

# “Aesthetics”, Postcolonialism and the Literary Text.

A Study in Cultural Differences with particular reference to the work of  
Ayi Kwei Armah, Neil Bissoondath, V.S. Naipaul,  
Ben Okri and Amos Tutuola.

by David Victor Bain

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The candidate confirms that the work is his own and that appropriate credit has  
been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

The central concern of this study is the exploration of the possibilities of a “dialogic” interaction between postcolonial texts and Western criticism. Its preoccupations are the difficulties in producing a responsible and ethical mode of relationship between Western Critical Practice and the postcolonial text. This problem is posed in terms of “inter-cultural” hermeneutics and constitutes an ongoing agenda concerning how postcolonial texts *have* been and *should* be read. I term this agenda “the aesthetics of reception.”

“Dialogue” assumes a two-way exchange. Linking the texts under discussion is the fact that they are “inter-cultural” works that operate within a multiple discursive environment. Many Postcolonial literary texts, whilst drawing on diverse indigenous aesthetic traditions, also interrogate and transform Western orders of representation. They are built upon indigenous *and* Western aesthetics. I term the study of this complexity “the aesthetics of production.”

The “Aesthetic”, as well as a body of theory on art, is also a discourse of the body and sensation. Part of the thesis explores the representation of the body in the writing of Neil Bissoondath and V.S. Naipaul. I examine the implications of their “bodily style” on historical representation and upon the category of the “postcolonial” itself. My short-hand for these issues is “the aesthetics of embodiment”.

The writers discussed comprise two Nigerians (Tutuola and Okri), one Ghanaian (Armah) and two Trinidadians (Naipaul and Bissoondath). The thesis is, therefore, a study of diversity and cultural difference. I have chosen such disparate texts (with the important proviso that all are written in English) in order to test the “performativity” of the concept of the “postcolonial” under the stress of this diversity.

The thesis is not a piece of conventional literary criticism, nor a comprehensive account of the authors in its remit. Literary texts are the occasion for the investigation of hermeneutic and theoretical issues presented by postcolonial textuality. The texts under discussion therefore share equal precedence with “secondary materials” from ethnography, literary criticism and critical theory.

The overall task of the thesis lies in the challenge of reading postcolonial texts in a spirit of ethical dialogue and the exploration of the difficulties of achieving such an ambition.

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## Introduction: Towards Ethical Dialogue

I want you to feel, as I, the sensation of being seen. For the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen. It was a seeing pure and uncomplicated, the light of his eyes drew all things from their primeval darkness. The whiteness of his skin was a further aspect of vision, a light condensed. The white man, white because he was a man, white like the day, white as truth is white, white like virtue, lighted like a torch all creation; he unfolded the essence, secret and white, of existence. Today, these black men have fixed their gaze upon us and our gaze is thrown back into our eyes.....By this steady and corrosive gaze, we are picked to the bone.<sup>1</sup>

Jean Paul Sartre's *Orphée noir*, an introduction to Senghor's groundbreaking anthology of African poetry, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, presents a startling image of the relationship between the Western reader and the African literary text. The African text is conceived, above all, as an act of violence against the sensibility, even the body of its French audience. It rips and renders open the metaphorical flesh of Western culture. The readership of the anthology (whom Sartre assumes to be white and French) are exposed, not so much to the refinements and pleasures of a literary encounter - the traditional pleasures of the aesthetic, but to the sublime force of the colonised world's accusing, destructive gaze. The West, like Sartre, is exposed to the horror of being seen and being known by the other. Reading the anthology is to be transfixed and anatomised, like Sartre, in a knowing gaze that was hitherto the sole preserve of the white man. Not only does the anthology fix the "black gaze" upon us, it throws the vision of the white, Western subject back upon itself, it is both a penetrating gaze and a mirror which reflects/reverses the Medusan vision of the West. This is as remarkable and unnerving an introduction and recommendation to a

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<sup>1</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor ed. *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* précédée de *Orphée noir* par Jean-Paul Sartre [1948] Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969, translated as *Black Orpheus*, (trans. S. W. Allen) Paris: *Présence Africaine*, 1976, pp. 7-11

collection of poetry as one might wish to find! Though written in the era of colonialism and in a significantly different intellectual tradition from my own, this quotation, nevertheless, crystallises and articulates, in its inimitable violence and extremity, many issues that will be central to this thesis' exploration of Anglophone postcolonial textuality.

Firstly, Sartre's text establishes a range of issues that are all rooted in the question of audience. Sartre's assumptions over audience are rather revealing: Senghor's anthology is meant to be read as an eruption and disturbance in Western patterns of perception, an attack upon the "bodies" of Western (here a synonym for white) readers. While Sartre is certainly an apologist for the genius of a "black Orpheus" whose creative violence, in a reversal of the traditional mythic narrative, acts to "decapitate" his audience, Sartre's text is remarkable for the certainty with which it encloses the African text in the French intellectual tradition. Sartre's concern is, firstly though not exclusively, with the affective force of this work upon its *white* readership. The broader politics of audience did not enter Sartre's analysis. Sartre, whose own audience was certainly the French intelligentsia, nevertheless fails to question either his competence as a reader of the African text or the assumption that white Europe was the text's intended audience. Sartre's response to Senghor's anthology is almost paradigmatic of certain patterns of Western response to texts produced in different cultures; for all the espoused profundity of the effect of black textuality on the Western reading subject, *Black Orpheus* still reads like a footnote to *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>2</sup>

Half a century on from *Black Orpheus* it is no longer so easy to place culturally different texts in a casually Universalist hermeneutic. One of the chief and ongoing concerns of this thesis will be the impact

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes) New York: Citadel Press, 1977

of questions of audience and cultural difference upon Western critical practice, on the practicalities and difficulties of reading culturally different literary texts. I intend, therefore, to stay within the problematic of Sartre's text in that I am concerned with the questions presented to the Western critic in his or her interaction with postcolonial literary texts. My approach is, then, explicitly "Eurocentric" and my critical resources largely stem from Western philosophy, ethnography and critical theory. I will not attempt to construct what an ethnographer might call an *emic* analysis of the various texts under discussion although the possibility and viability of writing an analysis from *within* the cultural loci of the other is in fact an important issue running through my thesis. I intend, instead, to attempt to understand what it means to read a culturally different text (such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* <sup>3</sup>) as a European. My central question is not "How can one read an African text in the manner of an African?" but, instead, "What are the practical consequences of reading texts from another culture?" In the case of postcolonial literatures, as Sartre himself makes clear, an important supplementary question needs to be added: "What is the impact of the history of colonial relations on the nature of this exchange?"

My explicit "Eurocentrism" is a position that was natural for Sartre in 1948 but is in need of some justification today. It stems from an acknowledgement of the fundamental impossibility, even the impropriety, of attempting a reading through another's eyes, of the historical and social anchorage that ties *any* act of interpretation to its discursive and cultural context. Ten years after the publication of the seminal '*Race, Writing and Difference*', one of its contributors, Christopher L. Miller, still phrases this challenge best:

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<sup>3</sup> Amos Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads' Town*, London, Faber and Faber, 1952

The question thus becomes a practical one of establishing guidelines for a kind of reading that lets the Other talk without claiming to be possessed of the Other's voice.<sup>4</sup>

The overarching aim of this thesis is, therefore, the exploration of the possibilities of what another Francophone phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, termed "ethical dialogue"<sup>5</sup> between self and other. In my instance this relation is between a "first world" criticism and the "third world" text.<sup>6</sup> Levinas, *contra* Sartre, proposed in his *Totality and Infinity* a mode of relationship to difference that was a direct challenge to Western philosophy's traditional "allergy of the other", an allergy characterised, perhaps, by the violence of Sartre's reaction to a collection of African poetry. In the opening sections of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas declares "the effort of this book is directed towards apperceiving a non-allergic relation with alterity".<sup>7</sup> For Levinas, Western thought is characterised by its consistent failure to engage in ethical dialogue with its others. Instead of an ethical relationship with the culturally other, Levinas suggests that the "allergy" of the Western intellectual tradition operates through the destruction and reduction of all forms of otherness, with the conquest and defeat of the other. Levinas outlines an alternative to the violence of this tradition's theories of being and knowledge in an "ethics of dialogue" in which the experience of an absolute otherness (which in *Totality and Infinity* is conceived as the "epiphany" of an encounter "face-to-face") leads to a

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher L. Miller "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology" pp. 281-300 in Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Race, Writing and Difference* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 282

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis) Duquesne Studies, Philosophical Series (trans. Alphonso Lingis) Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, *passim*

<sup>6</sup> I place the terms "first" and "third" world in parenthesis in an acknowledgement of the fact that these are far from natural descriptive categories. As Hannah Arendt suggests "the third world is not a reality but an ideology." *On Violence* London: Allen Lane, 1970 p. 21

<sup>7</sup> Levinas *Totality and Infinity* p. 15



form of mutual respect and exchange. His alternative to the primacy of ontology (the perennial quest for authentic being, presence, *identity*) is a form of ethical conversation with the other, with “ethics as first philosophy”. The mutual addressivity inherent in dialogue is, therefore, axiomatic in Levinas’ attempt to reverse the “imperialism of identity” found in Western models of knowledge and the subject. The subject/object paradigm for knowledge is eschewed for an “ethical commerce” face-to-face, a commerce in which “otherness” is not recuperated to “identity” but elevated to a kind of irreducible absolute that cannot be “known” in a conventional sense. Instead of a reductive knowledge, one should aim for dialogue, instead of the freedom to know one has “ethical responsibility” for and towards the other.

This study is not the place for a lengthy exposition of Levinas’ brilliant melange of Talmudic theology, Heideggerian phenomenology and French existentialism. Moreover, his work is concerned with questions of ethics and ontology and not with those of literary interpretation or cultural analysis. Indeed the somewhat metaphysical and idealist atmosphere of Levinasian ethics has little direct bearing on the kind of “practical criticism” involved in my treatment of literary and theoretical texts. Nevertheless, what Levinas offers is a model of epistemological relations that, while maintaining the difference between subject and object, self and other, suggests that the violence and appropriative brutality of the Western intellectual tradition can be superseded by a form of ethical commerce between parties “face-to-face”. It suggests that an avowedly “Western” criticism can interact with the cultural productions of other societies in a manner that is not, of necessity, appropriative and reductive, it implies that a “dialogic” criticism does not have to pretend to be possessed of the other’s voice to make meaning from its art. While the details of his phenomenology has little direct presence in my text, Levinas’ shadow falls,

nevertheless, over my best efforts to engage with culturally different texts.

Yet, for all my emphasis on the hermeneutics of alterity, of Sartre and Levinas' common binarisms of subject and object, there is an important degree to which my study of cultural difference is also a study of related and connected worlds of literary and critical practice. All the texts discussed are written in English, all are published globally. They are "inter-cultural" texts in that they have multiple and diverse audiences and are the product of plural and complex cultural traditions. Both the Caribbean and the African texts under discussion span different cultural contexts of production and reception. In a sense Sartre can be forgiven for the parochialism of his assumptions over audience; Senghor's anthology was a text that was aimed at an African *and* a European readership, likewise the works discussed in what follows can be justifiably examined as works that are *inter-* national. This has, I will argue, important consequences for the process of literary interpretation. Texts such as Okri's *The Famished Road* or Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* <sup>8</sup>, are works which, in their different ways, establish a dialogue between Western and African audiences. The model of alterity and self-other relations has only a limited utility in that African literary texts in English can never be entirely "other" to a reader of English. Conversely, Western culture and its literary traditions indisputably help shape and determine postcolonial literary practice. The works discussed are texts that are culturally *different* without being culturally *alien*. Colonial history, for all its violence and ignominy, is still a history of cultural contact. The "postcolonial" cannot be properly understood as the alien inverse of Western culture, as the purely "other", just as the cultural monolith we

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Okri *The Famished Road* London: Vintage Books, 1992 Ayi Kwei Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* London: Heinemann, 1989

too casually term the “West” cannot be understood outside the history of colonial relations. The proper territory of my research is the “interspace” between different orders of discourse, between the postcolonial and the West. I aim, then, to explore the possibility of a cross-cultural hermeneutic for an inter-cultural body of texts. It is this aim that has framed my choice of literary texts; I am interested in Tutuola rather than Fagunwa, in Armah’s *Fragments* rather than his *Two Thousand Seasons*,<sup>9</sup> because of my involvement in the ambiguities of audience and the category of the inter-cultural.

My efforts are oriented around staging a form of dialogue between disparate forms of discourse. To this end my research places what are traditionally called, in literary studies, “primary” and “secondary” materials in close and detailed interaction. In the context of this work the distinction between “primary” postcolonial literary texts and “secondary” Western ethnographic, critical and philosophical texts is not strictly tenable. I am as much interested in using postcolonial literary texts to interrogate the valency of Western models of interpretation as I am in using these works as “secondary texts” for the interpretation of postcolonial literatures. Hence equal precedence is given to the exploration of critical and ethnographic materials as to the “traditional” production of new readings of postcolonial texts. Large sections of my thesis are a long way from conventional literary criticism though their theoretical speculations are always actuated by an engagement with specific literary texts. The object of my study is both the possibility of a dialogic interaction with postcolonial texts and the necessary exploration of some of the ways other cultures have been “read” in Western discourse. It is necessary, in order to understand how culturally different texts *might* be read, to explore how they

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<sup>9</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah *Fragments* [1969] London: Heinemann, 1979 and *Two Thousand Seasons* [1973] London: Heinemann, 1979

have been read. It is this prerogative that has shaped, in particular, the study's ongoing dialogue between the discourse of ethnography and the postcolonial literary text. As a card-carrying poststructuralist, I was surprised by the frequency with which my research returned to ethnographic issues. Yet ethnography provides, above all, a body of theoretical materials devoted to questions of cultural difference and interpretation, materials to which I turned in both the quest for an historical understanding of the dialogue between the West and other cultures and in exploring the problems of interpreting cultural difference. My research drives through the discourse of ethnography very much in the manner of the bull in a china shop. This clumsiness stems from both my non-specialism in the discourse and, more importantly, through the ways in which an engagement with postcolonial texts upsets and overturns ethnography's careful displays of exotic curios.

In my first chapter, "On the Way to an Unknown Place': Issues in the Critical Reception of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*", I intend to examine questions of audience, literary reception and cultural difference through an in-depth examination of the critical reception of Amos Tutuola's first novel. My examination of audience originates in the acknowledgement of the role of readerly expectation upon the creation of textual meaning. My analysis of the "aesthetics of reception" governing Western and African responses to the novel aims to establish the politics of discourse at work between Africa and the West at a crucial time in both Nigeria's historical development and in the emergence of postcolonial textuality. The greater part of this chapter will be a reconstruction and examination of the discourses governing the literary critical apprehension of an African text at a given moment. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* provides a unique

opportunity to examine an inter-cultural dialogue in its historical complexity. Literary critical materials are, therefore, to the forefront as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was, I will argue, the site for an exploration and a contest over the meaning of Africanness. I will examine a range of African, British and American responses to the novel in the hope of recreating the dynamics of this debate. These issues will be framed by a broader theoretical discussion of theories of critical reception.

Tutuola's text engendered a kind of crisis in method in mid-century literary critical practice. The second section of this chapter "Beyond Primitivism? Rereading *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*" re-examines Tutuola's novel in the light of the problems of reading cultural difference today. My analysis is a practical exploration of the difficulties of constructing a reading of Tutuola's from the perspective of a contemporary non-African, non-Yoruba reader. It is, then, an exploration of the obstacles in the way of a reading "beyond Primitivism". Its exploration of the consequences of difference hopes to be true to a Levinasian imperative that refuses to make the round postcolonial text fit into the square hole of Western literary critical practice.

The second part of my thesis is devoted to a very different form of postcolonial textuality and to a very different aesthetic and theoretical agenda. In "The Flaying of Marsyas: Naipaul, Bissoondath and the Dissected Postcolonial Body", I intend to examine representations of the body in the textuality of two cosmopolitan postcolonial artists, the knight errant of the postcolonial world, V.S. Naipaul and his nephew, Neil Bissoondath.

As my opening quotation from Sartre demonstrates, the world of "aesthetics" is tied, at root, to discourses of the body. Aesthetics is a discourse on art and, simultaneously, one of perception and sensation as its etymology in the Greek "aesthetikos" (to perceive) helps reveal.

The “aesthetic” is, as Terry Eagleton suggests, both a *theory* of art and an account of how we perceive the world. It describes:

..how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts of all that arises from our most banal biological insertion in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Aesthetic knowledge speaks, then, of our sensory apprehension of the world and the art work. Sartre’s reaction to African poetry is inscribed with a profoundly affective and somatic model of the reading process. In Sartre’s paroxysm of interpretation the body and the text are linked in a brutal intercourse. Likewise, in Naipaul and Bissoondath the relationships between the body and literary representation take a particularly explicit form. The aim of my analysis will be the exploration and articulation of the various “bodily styles” in their literary practice.

A “Sartrean” problematic also prefaces my treatment of Naipaul. Naipaul’s’ textuality is, I will argue, defined by a visually conceived paradigm for cultural knowledge. His work, like Sartre’s, is enmeshed in the politics of the gaze and in a way of looking at the world that serves to fragment and divide the postcolonial body. My analysis ranges from his travel writing to a close reading of some of his later fiction in an attempt to understand the “scopic regime” at work in his texts. The aesthetics and the politics of this scopic regime has significant implications for Naipaul’s representation of history and subjectivity.

My discussion of Bissoondath evolves out of my examination of Naipaul. In “The Word Made Flesh: Neil Bissoondath and the Construction of the Postcolonial Body” I investigate a literary corpus that, even more than Naipaul’s, is obsessed with the representation of

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<sup>10</sup> Terry Eagleton *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 30

the body “picked to the bone”. My examination of Bissoondath is not, however, primarily concerned with his relationship to Naipaul. Bissoondath’s fiction is the opportunity for a discussion of the category of the “postcolonial” itself. The “postcolonial” is an extremely crowded term. It is a word that carries the weight of civilisations in its brief compass. It is a fraught and contradictory signifier that denotes the grandest narratives of World history, mass migration, genocide and the most local and the most ephemeral of cultural events. It is the most abstract and the most concrete of nouns, the most elusive of adjectives. An important thread running through my thesis is the exploration of this complexity. Can Tutuola’s novels be placed, with Bissoondath’s cosmopolitan fictions, under the aegis of one unifying, trans-cultural, concept? The meaningfulness of the “postcolonial” as a kind of critical prefix before profoundly different artistic practices demands an exploration of the ways in which the category is forced to carry the significance of a teeming multitude of referents. My ongoing concern with the critical importance of the concept of the postcolonial is manifested in my discussion of the links between different landscapes, the body and the postcolonial in Bissoondath’s fiction. The recurrence of bodily symbolism in Bissoondath’s work is his most prevalent method of linking disparate cultures in a common textual practice.

My treatment of the aesthetics of embodiment in Naipaul and Bissoondath also attempts to make meaningful linkages with the agenda of the first part of my thesis. In my analysis of the “genres of reception” at work in critical reaction to Tutuola, “Primitivism” surfaced as a dominant discourse in Europe’s relationship with Africa. In “Three Bushmen: Naipaul, Céline, Tutuola” I examine the impact of Primitivism on the representation of landscape in the textualities of Naipaul and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. “Primitivist space” is placed in dialogue with the very different representation of the bush in the

work of Amos Tutuola. The aim of this section is both the explication of differing textualities and the investigation of the role of a comparative approach to postcolonial literary criticism.

The final third of my thesis, “The Aesthetics of Production: Aesthetic Transformations in Contemporary West Africa”, brings together many of the issues articulated in the first two sections. In my analysis of works by Ayi Kwei Armah and Ben Okri I am concerned with the issues of interpretation and methodology central to my treatment of Tutuola as well as many of the aesthetic and representational agendas that evolved in my examination of Naipaul and Bissoondath. I term this section “The Aesthetics of Production” in order to signal my emphasis on an exploration of the various cultural traditions that inform the work of two contemporary African novelists. From my research on Tutuola, I expand my interest in the relationship between text and context and seek to explore the differing modes of transformation through which Armah and Okri produce inter-cultural fictions. From my research into Naipaul and Bissoondath, I develop my engagement with the aesthetics of the sublime and with the representation of the landscape and the body in postcolonial fictions.

The final third of my thesis realises my larger ambition of staging a dialogic relationship between postcolonial literary texts and Western criticism. The groundwork established in sections one and two permits a more nuanced interaction in the final section between, for example, the ethnology of Clifford Geertz and the fiction of Ben Okri. In my examination of Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Okri’s *The Landscapes Within* <sup>11</sup> I explore the way in which two African artists transform, not only literary forms, but some of the very structures of traditional aesthetic expectation.

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<sup>11</sup> Ben Okri *The Landscapes Within* Harlow: Longman, 1981



In my “Conclusion” I make a brief review of my journey through the widely differing textualities of Tutuola, Naipaul, Bissoondath, Armah and Okri. The concept of cultural difference re-emerges in all its complexity as Will Self helps me conceptualise “A World Without Difference”.

## The Aesthetics of Reception.

“On the Way to an Unknown Place”: Issues in the Critical Reception of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

I have felt my strongest artistic emotions when suddenly confronted with the sublime beauty of sculptures executed by the anonymous artists of Africa. These works of a religious, passionate, and rigorously logical art are the most powerful and most beautiful things the human imagination has ever produced. I hasten to add that, nevertheless, I detest exoticism. Pablo Picasso *African Art? Never heard of it.* <sup>1</sup>

One of the most powerful myths of origin for European modernism recounts the encounter between Pablo Picasso and the ethnographic objects of African sculpture he discovered in the Musée d’Ethnographie, Paris. The fateful morning in 1907 on which Picasso was first exposed to African Art (an encounter which “led”, somehow, to the proto-modernist *Les Femmes d’Alger*) constitutes an inaugural moment in the relationship between African material culture and metropolitan high modernism.

Like many myths of origin, this “encounter” is a way of simplifying complex and open-ended historical relations. Picasso’s experiences in the Trocadéro were, as Henry Louis Gates suggests in his “Europe, African Art and the Uncanny” part of a complex and ongoing relationship between Europe and Africa. It is, nevertheless, a useful and productive encounter for historical analysis not only because of Picasso’s cultural “eminence” but for the ways in which it crystallises the nature of this historical complexity.

In what follows, I will endeavour to use the encounter between an African novel, Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, <sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “Europe, African Art and the Uncanny” Henry Louis Gates Junior in *AFRICA: The Art of a Continent* ed. Tom Phillips, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995/1996, pp. 27 - 30, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> Amos Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and his Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Deads’ Town*, London: Faber and Faber, 1952. (References will be to the

Western literary criticism as a similarly important and emblematic moment in the relations between Africa and the West. What links the literary reception of Amos Tutuola's novel and Picasso's "reception" and transformation of African tribal masks is the uncanny ability of African Art to produce a seemingly endless stream of critical discourse. Indeed, this study is explicitly and deliberately part of this problematic; it is the ability of a culturally "Other" to both disrupt and demand exegesis that actuates and drives my examination of Tutuola. Gates' account of Picasso points to the sea-change that transformed Africa and African artefacts from mute objects gathering dust on the shelves of a museum, into the inspiration and source for a vastly influential eruption of Western fine art, ethnography and philosophy. As Gates suggests, the image of Picasso in the Trocadéro helps one visualise the emergence of cultural difference as a problem and an inspiration in modernity. Likewise, the critical reception of *The Palm-Wine-Drinkard* is the occasion for my examination of the discursive relations between emergent African textuality and Western criticism, a relationship acted out upon the cusp of African Independence.

I intend, therefore, to introduce my analysis and exploration of cultural difference and its practical implications for criticism by examining, in detail, the critical reception of a single novel. The differing reaction to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in Africa, Great Britain and the United States offers an extremely clear and richly textured example of an important and an inaugural moment in the emergence of African Literature. It provides an example of Western scholarship's methodology in regard to an African text, and, in the controversy surrounding the novel's reception, it embodies a complex cultural dialogue between Africa and the West, a dialogue realised in and through the critical reception of the novel.

I intend to examine three distinct theoretical and practical problems. The examination of the critical reception of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* will firstly actuate a discussion of the significance and role of the “aesthetics of reception” in the reading of postcolonial texts. I intend to explore Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogism” as a theory of critical reception that is significant to both the historical reconstruction of critical context and to the task of understanding the nature of intercultural texts. Bakhtinian theory provides a framework for the second of my tasks, namely, the reconstruction of the discursive context of the novel in the fifties and early sixties and the historical analysis of the actual reception in the same period. The reception of the novel provides an avenue into the cultural discourses that governed relationships between West Africa and Great Britain during the middle period of the Twentieth century. My third and most difficult task is to understand the impact of cultural difference upon the practicalities of reading *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* today.

I intend, firstly, to examine some of the various linguistic, political and cultural theories of critical reception proposed by M. M. Bakhtin. The sensitivity of a Bakhtinian framework to contextuality, plurality of meaning and to the necessity of audience in understanding the literary work, demands a “response”- based hermeneutic. It promotes an analysis closely focused towards the *event* of the text’s reception and intervention in a given literary and social milieu. This chapter aims to look at the publication of a founding text of African literature in English as such a literary and historical event and is, therefore, as much concerned with the issues surrounding the historical contours of this “happening” as it is with producing a straightforward literary critical analysis of the novel. The aim of a dialogic examination of the novel’s reception is the exploration of the broader “contextual overtones” surrounding *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*,

in using this body of materials to explore discursive relations between two cultures.

### Text, Context and Reception: Using Bakhtinian Discourse Analysis:

Every literary discourse more or less sharply senses its own listener, reader, critic and reflects in itself their anticipated objections, evaluations, points of view. In addition literary discourse senses alongside itself **another** literary discourse. Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: [emphasis added] <sup>3</sup>

A Bakhtinian model of literary analyses cannot treat its texts in isolation; Bakhtinian models of meaning suggest that all utterances are written in complex anticipation of audience. The internal dialogism of the word, of genre and of the novel itself all suggest that any act of interpretation is historically connected not only to the text but to the history of that text's critical reception, that "other" discourse that silently shadows the text. In fact, Bakhtin gives the *answering* discourse of reception a kind of "primacy" in the process of signification:

....every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates. Primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle. It creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other, one is impossible without the other. <sup>4</sup>

The publication of a novel is thus the inauguration of a multi-voiced dialogue and the instance of the text's promiscuous multiplication as it meets the complexities of audience. As Foucault, a

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<sup>3</sup> M. M. Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 8, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 196

<sup>4</sup> M. M. Bakhtin "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* ed. Michael Holquist (trans Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist) Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 1992, pp. 281 - 282

thinker connected to Bakhtin by a shared concern in the regulative role of discourse in history, so beautifully expresses it:

A book is produced, a minute event, a small handy object. From that moment on it is caught up in an endless play of repetitions; its doubles begin to swarm around it and far from it, each reading gives it an impalpable and unique body for an instant, fragments of itself are circulating and are made to stand for it; it is doubled with commentaries, those other discourses in which it should finally appear as it is, confessing what it had refused to say, freeing itself from what it had so proudly pretended to be.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of my analysis of the reception of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is to place the text in its various contexts, historic, geographic and cultural, in order to illuminate, not only the nature of these contexts in themselves, but also in order to examine the nature of Tutuola's dialogue with these anticipated audiences - to trace this prolific fragmentation and circulation of our "small handy object" in a universe of interpretation.

More particularly I will focus upon the various literary critical environments and discuss the values, methodologies and critical procedures that these audiences display. In order to focus more sharply on the nature of the complex forms of the inter/intra cultural communication takes place under the conditions of cultural difference, I shall focus upon a range of responses to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and attempt to draw out any tangible dialogic patterns in this body of work. I will discuss what these patterns might mean and, finally, begin to evaluate these debates in the light of our evolving agenda, namely, the possibility and features of "ethical dialogue".

In discussing both the "African" and "Western" modes of response to a text one might be able to tease out the ideological and linguistic "genres" of discourse as they interplay in the field of literary

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<sup>5</sup> M. Foucault from the "nonpreface" to the second French Edition of *Histoire de la folie* quoted in Didier Eribon's biography *Michel Foucault* (trans. Betsy Wing) London: Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 124

critical reception in both Nigeria and the West. I will focus, then, on the relationship between text and context or, in Bakhtinian terms, upon the nature of the novel's relationship and participation in its cultural "heteroglossia". Heteroglossia is Bakhtin's complex and polysemantic term for the conglomerate of dialects, accents, genres, registers etc. at work, at any given moment, within a national language. Bakhtin sees an individual "national language" as internally divided, stratified into a complex of diverse communication systems. A culture's heteroglossia spans and includes its shopping lists and sacred books, its curses and its prayers, its canonical texts and its bar-room chatter. The "heteroglossia" is a kind of linguistic Leviathan made up of every aspect of language use within a culture. As an analytical tool the concept of heteroglossia allows one to regard even the most microscopic of language phenomena as a function of complex involvement with larger ideological and political structures and with the history of language use. It is, however, an unwieldy term that gives name but not shape to the complexities of language relations. The concept of heteroglossia does not equip one with either the terms or the methodology to begin to separate out its constitutive parts.

While it is always foolhardy to link differing aspects of Bakhtin's work into one project, his essay, *The Problem of Speech Genres* <sup>6</sup>, does seem to address this very problem. Bakhtin identifies the components of heteroglossia as "speech genres", recognisable and relatively consistent stylistic and ideological forms of utterance. These can be as simple or "primary" as a genre of spoken expletives or as complex as the "secondary" speech genres such as Modernist techniques of interior monologue. Bakhtin's philosophy of language suggests that each utterance, each word is dialogically tied to a million parallel histories of

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<sup>6</sup> M. M. Bakhtin *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. C. Emerson, M. Holquist, (trans. V.W. McGee) Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994 pp. 60 - 103

signification. "Speech genres" are not, then, entirely discrete and distinct, they form a network of changing relations to each other and to their own history of usage. Literary discourse is a component element in the operation of the heteroglossia (the sum of all society's discourse) but, unlike other components, (the language of legal contract for example) it is, to an unparalleled extent, both penetrated, permeated and inclusive of these other language uses. There would, therefore, be genres of response and genres of production distinct but linked in dialogic relation:

All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language. Quite understandably, the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as the areas of human activity. This, of course, in no way disaffirms the national unity of language. Language is realised in the form of individual concrete utterances.....Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*.<sup>7</sup>

Bakhtin proposed that the relative stability of forms of utterance allowed a form of historical stylistics that documented and classified these micro-systems and placed them back into the larger context of the national language.

Literary language is, of course, the area of heteroglossia that most fascinated Bakhtin and the area in which he found the complexities of these relations at their most profound:

Literary language, which also includes non-literary styles, is an even more complex system, and it is organised on different bases. In order to puzzle out the complex historical dynamics of these systems and move from a simple (and, in the majority of cases, superficial) description of styles, which are always in evidence and alternating with one another, to a historical explanation of these changes, one must develop a speech history of speech genres (and not only secondary, but also primary ones) that reflects more directly, clearly, and flexibly all the changes taking place in social life. Utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> M. M. Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p. 60

<sup>8</sup> M. M. Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p. 65



Bakhtin is proposing a massive, even impossible, historical project, the recording and reconstruction of this larger history of speech genres. Nevertheless, what this text does suggest, is that a study of heteroglossia should proceed by the identification and analysis of speech genres. The primary materials for my own analysis will be diverse, including reviews, academic assessments, letters and more theoretical examinations of Tutuola's work. These responses will come, therefore, from a range of disparate contexts both geographically, historically and methodologically.

Yet my analysis will not attempt to be strictly, or exclusively, "Bakhtinian". Bakhtin, after all, was not the only thinker to concern himself with the possibilities of dialogic interaction with literary texts. Derrida in his afterword to *Limited Inc*<sup>9</sup> entitled "Towards An Ethics of Discussion" provides a useful and concise introduction to the nature of the problem of reconstructing contexts:

The reconstitution of a context can never be perfect and irreproachable even though it is a regulative ideal in the ethics of reading, of interpretation, or of discussion. But since this ideal is unattainable, for reasons which are essential and to which I will doubtless return, the determination, or even the redetermination, the simple recalling of a context is never a gesture that is neutral, innocent, transparent, disinterested. ... The putative or pretended reconstitution of a context always remains a performative operation and is never purely theoretical.<sup>10</sup>

The "performative" reconstruction of the literary and social contexts of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is, therefore, as value-laden, imperfect and partial as any other historical reconstruction. What is interesting and surprising is Derrida's insistence on the diligent pursuit of this "regulative" ideal and on the lengths to which he goes in this text to

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida *Limited Inc* ed. G. Graff, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988

<sup>10</sup> Derrida *Limited Inc* pp. 131 - 132

demand the fullest and most thorough attempts to reconstitute contexts in the reading of his own works. I will return to this brief and suggestive work in due course, its speculations on the ethics of discussion are too valuable to be quickly glossed over. It is in the spirit of an open-eyed acknowledgement of the “fictionality” of contextual reconstruction that I look at Tutuola’s critical reception. Yet in this acknowledgement there is also, as in Derrida, the hope of being led by an ethic of fidelity and diligence towards one’s sources.

It is revealing, firstly, to establish the general historical parameters of interest in Tutuola and to remark upon the marked waning of critical interest in his works and in his status in the emerging canon of African writing. Historically, interest in Tutuola (as reflected in a criterion as simplistic as the volume of academic and review articles published) shows a distinct decline from the mid-seventies onwards. Published material on Tutuola largely stems from the 1950s, 60s and 70s although Tutuola’s last published work was issued in 1990.<sup>11</sup> The 80s and 90s has seen a decline in both Tutuola scholarship and in the “impact” his later work has made in review articles and scholarship.

This trend might superficially be explained as the product of the vagaries of literary and academic fashion, perhaps, as some European commentators suggest by a decline, over the period, in the artistic merit of the works themselves.<sup>12</sup> What makes this decline striking is that it is in direct contrast to trends in the teaching of English, particularly in Higher Education, and to the explosion of interest in what have come to be known as postcolonial literatures and their

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<sup>11</sup> Amos Tutuola *The Village Witch Doctor and Other Stories* London: Faber and Faber, 1990

<sup>12</sup> Bernth Lindfors suggests that the sixties saw an increasing dissatisfaction with Tutuola’s later works. In his invaluable text *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola*, London: Heinemann, 1980. Lindfors suggests “reviews of Tutuola’s later books reveal that his reputation as a writer suffered a sharp decline in the late fifties and early sixties” p.55 Unless otherwise stated all quotations from newspapers and journals will be quoted from this anthology.

attendant body of cultural theory. While English faculties from the eighties onwards have seen a blossoming in the teaching of African and other literatures in English and in academic research in the same fields, critical response to Tutuola has all but disappeared from the journals and intellectual forums of this emerging discipline. The recent publication of two major anthologies of "Postcolonial Theory",<sup>13</sup> for example, help to delineate this neglect. Tutuola, the first African literary artist published in England, the first to be translated throughout the world and writing on the cusp of the transition from colonialism to National Independence, is not referred to once by any contributor in either volume.

The intensity of the dialogue surrounding Tutuola's work may have subsided and the number of participants drastically fallen away, yet in the patterns of silence one may, however, find a kind of "speech" equally as forceful as all the sound and the fury that has, until recently, attended Tutuola. In terms of the Bakhtinian models proposed for this analysis, it may be necessary to evolve a "genre of silence" to account for and explain this neglect.

What is fundamental to a Bakhtinian analysis of both literary production and reception is that all the multitudinous genres of both literary and critical registers are seen to be embedded in a network of relations with the broader life of language in society and to the historical and political determinants at work in a given milieu. To "understand" Tutuola's text is to be understand something of the Nigerian heteroglossia in which it was produced, to understand the reception of the novel is to understand something of the social context of this reception.

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1995, and Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iverson eds. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994

Any moment in the “life” of heteroglossia, therefore, represents a sublime complexity that threatens to engulf any examination. In order to make this enormous, indeed gargantuan, web of different voices more accessible to analysis, it is possible to create the artificial analytic distinction between the “social heteroglossia” (which might be understood to signify the broadest strata of ideas, beliefs, opinions and registers at work in society) and the “literary heteroglossia” (which might be understood as a subset of the broader heteroglossia, encompassing the available literary genres, styles, registers etc. of an era). It is important, however, to realise that these categories inevitably “seep” into each other in complex and unexpected ways. In the following section I will attempt, briefly, to delineate the context of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* using these distinctions. I will examine the social and literary heteroglossi of Nigeria and the United Kingdom in order to establish a roughly Bakhtinian portrait of the contexts awaiting Tutuola’s work.

### Nigeria: The Social and Literary Background

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was first published by Faber and Faber in May, 1952. The remarkable details of the novel’s arrival in print are worthy of study in themselves. The institutions of literary publishing reveal something of the broader institutional and economic relations (or, in a sense, the absence of relation) then at work between Africa and Britain.<sup>14</sup> Bernth Lindfors’ research gives an invaluable insight into the responses of Tutuola’s first audience, the readers for a variety of publishers. It accounts for the fascinating and unorthodox

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<sup>14</sup> Details of the publishing history of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are taken from Bernth Lindfors’ useful research into Tutuola’s (and other relevant parties’) lengthy correspondence and contractual dealings over the text. Published in “Amos Tutuola’s Search for a Publisher”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, 1982, pp. 90 - 106

nature of Tutuola's own business dealings and delineates the opinions of most parties, both more and less, concerned with the publication of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. This first audience is, of course, vital, in practical terms, for *any* unpublished author. In the case of Tutuola, who was entirely unfamiliar with the procedures and practices of publishing, this history stands as a testament to the daring nature of Tutuola's submission and demonstrates the degree to which he pioneered the foreign territory of international publishing for fellow Nigerian writers. I will return to these early, hesitant, overtures in Tutuola's dialogue with the West in due course.

Lindfors' research reveals that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was Tutuola's second written narrative, his first being *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* written with Edward Akinbiyi in 1948. Tutuola submitted the manuscript of this text to Focal Press, a publisher of photographic text books, and received a small payment (though no contract or prospect of publication) from its editor, A. Kraszna-Krausz. Encouraged by this, Tutuola began work on *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1948/49, completing the text by 31st January 1950 at the latest (the date when he first wrote to a Publisher suggesting publication).<sup>15</sup> The immediate context for the production of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is, therefore, the turbulent period of the late forties and early fifties. In Bakhtinian terms, of course, this context needs to be extended back into Nigeria's history as components of the heteroglossi (the various ideo-linguistic speech genres) have their own historical origins and mutations that cannot be chronologically bounded with any precision.

The post-war Nigeria in which Tutuola worked was a polity in flux. The war years, in Nigeria like many colonies, were a pivotal point in national history. In many accounts of decolonisation the radicalising

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<sup>15</sup> Tutuola first offered the text to Lutterworth Press, the imprint of The United Society of Christian Literature. See "Amos Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p. 93

effect of war experiences upon returning ex-servicemen is given cardinal importance in emergent anti-colonial struggles. Fighting for the colonial powers served, firstly, to demonstrate that so many aspects of colonial discourse, white supremacy, the civilising mission, political and military infallibility were, in fact, chimerical. More importantly, it demonstrated that the values championed by the Allies were values whose moral authority and effect ended at the borders of the colonial possessions. Elizabeth Isichei in her work *A History of Nigeria*<sup>16</sup> accounts for these years thus:

The Second World War, and its aftermath, was a turning point in Nigerian history. Again, Nigerians supported the British side strongly, both with donations they could ill afford and with the soldiers who fought and died in strange and unfamiliar conditions in Ethiopia and Burma....[returning veterans] applied the professed war aims of the Allies to Nigerian realities, and found a great gulf between the two. They pointed out that the Allies and Nigerians - were fighting for democracy, but democracy did not exist in Nigeria. They were fighting against totalitarianism, but colonial rule, as it existed in Nigeria until 1945, was essentially totalitarian. They were fighting against racism, but Nigerians could not be treated in 'European hospitals', or join the Ikoyi club, or obtain equal pay for equal work in the colonial service.<sup>17</sup>

Nigeria became fully independent in 1960, fully fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, a momentous year for the Continent, in which some seventeen former colonies became sovereign African Nations. The period from 1950 to Independence in 1960 was one of slow transition to self-rule and one of inter-regional jockeying for position in post-independence Nigeria. Clifford Geertz found the pattern of Nigerian decolonisation to be of particular interest in his study of issues of ethnic, regional and National affiliation. In "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the

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<sup>16</sup> E. Isichei, *A History of Nigeria* London: Longman, 1983. This work represents the best available account of modern Nigerian history. The following account of Nigerian struggles for Independence is based largely on her work.

<sup>17</sup> Isichei *A History of Nigeria* pp. 403 - 404

New States”,<sup>18</sup> Geertz is concerned with the “regionalised Nationalism” of Nigerian Independence movements and the manoeuvrings of regional politicians for position in a postcolonial polis:

After 1946 the Nigerian struggle for freedom was less a matter of defying foreign authority and more a matter of drawing boundaries, founding capitals and distributing powers in such a way as to dampen and contain ethno-regional hostilities prior to the disappearance of that authority.<sup>19</sup>

As Geertz suggests, the political development of Nigeria had a particular tenor that was shaped by its unique combination of linguistic, ethnic and social divisions and by a *gradual* movement towards Independence.

The social heteroglossia in which *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was written was, therefore, extremely complex. In addition to the clear antagonism between ethnic/regional voices and Nigerian nationalism, between voices of radical protest and the accommodations of the comprador elite, one can note the influences of a range of liberationist discourses, be they Marxism, Pan-Africanism or Nationalism. What was marked in the Nigerian situation was that none of these genres of resistance truly coalesced into sustained mass nationalism. Liberationist movements, such as the Zikists, were marked by an ideological eclecticism and, perhaps, by a less than systematic approach to their aims for post-Independence Nigeria.

These political discourses far from define the full extent of the social heteroglossia. Traditional linguistic, ideological and, to an extent, political systems were still a major part of the life of most Nigerians. The forties saw movements towards Independence in coexistence with the operation of the apparatus of Indirect Rule and with the enduring

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford Geertz “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States” [1963]. Republished in C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures - Selected Essays*. London: Fontana Press, 1993, pp.255 - 310

<sup>19</sup> Geertz “The Integrative Revolution.” p. 303

authority of local Warrant chiefs. The dominant discourse of the elites was one which stressed the readiness of Nigeria and Nigerians for the modern nation state in the European model. The gradual change to Independence, the lack of a mass nationalism and the coexistence of traditional and bureaucratic systems of authority and cultural practice makes it difficult to “place” Tutuola in any simplistic relation to the variety of social discourses in forties Nigeria. What is clearer is the extent to which Tutuola, as a working man, would have been embedded in a modern urban Yoruba culture and the cultural diversity to which he would have constantly been exposed.

While Tutuola was a Yoruba and Yoruba his first language he, like many Nigerians, would have experienced a vividly multi-cultural and polyglot environment. The “regional” and ethnic divisions represented by the political parties did not reflect any neat geographic divisions separating Yoruba, Tiv, Ibo, Fulani, Hausa and other ethnic groups. While some rural communities may have been relatively remote and homogeneous yet the norm, even before colonialism, was one of cultural contact between the different ethnicities and cultures of Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> If we look forward to the pogroms and inter-ethnic violence of the sixties, it is clear that this multi-culturalism was partly defined by rivalry, suspicion and competition. The Nigerianisation of public appointments throughout the fifties and the high percentage of employment in State industries, meant a high degree of mobility (both geographical and social) amongst wage-earning Nigerians. The values of various indigenous cultures were, therefore, very much a part of the complexities of the Nigerian social heteroglossia. To term these values “traditional” is problematic in that it suggests that they were residual or, somehow, disconnected from the process of modernity. I use the term reservedly, the associations of residualism, conservatism and

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<sup>20</sup> See Isichei *A History of Nigeria* on the pre-Colonial history of Nigeria pp. 1 - 21



datedness that “tradition” might suggest in other contexts, are ones I hope to vitiate through an emphasis on both the mutability, contemporaneity and vitality of these cultural practices. *Traditional* medicine, “witchcraft”, divination and the practices of local cults were a part of everyday experience and were not, of necessity, in conflict with secular, scientific and technocratic discourses of the emerging state.

This brief discussion of the Nigerian social heteroglossia cannot give anything but an impression of the complexity of the period. The limited nature of recorded archival material causes, perhaps, too strong an emphasis on public discourses and speech genres and fails to give proper account of the host of intimate and unrecorded speech genres of everyday life. Perhaps it is these intimate instances of language use that reveal the limits of Bakhtinian analysis; the proverbs, riddles and ephemera of everyday spoken language might well be the crux of an intimate understanding of the social heteroglossia, yet these details do not open themselves to a deracinated analysis of the archive. Nevertheless, it is in the spirit of fidelity towards context, championed by the Derrida of *Limite Inc.*, that I will attempt to give account of the literary heteroglossia of 1940s Nigeria.

The literary scene into which Tutuola was to make his entry was no less complex than the social heteroglossia of which he was a part. While one can justifiably look to the period as one in which Nigerian national literature was in its infancy, Tutuola did not “found” a National literature. Nigerian literature did not sprout, fully formed, from Tutuola’s temples like a child of Zeus. Tutuola, as we shall see, is foundational in a limited but, nevertheless, vital sense.

Nigeria’s literary scene in the years immediately following the war was characterised by rapid change. The mood of both resistance to colonialism and optimism regarding the future enabled pioneers such as Hubert Ogunde to take elements of traditional Yoruba culture

and to create a new theatrical form, a kind of Yoruba folk opera.<sup>21</sup> Ogunde is an interesting figure with which one may compare Tutuola. A policeman up until 1945, he resigned his job and set out on “the perilous and unprecedented task of establishing a professional theatre group”.<sup>22</sup> His work was often biting satirical, his first major production, *Tiger’s Empire*, was a bitter attack on colonialism. Ogunde, like Tutuola, was not a member of the educated elite, he was a product of both traditional Yoruba culture and of Nigerian Christianity and, like Tutuola, he created a literature located in traditional culture but, under its new circumstances, a literature quite transformed. Like Tutuola, his status as a “founding father” of Nigerian literature is still a matter of debate.

In a now recognisable spirit of enterprise, the forties also saw the development of something of a publishing phenomenon, “Onitsha Market Literature”.<sup>23</sup> This term has come to signify the cheaply produced pamphlets of short stories, domestic romances and self-improvement texts produced by Nigerian entrepreneurs, publishers, printers and self-publishing authors. Though Onitsha Market was the site of many of the publishers, Lagos, Ibadan and many major market towns (particularly in the East) also produced market literature. The books were manufactured and sold cheaply in small runs, mostly in English. Onitsha market literature was at the height of its popularity in the period dating from the end of the Second World War up to the

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21 The career of Ogunde has been the source of much commentary. Debate centres around the extent to which Ogunde should be considered an innovator in theatrical form and the degree to which his work built upon a range of traditions including the Nigerian Christian Church and the tradition of Egungun masquerade. An excellent analysis of the problems of genre definition in Nigerian drama comes in Oyekan Owomoyela’s “Yoruba Folk Opera: A Cross Cultural Flowering” in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial* ed. Anna Rutherford Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1992, pp. 160 - 180

22 Isichei *A History of Nigeria* p. 451

23 For an account of some of this literature, see Emmanuel Obiechina’s *An African Popular Literature: A study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, and The British Library’s *Market Literature from Nigeria - A Checklist*, ed. P. Hogg, 1990

years of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The encroachment of Western publishing and the effects of the Biafran War arguably<sup>24</sup> spelled the end of the most prolific era of market literature.

The texts were of both instructional/factual and literary genres, the only criteria for production being the possibility of a market. They dealt with all aspects of urban life from how to write letters to comedies of manners lampooning social affectation and hypocrisy. Titles from this period included *Mabel the Sweet Honey that Poured Away*, *Beware of Harlots and Many Friends*, *How to Become Rich and Avoid Poverty*, *The Right Way to Approach Ladies and Get Them in Love*.<sup>25</sup> The books were popular ephemera quickly produced, consumed and circulated but they, nevertheless, demonstrated a home market with a taste for literature produced by Nigerians for Nigerians. The “how to” books reveal both an enormous optimism in the future (combined with the usual market traders hyperbole) and a faith in the changes everyday Nigerians could make in their own circumstances. “How to” books dove-tailed into the many privately run instructional courses available to Nigerians in the English language, in secretarial skills, bookkeeping etc. Tutuola was very much a part of this milieu. In a letter dated 21 March 1952, Tutuola makes the following request to Faber and Faber:

I am really sorry to bore you with correspondence, but I have a problem which I wish to bring before you for sympathetic consideration. I am to enquire whether it could be possible to grant me a loan of £30 to further my studies in a Private Institution overseas, having as a security the royalty which may be due to me in consequence of my humble work. I take no advantage of our business commitments to make this humble demand, but wish to lay hand on any avenue which may open its way to making me a better man in life.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Some accounts question this conventional wisdom. See Joseph C. Anafulu, “Onitsha Market Literature: Dead or Alive?” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1973, pp. 165 - 172.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Bernth Lindfors, *Popular Literatures in Africa*, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991, p. 24

<sup>26</sup> Published in Bernth Lindfors, “Amos Tutuola’s Search for a Publisher” pp.100 - 101

(Bernth Lindfors accounts for the unfamiliar grammar and tone of the letter by suggesting that a professional letter writer may have drafted the letter for him). It is significant that it was both the Civil War and the development of Western publishers, such as Heinemann, in the African market that contributed to the decline of market literature in its earliest and most vibrant manifestation.

The existence of a small-scale local literary scene and the business apparatus necessary to publish is extremely significant to the case of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. The fact that Tutuola approached British publishers is, then, a matter for interpretation. It was not an issue of necessity. One may read this behaviour in a number of ways. Did Tutuola hope for greater remuneration through publication abroad? Did such a course of action hold more prestige and less financial risk than publication through the small presses? Was *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* suitable material for market literature? Did Tutuola intend his work for a different audience than the readers of market literature?

It is impossible to give definitive answers to these questions. Tutuola's correspondence with Faber and Faber make it very clear that he conceived of the publication of the text as a business transaction. His negotiations were both shrewd and hard-nosed. In addition to a £25 advance (a not inconsiderable sum at the time), Tutuola secured an excellent royalty agreement. In a letter debating Faber's offered terms dated 27 June 1951, Tutuola writes:

Thank you for your letter of June 21st. I am very glad to read in your letter that you will publish the M/S and also the letter points out about the correction of my wrong English etc., In conclusion, I leave everything for you to do as how it will profit for both of us, and, is no need of sending me the printer's proofs for corrections as you are an expert in this field.  
2. All the terms are accepted but I suggest that this 10 % is too poor and it would be better if it is 20% or 25%, but this does not debar you to start work, I leave all for you to judge.

3. Please, will you explain in full a paragraph of your letter which reads as follows:-'We should like to have the option of publishing your NEXT BOOK on terms to be mutually agreed.'

Awaiting your early reply, please,  
Yours truly,

A. TUTUOLA

N.B. Paragraphs 2 and 3 above do not debar you in any way to start the work.<sup>27</sup>

This letter suggests that Tutuola was as business-like as any Onitsha market bookseller and conceived *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as a commercial as well as an artistic enterprise. His lack of preciousness in regard to authorship and the integrity of his text seems to confound Faber's expectations of the relationship between author and publisher. This canniness and seeming disregard of the minutiae of the text has no bearing, of course, on issues of literary merit. What it does suggest, is an affinity between the world of Onitsha and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Accounts of Onitsha literature and the texts I have been able to inspect do not contain material resembling *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*; the various genres did not admit, at this stage, what we might reservedly call "folk tales". Onitsha literature shows a concern with the issues generated by urban living, with self improvement, with political events<sup>28</sup> and racy narratives of adventure. One might speculate that there was no perceived market for material such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, that the reader to whom these works were intended would not pay for material to which they might already be familiar through the established traditions of oral narrative. As we shall see, some of the early African criticism of Tutuola makes precisely this point. Tutuola's business dealings with Faber show that if this was the case, Tutuola certainly possessed the acumen necessary to know his market.

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<sup>27</sup> Lindfors "Amos Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p. 97

<sup>28</sup> Some later titles from Onitsha include *Dr Nkrumah in the Struggle for Freedom, The Struggles and Trials of Jomo Kenyatta, Awolowo and Akintola in Political Crises*. Quoted in Bernth Lindfors, *Popular Literatures in Africa*, p.24

What is clear and meaningful is that Tutuola deliberately submitted his work to a foreign audience. The text was sent out from Nigeria into what was, literally, unknown territory to Tutuola. It is for this reason that one may look to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as the deliberate initiation of a trans-cultural dialogue, notwithstanding any other concerns that may have accompanied this decision.

English language literature was not restricted to popular fiction produced by Nigerians. Colonial educational policy in Nigeria, as elsewhere, laid a strong emphasis upon the study of “great” English literature, both as a vehicle for the transmission of British values and as a practical tool for language teaching. School text books were often in English and most Nigerians would have had some familiarity with Western literary models. This familiarity would vary enormously in accordance to variables of social class, access to education and the degree of cultural contact. The Westernised elites might have a knowledge of the “Great Tradition” to rival anyone in England and, in remote areas, there might be no familiarity whatsoever. Elizabeth Isichei, however, characterises the exposure of “typical Nigerians” to Western Literature as follows:

Until about 1960, Western Literature reached the typical educated Nigerian in one of two varieties. One was the schoolboy’s set text, pored over and almost learnt by heart, leaving the boy with an exhaustive knowledge of, for instance, *David Copperfield* and *Twelfth Night*, and with no acquaintance at all with the other works of the ‘set’ author. The other consisted of popular romances, detective stories, and westerns.<sup>29</sup>

While it is unproductive to speculate as to exactly which genres and which texts Tutuola may have been familiar with, it is clear that as someone who had received a primary education in a colonial and missionary setting, Tutuola would have received instruction in English through the use of literary mediums and, as a Christian. He would

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<sup>29</sup> Isichei *A History of Nigeria* p. 451

have been inculcated, in a fairly indeterminable way, in various aspects of European culture.

Yet as someone whose first language was Yoruba, it was with the oral traditions of that culture too which Tutuola would have been most conversant. Yoruba culture had and has a variety of forms of orature structured around different roles and social functions. Yoruba culture is not atypical in this respect. Throughout West Africa, prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, myths, maxims, songs, oral histories in both “secular” and “sacred” forms, provide a rich and complex background of oral culture. Yoruba culture provides a particular richness in fictional prose narratives; the American ethnologist, W.R. Bascom, estimated that Yoruba culture had over five thousand folktales in circulation.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately the vocabulary for describing this cultural complex is somewhat inadequate and demonstrates the full weight of strained cultural translation.

Inevitably, in trying to account for the broad functioning of these speech genres in a culture, one divides and stratifies in a way that is a poor reflection of that culture’s web of lived connections. Similarly, the language ethnologists use in describing the “literary” practices of other cultures can no longer be looked upon without suspicion. This said, one may tentatively make a purely descriptive analogy and describe a high/low cultural dichotomy in Yoruba “literary” speech genres. Yoruba “high” cultural forms might include praise chanting or *Oriki* (a canon of sacred verses devoted to the pantheon of Yoruba deities and to celebrating ancestral lineages), the cycle of *Ifa* verses operating in cabalistic complexity in a divinatory and prophetic function and, like *Oriki*, defined by a body of canonical verses that are the reserve of a specialist priesthood. These verses have a rigid corpus that requires years of study by *Ifa* specialists. These aspects of Yoruba culture

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<sup>30</sup> W.R. Bascom “West Africa and the Complexity of Primitive Cultures,” *American Anthropologist* Vol.50, No.1 (Jan.-Mar. 1948)

relate to the term “orature” in a different way to what we might call, reservedly, “low cultural” such as proverbs, folk tales, riddles etc. Yoruba sacred verse differs in that its religious function, the scholasticism needed by its specialists, mean that this is not the same kind of discourse as genres which are distributed in their reproduction and use throughout society. Yoruba “low” cultural forms include commonly known and widely used proverbs, innumerable but shared folk tales and a tradition of verbally inventive riddles. The complex and multi-faceted background of oral tradition presents its own difficulties in understanding the context of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. “Orature” cannot be simply read as a term equivalent to literature, differing only in that one text is performed, the other written. “Orature” is not an analytical term that can be used in the place of “literature” as it is understood in Western cultures.<sup>31</sup> In describing, for example, the sacred and divinatory verses of *Ifa* as devotional verse or as religious poetry, or in describing Egungun masque as ritual drama, one is participating in the kind of problems of cultural difference and translation that frame the theoretical project of this thesis. Central to the non-equivalence of the terms is the concept of fictionality. The “inventedness” we use to characterise literature is applicable to elements of the oral tradition but not to others; one needs then to look anew at the concept of fictionality in regard to the oral tradition and re-examine the specific functions of individual “speech genres” from this corpus. Indeed, Bakhtinian models of “speech genres” might not be particularly well suited to the analysis of this kind of heteroglossia. “Heteroglossia” is a powerfully syncretist model of the functioning of language. This is both its strength and its weakness. The concept of speech genres does not give adequate account of hierarchical or paradigmatic divisions in heteroglossia. It implies a secularism and

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<sup>31</sup> These issues and others are discussed in Eileen Julien’s *African Novels and the Question of Orality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992



relativity between speech genres in which the language of the Ten Commandments is a speech genre different in species but not in genus, from a shopping list. There is an implicit understanding that, in one sense, all speech genres are fictional in nature.

Bakhtin would not suggest that speech genres are undifferentiated and part of the role of the analysis of speech genres would be to identify functional ideological and stylistic differences in these genres. But Bakhtinian analysis would place genres of the sacred and the secular, the fictional and the factual, in the same signifying system, distinct from each other but both still only instances in the larger life of the language. This equivalence of speech genres and discourses might be well suited to an understanding of postmodernism's discursive relativism but it seems to be out of step when faced with the analysis of a culture that stratifies and organises its speech genres in a way different from our own.

Tutuola was not the first to begin to explore this oral cultural heritage in print and English was not the only language that would have constituted his literary heteroglossia. In Northern Nigeria, Abubakar tafuwa Belewa had published a Hausa novel, *Shaiha Umar*, as early as 1934. Yoruba language literature had already emerged with Chief Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa publishing his first novel *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo* (The Brave Hunter in the Forest of the Four Hundred Spirits) in 1938. Fagunwa was extremely popular in Yorubaland and also produced Yoruba school text books, travel books and short stories. The relationship between Tutuola and Fagunwa is one has been much discussed in criticism. For the moment it is sufficient to establish that they shared a common set of cultural co-ordinates and that Fagunwa had established the possibility of translating aspects of the oral tradition into literary forms.

Nigeria was not, of course, isolated from events and developments in other parts of the African continent. In Francophone Africa and in Parisian exile, young African intellectuals were publishing both literary works and cultural studies on African societies. In the autumn of 1947, the first edition of *Présence Africaine* was published in Paris and Dakar. Its stated editorial policy, written by C.A. Diop, was to “define the African’s creativity and to hasten his integration in the modern world”.<sup>32</sup> The journal was founded by “a certain number of overseas students, witnessing a stricken Europe questioning herself as to the efficacy and genuineness of her values, (who) gathered themselves together to study that same situation and to weigh the distinctive qualities of their own being.”<sup>33</sup> This exploration of African culture served to both resist colonialism and to affirm the value of the cultures of various African societies. In effect, both these practices achieved the same end. The exploration of African societies by Africans resisted colonial constructions of the native and the resistance of colonialism led to an investigation of African cultural alternatives to colonial values.

Tutuola’s literary heteroglossia was characterised by the emergence of new literary uses for traditional oral materials, by new opportunities for the publication of this and other material and the self confidence, amongst Nigerians of every station, to both consume and produce literature. Nigeria was not yet a Nation State and the ideological impact of British culture endured, as did the influence of the English language as a pan-ethnic medium of communication. The cultural prestige of colonial literary production remained but this tool of British hegemony was becoming transformed by the interruption of

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in V.Y. Mudimbe ed. *The Surreptitious Speech; Présence Africaine and The Politics of Otherness 1947-1987* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.16. This text also provides an important introduction to the history of the journal *Présence Africaine*.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Mudimbe *The Surreptitious Speech* p. 16

the voices of the colonised. In this regard, a market literature pamphlet on how to attract a partner was part of the same radical questioning of British rule as more overtly political genres of subversion such as a Zikist polemic. The creation of indigenous literatures was an affirmation both of cultural independence and in the value of Nigerians accounts of their own lives, aims and achievements. These forms and literary institutions were, nevertheless, in their infancy. It was an era in which anything seemed possible, in which both the political and cultural make-up of the emerging nation were in the process of becoming. The end of the war and the crumbling of colonial authority seemed to mark the beginnings of a new era unsoured, as yet, by the disappointments of life after independence.

#### The United Kingdom. The Social and Literary Heteroglossia:

In order to establish the nature of the inter-cultural dialogue actuated by the publication of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, it was first necessary to establish some historical and cultural co-ordinates under which the text was produced. As the volume of scholarly material on British social and literary history in the post-war period is already quite immense, I will offer only a brief and synoptic account of the heteroglossic field awaiting Tutuola's text in the Great Britain of the late forties and early fifties.

British society, like that of Nigeria, was dominated by the long-term after effects of the war. The war had left the United Kingdom in debt to the tune of at least three billion pounds. Areas of the country were still physically devastated and the war economy continued into the post-war years with rationing, widespread shortages and low productivity, defining economic life.

In terms of the speech genres dominant within the heteroglossia in the United Kingdom in the period, one might imagine that they were marked by a historical shift between a war-time discourse of unity and besieged nationalism into a post-war mentality of radicalism, economic and cultural renewal and social egalitarianism. While this may be true up to a point, it is possible to see powerful historical continuities between war-time values and those at work in the emerging heteroglossia of the late forties and early fifties. The nationalisation of major industries did not create democracy in the workplace nor did it give working people control “of the means of production and exchange”. In ideological terms, the linkages between the war years and the first years of peace came with the commitment to large scale social engineering - a rationalist and technocratic faith in the possibility of rationally influencing, not only the course of everyday lives, but the historical direction of the nation. The war had created a large bureaucratic infrastructure with close governmental involvement in private industry and had showed the possibility of planning to shape events. Implicit in the social legislation of the period was the faith that the economic inequality, poverty and class divisions of the pre-war years could be eliminated through legislation and technocratic and scientific engagement. As a corollary to the rise of discourses of “social science”, was a commitment to technological solutions to social problems and of the role of the specialist in conducting this planning.

In academic and intellectual life, something of the same inward-looking mood and specialist sensibility found in political life defined academic speech genres. C.P. Snow’s analysis (in the late fifties) of the “two cultures” of the humanities and the sciences, both mutually distrustful and exclusive, typifies the mood of the era. In the social sciences, discourses such as psychology, sociology and social

anthropology, partook in the expansion of Higher Education and showed the increasing specialism of academic discourse.

This overview of the British social heteroglossia is as brief and inadequate as the one offered for Nigeria. It is possible to create a fairly seamless narrative linking post-war economic and social conditions, the inward looking and technocratic ethos of public life and literary production in the period. Literary history traditionally understands the period in Britain to be typified by a reaction to a modernism which had reached its *ne plus ultra* with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. While the academic world was still attempting to come to grips with the neologistic and allusive complexity of high modernism, the emergence of writers such as Larkin, Amis and Osbourne in the late forties and early fifties is said to typify the artistic backlash to the Cosmopolitanism and elitism of modernism. Attributes said to typify this generation of writers is an anti-modernism, an anti-intellectualism, a rejection of the stylistic innovation, the political commitment of the thirties generation and the Primitivism and paganism of D.H. Lawrence. The mytho-poetic impetus of the modernism of an Eliot or a Joyce found its post-war antithesis in the "little-Englandism" of Larkin *et al.* Kingsley Amis presents the apogee of this sensibility:

Nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or paintings or art galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems. At least I hope nobody wants them.<sup>34</sup>

Whether this position represents a rather disingenuous parochialism or a subversion of elite tradition is debatable. In a similar vein, Larkin wrote of having "no belief in tradition or a common myth-kitty or

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Charles Tomlinson "Some Aspects of Poetry Since the War" in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Volume 8, THE PRESENT, ed. B. Ford Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983, p. 450

casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets”.<sup>35</sup> This kind of literary pragmatism echoes, for example, a particular strain or radical empiricism found in the work of A.J. Ayer and has both radical and reactionary implications. Its anti-modernism, its attack on the poetics of allusion, suggests the possibility of discourse that stands in a different relation to the cultural heights of canonical English Literature and also seems in tune with the popularism of Government policy, its splenetic blokishness and middle-brow pretensions shows the kind of failure in intellectual engagement evident elsewhere in the social heteroglossia. Nevertheless, the period was characterised by more than the reaction to modernism and an introspective concern with a lost England. Orwell produced the bleak political fantasy of *1984* (published in 1949). In 1948 Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess : An Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, sought to fashion an idiosyncratic and universal grammar of myth, a reworking of Hellenistic myth no less radical than *Ulysses*. The forties and early fifties were rife with genres of the fantastic - Mervin Peake’s Gormangast Trilogy began with *Titus Groan* (1952) which created an alternative world of terminal decay and meaningless ritual. In a different vein, Tolkein’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-56) merged a world of pure fantasy with aspects of Nordic and Germanic myth and a distinctly Cold War morality.

In poetry, Dylan Thomas, “The Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive” offered both a prosody and sensibility in stark contrast to the values of economy, clarity and exactness espoused by the Movement poets. This was a poetry of excess, one that sought to explore the unconscious, the role of incantation and a Neo-Romantic obsession with capturing the nexus of the body, nature and the sacramental role of poetry, with seizing:

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<sup>35</sup> Kingsley Amis in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Volume 8, p. 457

..the magic of this, burning and bewildering Universe, in the meaning and the power of symbols, in the miracle of myself and all mortals in the divinity that is so near us and so longing to be nearer, in the staggering, bloody, starry wonder of the sky I can see above and the sky I can think of below. <sup>36</sup>

The seamless narrative that forecloses British literary modernism in 1945 does not, therefore, perfectly match the facts of literary production. The reality was more complex and the transformations enacted by the Cold War context less easily delineated.

The period from the late forties to the early fifties saw an interesting interplay between differing discourses of literary critical reception. Like the social heteroglossia and in literary production, the period is not self contained. Many of the innovations in literary critical method of the late twenties and early thirties only took full hold in Academic Institutions and general critical practice in the post-war years. In a similar vein, the United Kingdom was not entirely isolated in its literary critical heteroglossia with particular cross-fertilisation between debates in the United Kingdom and North America.

Indeed, certain patterns and antagonisms in the structure of English literary critical discourse stem from the origins of the subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and were in evidence in the literary criticism of the fifties. These antagonisms stemmed from twin concerns; to establish the social, philosophical and *spiritual* value of English Studies, often in contrast to the perceived threat of mass culture and, conversely, to construct a definable and rigorous methodology for literary studies in the face of the impact and prestige of social and natural sciences. Tension remained between the older belle lettrist traditions of critical *appreciation* and the movement to professionalise the discipline of literary criticism. By the fifties, these discourses had gone their separate ways, with belle lettrist

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<sup>36</sup> From a 1933 letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson quoted in *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas* ed. P Ferris, London: Dent, 1985, p. 23

criticism and professional literary study almost entirely distinct. Literary journalism in the period was, of course, defined by different criteria, the perennial need for good copy. But it retained much of the impressionism and appreciative subjectivity of belle lettrist tradition, while, simultaneously, Academic discourse showed increasingly specialised vocabularies and procedures.

In the technocratic forties and fifties these twin claims (for moral leadership and for the establishment of a discrete and professional discourse of literary studies) were even more pressing. The work of the great pioneers of English literary studies in the thirties and forties (Leavis, I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot etc.) came into common currency in the expanding Academia of the post-war years. Yet the paradoxes inherent in a discipline which sought to provide a spiritual and moral alternative to modern culture, while emulating the methodological procedures of that culture's dominant scientific disciplines, became ever more apparent.

The strident though unanalytic language of *Scrutiny* saturates the criticism of the period. A great poem "embodied" or "enacted" its meaning. The text was regarded as an interplay of forces, the critic traced the "movement" and "direction" of this energy in the text and assessed whether the work had "fully realised" the "concreteness" of meaning. The unstated process by which the great text "manifested" its meaning to the initiated critic reflected vaguely Laurentian values and was underpinned by a nostalgia for a lost culture, complete, life-affirming and unalienated. New criticism developed the impersonalism of Eliot and the "objectivity" of Richards and the Leavisites to produce a literary criticism in which authorial intention, reader response and the specifics of historical context were to have no direct relevance to the interpretation of the text. Literature and, most importantly, poetry was, for the New Critics, to be elevated into an objective and timeless



world above the detritus of history. Tied to this conception of the objective and reified literary text, was a method of “close analysis” of textual structure that was to reveal its iconic and objective status.

The historical synchronicity that brought a number of thinkers in the late forties and fifties to search for unifying models of literary analysis and literary history is remarkable. In France Claude Lévi-Strauss was beginning to develop structural anthropology <sup>37</sup> while Auerbach published the compendious and comparative *Mimesis: Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946 English Translation - 1953). Similarly, Northrop Frye’s work in the fifties also sought to establish archetypal *mythoi* beneath all and any manifestation of literary creation.

The literary critical heteroglossia awaiting *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was thus characterised by a concern with the nature of the literary, with what it was that defined literary textuality. It was radically de-contextual in emphasis, with the iconic text the proper and only concern for criticism. It was characterised by an increasing specialism amongst literary critical practitioners and by a stress upon the reified and morally-saturated nature of literature. Married to this was both an atavistic cultural nationalism and a dissatisfaction with modernity. In Leavis, Richards, Eliot and the New Critics, there is a consistent evocation of cultures holistically unified, pre-modern and agrarian.

Concerns for objectivity, for the universal nature of the literary could have, or indeed *should* have, opened up the discourse to a pan-cultural analysis of literary production. In most cases, however, “Literature” was assumed to be Western Literature, most often works in the English language. Nevertheless, in works by Frye and others of a

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<sup>37</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. (Paris 1949) English Translation *Elements of the Structure of Kinship*, Revised Edition (trans James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham) London: Ayre and Spottiswoode, 1968

more Catholic taste, the Universalist implications of all this grand theorisation began to be explored. The impact of Jungian psychology, cultural anthropology and re-emergent Folklore studies threatened to open the discourse of literary studies to issues of cultural difference. This opportunity, however, was not taken and much of the work of the period was happy to make universal claims from local English language particulars.

### Darkness Visible: First Critical Encounters with Tutuola.

The first moments of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard's* dialogue with literary criticism were, firstly, with English and American editors and then with the British and American reviewers for newspapers and literary journals. This context placed a certain evaluative emphasis on the reading process. Unlike later academic investigations of the text, early encounters were governed, in part, by discourses of literary journalism and by the strictures of editorial policy and procedure.

From the outset, Tutuola's potential publishers show a mixture of anxiety, wonder and anticipation over the possible reception of the text. The first concern of these readers (over and above the text's commercial viability in the literary market-place) was the "authenticity" of the manuscript. Jocelyn Oliver, a key figure in the history of the text's publication, passed the manuscript on to Faber and Faber with the following request:

Do you think Mr Eliot would have time to look at the enclosed M.S. which has been sent to us from Africa? Lutterworth funks it I'm sorry to say, but *if* it is original it is the one work of real genius that has come my way in 25 years of publishing. <sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Bernth Lindfors' "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p. 94. All of Tutuola's correspondence will be quoted from this text.

Faber showed interest in the text and, taking Oliver's advice, attempted to have the text "authenticated" by passing the manuscript onto Daryll Forde, a professional Africanist from the Department of Anthropology of University College, London for his professional opinion. Geoffrey Faber, in a letter to Forde, dated March 15th 1950, described his impressions of the text and his evaluation of its prospects:

It is a long rambling ghost, spook and juju story by a West African native . . . We think it possible that it might conceivably have something of a success if published here. But we should like to know whether it has its roots in the common West African mind. <sup>39</sup>

Forde authenticated the text (with the aid of a Nigerian post-graduate student, S. O. Biobaku) as a "genuine" product of the African mind and Faber and Faber began their search for the text's author (the manuscript had come to Faber via a number of publishers and they had, at this point, no direct contact with Tutuola).

Faber recognised a text inscribed with cultural difference - a text that standard editorial procedures seemed ill-equipped to deal with. In a model that replicates certain forms of anthropological knowledge the "suspicious" text of cultural difference needed to be processed through the verifying institutions of European knowledge. With the aid of a "native informant", Forde was able to locate the text in a specifically Nigerian Yoruba idiom. This process was repeated for Tutuola's next novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* <sup>40</sup> with anthropologist Geoffrey Parrinder serving to legitimise the cultural value of the text. Oliver's and Faber's suspicion of the African text is startling, at worst it seems to suggest that they considered the manuscript to be potentially fraudulent or plagiarised, at best that the text needed to be *sufficiently* African to be of interest. This was, one

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<sup>39</sup> Lindfors "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Amos Tutuola *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* London: Faber and Faber, 1990

must remember, the “golden era” of ethnology and the discourse of anthropological knowledge. This period came before the destabilising effects of factors such as decolonisation had undermined the “ethnographic authority” of the discourse. Anthropological discourse of a variety of schools and models was, during this period, at its most self-assured, its most “scientific” and authoritative. James Clifford assesses the current crisis of “ethnographic authority” as antecedent to this period of anthropological certainty that was based on the development of the specialised discipline of professional ethnography:

The current crisis - or better, dispersion - of ethnographic authority makes it possible to mark off a rough period, bounded by the years 1900 and 1960, during which a new conception of field work established itself as the norm for European and American anthropology. Intensive fieldwork, pursued by university-trained specialists, emerged as a privileged, sanctioned source of data about exotic peoples. <sup>41</sup>

It is, then, unsurprising that Faber would look to “contract out” evaluation of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to the relevant area of professional expertise. Having passed the test of specialised opinion, Faber and Faber were still left with the questions of value and market and reception surrounding *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Richard de la Mare, who was in charge of the publication of the manuscript seemed, like many involved with the text, to experience a distinct thrill at the prospect of the text’s critical reception. In a letter to Jocelyn Oliver, dated 13th July 1951, he writes:

It seemed to me and to many of us to be a terrifying but quite fascinating book and we felt we ought to let it slip. What the reviews will say about it I cannot imagine, but it will be more than interesting to see how they take it. It is many a long day since I have looked forward to the press for a book more than this one! <sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. London: Harvard University Press, 1988, p.24

<sup>42</sup> Lindfors “Tutuola’s Search for a Publisher” p. 101

Faber were correct in anticipating a problem with aesthetic criteria amongst reviewers. In a later review of *The Brave African Huntress*<sup>43</sup> V.S. Naipaul gives a retrospective account of the kind of problems Tutuola presents the critic:

Frankly I do not know what to make of this latest offering by Amos Tutuola. To review a book is, as far as I know, to give your audience your own honest estimation of the work: an estimation based upon (to say the least) vague standards. The fact that these standards are identifiable when positively present accounts for the surprising unanimity with which critics acclaim a work as good or bad. When, however, there are no standards by which to judge an offering, a critic has two choices. 'Chuck it out, it's no good.' (An attitude unfortunately adopted by most Nigerians towards Tutuola). Or, out comes the trumpet; and hiding behind this horn the critic blows his loudest, aiming by his own noise to drown and deafen his ignorance of the facts. After all, who knows Tutuola's world of 'deads' and 'satyrs'?<sup>44</sup>

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, like Tutuola's later texts, confounded the established rules of both publishing and those of critical judgement and appreciation. This "unknowable" world of "deads" and "satyrs" seems to establish an example of what Lyotard calls a *différend*. The *différend* is Lyotard's elusive and highly metaphoric concept for a discursive situation in which the contact and conflict of irreconcilable and mutually incommensurable orders of signification produces a moment of radical undecidability. It describes a moment in which available criteria for judgement prove unworkable or inadequate:

..a *différend* would be a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that could not be resolved equitably for a lack of a rule of judgement applicable to the two modes.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Amos Tutuola *The Brave African Huntress* London: Faber and Faber, 1958

<sup>44</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *New Statesman*, April 1954, quoted from *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola*, ed. Bernth Lindfors, p. 61. Unless indicated, all extracts of reviews and criticism will come from this text. . .

<sup>45</sup> J. F. Lyotard, *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute* (trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele) Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 20 - 30

Lyotard's aestheticisation of theories of justice and judgement has, of course, implications for moments of literary critical practice in which there seems to be no definitive or secure procedures for this act of judgement.

It is my contention that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* produced such a moment, an instance of literary critical judgement in which Western critics touched upon "something which ought to be able to be phrased that cannot yet be phrased."<sup>46</sup> Yet, as we shall see, this moment of cultural difference, the interpretative vacuum outlined by Naipaul was quickly filled with available interpretative discourses from the Western social heteroglossia. A bizarre melange of Primitivism, anthropology, and more affective modes of appreciation was sucked into this space of interpretation. Selden Rodman's piece in *The New York Times Book Review*, (September 20, 1953) gave a clear indication of the extent to which Tutuola would be understood through analogy to existing Western Literary genres (from both the avant-garde and the nursery) and to the category of the primitive:

If you like Anna Livia Plurabelle, Alice in Wonderland and the poems of Dylan Thomas, the chances are you will like this novel, although probably not for reasons having anything to do with the author's intentions. For Amos Tutuola is not a revolutionist of the word, not a mathematician, not a surrealist. *He is a true primitive.* And the pleasure a sophisticated reader will derive from his un-willed style and trance-like narrative is akin to the pleasure generated by popular painters like Rousseau or Obin.<sup>47</sup> (my emphasis)

The historical evidence of the reception of this text calls into question Lyotard's analysis of the moment of equilibrium in which the différend is made manifest, it implies that his model of "judgement without criteria" remains an ideal.

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<sup>46</sup> Lyotard *The Différend* p. 9

<sup>47</sup> Extracts from *The New York Times Book Review*, September 20, 1953 - Selden Rodman

Faber's attitude to the text was, in fact, determined by a fascination with its exotic qualities. It was, perhaps, for this reason that they avoided using the traditional evaluative editorial procedures of revision and correction of the manuscript and hoped, instead, to produce a text capable, in its singularity, of a "one off" hit in the market-place. Hoping to secure a publisher in the United States, Faber submitted the manuscript, before its British publication, to a number of American Publishing Houses; the correspondence of this exchange is quite revealing:

A reader at Norton rejected the text; to Norton *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was:

..almost that fascinating sort of off-the-trail book coming from an off-the-trail mind that sometimes catches the public eye, but the trouble as I see it lies in the word 'almost'. I am afraid Mr. Tutuola doesn't quite pull it off, and when the book is finished, it isn't quite worth the confusion.<sup>48</sup>

In response, du Santoy of Faber and Faber replied:

We do, of course, realise it is not quite as good as it ought to be, but it is the unsophisticated product of a West African mind and we felt there was nothing to be done about it except to leave it alone. When I say unsophisticated, that is not altogether true, since Tutuola has been to some extent influenced by at any rate the externals of Western Civilisation. It seemed to us to be an interesting example of genuine African writing and worth publishing on that account. Its interest is possibly more anthropological than literary, but apart from being in the end a little tedious, it has got a certain quality as a piece of unusual writing.<sup>49</sup>

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, therefore, engendered excitement at Faber not necessarily for its literary merit but for its essential and naive reproduction of an "essential" Africanness. While Faber could speculate on the external influence of Western culture (and equate "sophistication" with culture contact with the West), *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was at its core everything African, a product of the "African

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48 Lindfors "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p.102

49 Lindfors "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p.102.

Mind". The text, whose reception began with the authorisation of anthropology would, for Faber, end under the remit of this discourse. T.S. Eliot, for example, doubted the enduring appeal of texts such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. In a letter dated "Quinquagesima 1952" Eliot opines:

I think that this one is worth publishing, but will the author go on being interesting to any but students of social psychology and, on a deeper level, students of colonial policy? <sup>50</sup>

From the outset, then, the manuscript was placed in an ambiguous relation to literary critical discourse. Faber anticipated that it might be read as an index of Africanity, indeed, the editorial procedures undertaken by Faber served to present the text in a manner more akin to an artefact from the plastic arts than as a piece of literature. Faber made a conscious decision to do as little editorially to the body of the text as possible. Richard de la Mare in his letter to Jocelyn Oliver quoted above states:

so far as our edition goes we have decided to let it burst upon an astonished world unheralded and unrecommended. <sup>51</sup>

Tutuola was, for his part, more than willing to accept editorial amendments to his text:

I shall be very much grateful if you will correct my 'WRONG ENGLISH', etc. and can alter the story itself if possible, of course, it is not necessary to tell you as you are an expert on this work..... In conclusion, I leave everything to you for you to do as you can in such a way that it will pay for both of us. <sup>52</sup>

Faber decided instead to make the minimum of changes to the text, to present the manuscript as an autonomous artefact of a culture to be

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50 Lindfors "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p.103

51 Lindfors "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p. 95

52 Lindfors "Tutuola's Search for a Publisher" p. 96



viewed in all its “native” peculiarity. As if to demonstrate the authenticity of the text’s strangeness the first and all subsequent editions displayed a page of Tutuola’s original hand-written manuscript.

In the light of this crisis of aesthetic criteria many critics, in fact, reproduced Faber’s example of re-presenting the exotic nature of the text and quoted extensively from the novel with a kind of demonstrative and gestural quality. The nature of this critical quotation was rather different from normal literary critical method. Time and again, early reviewers quoted *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* at some length, seemingly at random, for the purpose not of constructing a *reading* but of demonstrating and reproducing a sample of Tutuola’s textuality. Kingsley Amis in his review of the novel is typical of this tendency:

.....there is no doubt of the size of Mr. Tutuola’s talent, which makes the average ‘modern novel’ look jejune and vapid. Try this bit-<sup>53</sup>

Amis takes his usual swipe at modernism and goes on to “show”, through demonstration, the strangeness and fecundity of the text. When critics did offer synopsis of the text, it was in a literal and “quotational” manner rather than in an interpretative or discursive mode. Dylan Thomas’ famous review in *The Observer*, July 6, 1952, is typical of this tendency. Again and again, the “usual” process of synopsis, close analysis and textual commentary is confounded, in the case of Tutuola, with a kind of presentational imperative which served to reify the text into a closed unit of signification. In a context where literary critical discourse was becoming increasingly concerned with “close analysis”, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard’s* textuality was something somehow unassailable to standard critical practice.

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53 Kingsley Amis *Spectator*, February 26 1954

The reification of the text into something resembling an artefact of the visual arts, into a kind of icon, was itself one of the procedures of New Criticism. Yet, in the case of Tutuola, the context of the text's production was not so much ignored as deliberately effaced. In order, perhaps, to turn the text into an *intelligible* cultural artefact many critics sought to establish that the text was produced under a different regime of authorship than that of the Western novel. Eric Larrabee's review, cum preview, of the then forthcoming American edition of the novel is typical of this process:

As an exercise in imagination, try to conceive of an author who (1) probably has never met another author, (2) owns no books, (3) not known to his daily acquaintances as an author, (4) has no personal contact with a publisher, (5) is not certain where his book is on sale and (6) does not think of himself as an author...To Mr. Tutuola stories are things that exist; he merely puts them down. He is aware that the ability to do so is not universal -'many people in Lagos cannot write stories'. The sale of writing as a commodity he understands and I suspect he made the natural connection between America and commercial opportunity but he himself is only its Agent. When I asked him what his future writing plans were he said that possibly there were more stories down on the farm and that if I liked he might be able to get some. 'Leave the matter to me'.<sup>54</sup>

In this and other accounts of Tutuola's authorship, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is not text "written" in the usual messy and particular process, it was "set down", authored by a culture in general and produced by the broader "racial imagination". In this process of effacement, Tutuola was simultaneously praised for his invention and removed from the process of producing his text. To this end, a number of critics suggest that Tutuola "encountered" his stories in a literal sense (around the camp fire as elements of a common folkloric background) and in a cognitive sense (by some unspecified unconscious involvement in a racial imagination in which his stories were both folk lore and folk consciousness). As Rodman's review in *The New York Times Book Review* made clear, the effect of this

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<sup>54</sup> Eric Larrabee *The Reporter* May 12 1953

scheme of authorship was to take any form of *intentionality* (on the part of Tutuola) from the literary effects produced on reading. Parrinder, the ethnologist who introduced Tutuola's second novel, suggested that he "lived in his own narrative":

I asked Tutuola for the apparently haphazard order of the towns of the ghosts, he replied quite simply, 'that is the order that I came to them'.<sup>55</sup>

Ironically this involvement seems to suggest that it is Tutuola who is *authored* by the text of Africanity, he is a courier of a cargo of stories from the African bush to the Western reading public. "A Nigerian Correspondent" writing in *West Africa* (May 1, 1954) suggests that Tutuola's creative method was a species of "automatic" writing and that his work was at once a transliteration of Yoruba orature and the dream-world of his imagination, "...they are the dream; the tales seething in his mind are the reality".<sup>56</sup> Tutuola is offered as having a unique and "primitive" relationship to language and, in turn, to authorship:

His own spoken and written English are identical and he writes exactly what presents itself to his mind. .... He can only re-write passages that fail to portray in word pictures the ghostly creatures of his imagination as vividly as he sees them..

Tutuola confesses that he more than half believes the tales he writes and he can, without mental trauma, reconcile this quasi-belief with his strong Christian views... for he merely translates in a literal fashion from the Yoruba in which all the old legends are still verbally told. If he does 'improve' himself educationally, I hope Amos will not come forth too far from his dream world, peopled as it is by creatures an imaginative child might create. The essential difference between them is that the average child's creative powers are dulled by the impact of adulthood: the vision is blurred, then lost for ever. Tutuola, by chance or genius, has preserved the vision.

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55 Amos Tutuola *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* p. 11

56 "A Nigerian Correspondent" *West Africa*, May 1 1954 "Portrait: A Life in the Bush of Ghosts" In Bernth Lindfors *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola* pp.18-20

57 "A Nigerian Correspondent" *West Africa* May 1 1954

The aim of this process of reification was, I suggest, to transform *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* into the kind of anonymous cultural text such as the purloined tribal masks in the British Museum, decontextualised, authorless and deracinated. This process made the text available for both an “aesthetic” reading and an ethnographic inscription on the nature of the primitive. To make *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* resemble an authorless artefact enabled critical responses usually associated with commentary on material culture. Anonymity was foundational to the act of ethnographic interpretation as it guaranteed the *general* and representative relationship between the artefact and the culture in which it was produced. Authorship, as Foucault famously demonstrated, functioned as a limit and boundary to the interpretative possibilities of the text.<sup>58</sup> The denial of authorship for the ethnographic text opened the possibility for a kind of definitive and general inscription of meaning that was unfettered by the particularity of an “authored” text or by the immersion of an author in a “real” historical context. Similarly, to receive the text in a way analogous to the plastic artefact was to open the text to a range of affective registers of response, to describe the emotional impact of the experience of the artefact on the Western subject. An affective aesthetic is common to much of this criticism of Tutuola with descriptions of how the text made one *feel*. The tone of this affective response was overwhelmingly defined in terms of the thrill, the terror and the sublimity experienced in the face of the primitive.

V.S. Pritchett wrote of:

A soft, amazed voice (which) led us easily out of real life into fantasy life as barbarous, bloody and frightening as the masks of the tribal ceremonies.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> M. Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader* ed. P. Rabinow, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984

<sup>59</sup> V.S. Pritchett in *New Statesman and Nation*. March 6 1954

The text produced a derangement of the senses, a delirium of fear and fascination contrived in a promiscuous farrago of conflicting and dazzling emotional responses.

This shift into a visceral and emotive range of critical speech genres served then to allow the “anonymous”, uprooted text to carry a wider cultural significance, to become an index of Africanness, not merely of the specifics of Tutuola’s own artistic context. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* became, on the cusp of decolonisation, a text that could bear an enormous interpretative burden, standing “for” British and American perceptions of Africa. It also enabled the inscription of a complex set of assumptions on the nature of Africanity and of the primitive itself.

Kingsley Amis’ review is again useful in the analysis of these patterns of response as he takes us through a shift from an anxiety over genre and critical standards into the language of an affective aesthetic. This aesthetic locates common, though shifting, cultural ground in the emotions represented in the text to those produced in the act of reading :

What sort of book is it then? In the face of a tissue of unfathomable African myth/ and fairy story, written in a completely new English idiom, for presumably, a native audience, a European reader will blench [sic] at this question, and only feel a fool if he mutters: ‘Nightmare.....primitive unconscious.... episodic allegory without a key.....reminiscent of Kafka.....poetry..’ Certain emotions can at any rate be identified: physical misery, horror, fear, despair and a unique grotesque humour that seems not to be felt by the author as humour in our sense at all, not as ‘relief’ or as an indication that human ideas still prevail in his ghost-world, but as just another serious, fantastic and violent effect. <sup>60</sup>

Amis’ reading is subtle to the problems the text registers to “our originality as readers” and to the possibility of the commonality of

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<sup>60</sup> Kingsley Amis *The Spectator*, February 26, 1954

emotional content being “blurred in a strange context.”<sup>61</sup> His review is circumspect in addressing the claims of both the Primitivist response “nightmare.....primitive unconscious etc.” and the significance one can ascribe to “emotional effect”. His reading, in fact, leaves these antagonisms unresolved but it brilliantly demonstrates the field of response the text was to find elsewhere.

There was a constant tension, as Amis suggests, between an ethnographic, Primitivist response and the demands to simultaneously claim the text for a distinct literary critical mode of knowledge. Again and again, early criticism maintained an ambivalent relationship with other discourses of the “human sciences”, in particular, those of anthropology, psychology and, to a lesser extent, folk studies. This ambivalence foregrounded the question of where, amongst the array of competing schemes of interpretation, ultimate concern and responsibility for Tutuola’s cultural production should lie.

Naipaul, echoing Eliot (both quoted above), suggested that Tutuola’s later fiction lacked the Primitivist delirium that made this early work so appropriate for the specialist reader:

There is none of the primeval nightmare fascination of the earlier books, little to attract the psychoanalyst and the anthropologist. Were it not for the difficult language, the book could be given to children.  
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Other critics were less willing to pass critical jurisdiction over to the hands of specialised opinion. As we have seen, the period was marked by the increasing professionalisation of literary critical discourse and advocates of the value of “literary knowledge” were not willing to give ground in the “turf-war” of academic speech genres. V.S. Pritchett was willing to concede that the text was “deeply interesting” to psychology

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61 Kingsley Amis *The Spectator* February 26, 1954

62 V. S. Naipaul *The New Statesman, and Nation*, April 1958

and anthropology but, that as a piece of literature, it was far more than the sum of its ethnographic or psychoanalytic parts.

In a violent, bizarre but quite simple talking manner, Tutuola is describing universal experience in a way that will be deeply interesting to psychoanalysts and anthropologists, but he ought not to be read for scientific reasons; he has the immediate intuition of a creative artist working by spell and incantation. He is not the specimen of the folk-lorist and anthropologist but a man living out a recognisable human and moral ordeal.<sup>63</sup>

As both Amis and Pritchetts' reviews suggest *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* actuated the operation of a number of discourses traditionally used in British culture in its understanding of Africa. I have termed this array of discourses, somewhat reductively, "primitivism" but this term is meant to denote a wide family of related speech genres which are distinct but interconnected. Despite the claims of discourses such as anthropology to exclusively govern authentic and scientific knowledge of the primitive, the genres (in the Bakhtinian sense) of the primitive were highly diffused throughout the heteroglossia. As I have suggested, literary criticism was willing to draw upon this variety of modes of response without passing knowledge of Tutuola over to specialised "Primitivists". Placing the variety of early British and American responses to *The Palm Wine Drinkard* under the aegis of the discourse of Primitivism is not, of course, to suggest that all responses were consistent or unanimous in their evaluation of the text but that Primitivism provided a framework for a complex range of response.

My use of the term brings together genres as distinct as Tarzan movies, "Boys Adventure" fiction, aspects of social and cultural anthropology, psychology, art criticism and Modernist artistic practice. In all this variety Primitivism shows a range of related motifs. It offers a vaguely Hegelian and evolutionary notion of history in which

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<sup>63</sup> V.S. Pritchett in *The New Statesman and Nation*, March 6, 1954

the primitive gave an insight into a common foundational period of culture that was universal and trans-historical. The Universalist impetus to find “archetypal” literary forms discovered, in Tutuola, a living example of the “roots” of literary culture.

Similarly, Primitivism collated tribal culture and its subjects to speculation on both the nature of pre-industrial and organic social organisation, the impact of this “holistic” socius on cultural production and on the “mind” of the primitive man. The roots of this thinking run very deep in Western culture and the discourse of Primitivism was (and perhaps is) so dispersed throughout our understanding of other cultures that it is meaningless to look at one or a handful of founders for the discourse. The Primitivism I examine as typical of critical responses to Tutuola could be explained, contextualised and realised with reference to a number of important figures in Twentieth Century thought. One could look to Durkheim’s conceptualisation of the differences between industrial and pre-industrial forms of social cohesion (concepts of Mechanical and Organic solidarity) <sup>64</sup> to Lévy-Bruhl’s influential paradigm on the a-logical qualities of the primitive mind, <sup>65</sup> to late Freudian speculation on the origins of society <sup>66</sup> to neo-conservative nostalgia for the “Golden Age” of pre-modern societies (T.S. Eliot and New Criticism). One might delve deeper through Nietzsche into the “foundations” of Enlightenment in Rousseau, Herder or Hume. Yet this would only reveal an aspect of the pervasive nature of Primitivism which might be as profitably examined through figures

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<sup>64</sup> E. Durkheim *The Division of Labour in Society* (trans George Simpson) New York: Columbia University Press, 1933

<sup>65</sup> The controversy surrounding Lévy-Bruhl’s work on the “organic” nature of “primitive” consciousness was played out on the pages of the following texts. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (1923) *How Natives Think* (1926) *The Soul of The Primitive* (1928) [all] London: Allen and Unwin and trans. L.A. Clare.

<sup>66</sup> Some of the essays from the later years of Freud’s career are devoted to a kind of speculative para-anthropology on the origins and operations of culture and society. See in particular *Moses and Monotheism*, and *Civilisation and its Discontents* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, ed. James Strachey and *Moses and Monotheism*, Vol. 23, London: Hogarth Press, 1964



such as Conrad, Josephine Baker, Picasso or Johnny Weismuller. The diversity of this discourse can gainfully be conceived, in Bakhtinian terms, as a historical network of “speech genres” that constitutes a heteroglottal field. In a modern context of mass media, these Bakhtinian terms are somewhat stretched in order to accommodate genres and styles of signification that are extra-linguistic such as film, sculpture and painting.

V.Y. Mudimbe’s work on the category of the “African” in Western thought, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* <sup>67</sup> suggests that the Primitivist conception of Africa can be understood through the interaction of a trilogy of distinct genres of interpretation - an exoticist discourse of otherness and adventure, an evolutionist discourse on the progress of civility and technology and an anthropological discourse on the social and cultural organisation of the primitive society:

In fact, from a more general historical frame, one can observe three complimentary genres of ‘speeches’ contributing to the invention of primitive Africa: the exotic text on savages represented by travellers reports; the philosophical interpretations about a hierarchy of civilisations, and the anthropological search for primitiveness. <sup>68</sup>

Mudimbe’s Foucauldian analysis of the discourse of the primitive is extremely persuasive and finely nuanced. It analyses the segue between “scientific” and relativist conceptions of otherness and those that came before the “epistemological threshold” of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>69</sup> As a consequence of Mudimbe’s somewhat rigid Foucauldianism, his account gives too much emphasis to the “ruptures” in the discursive field of primitivism and on the “official” and theoretical voices that constitute its features. In a “sample” of

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<sup>67</sup> V.Y. Mudimbe *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* London: James Currey, 1988

<sup>68</sup> Mudimbe *The Invention of Africa*, p.69

<sup>69</sup> Mudimbe *The Invention of Africa*, Chapter 1

discourse on the primitive as narrow and as the reception of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, it is clear that Primitivism is a more “heteroglotic” array of genres than Mudimbe suggests and that one cannot locate any seismic shift in the nature of Primitivism or around the growth of British functional anthropology (Mudimbe’s other major thesis). I hope to use a more diffuse interpretation of the term as is fitting for a body of “speech genres” that combine the highly theoretical with the impressionistic and emotive, the “empiricism” of fieldwork with the boot polish of a minstrel show. In delineating the discursive field of literary critical Primitivism I shall, therefore, illustrate its features through an illustrative, rather than a comprehensive, method and will offer parallels to criticism on Tutuola from this broader perspective.

In much of the early criticism of Tutuola, one is struck by recurring patterns and palettes of reception. Critical reaction was defined by the repeated motifs of the child, the unconscious and nightmarish and with the pre-historical nature of African life. In this criticism *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* reflected a pre-logical and pre-modern African world coloured by manichean deliriums of darkness and the nightmarish bush. In a novel filled with images of light, Dylan Thomas’ review of this “tall devilish story” commented on the “convenient features of modern civilised life that crop up in the black and ancient midst of these fierce folk legends”.<sup>70</sup> This palette was, then, defined by the shadings of darkness and obscurity and, conversely, with the “primary colours” of a fauvist aesthetic.

Literary critical Primitivism took a number of forms. The world of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* represented a “living fossil” of the operations of the primitive mind and of an organic society not yet fragmented by modernity. In the speculative “social psychology” of many of these readings, one can find the profound influence of

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<sup>70</sup> Dylan Thomas’ review in *The Observer*, July 6 1952

Freudian discourse on the origins of civilisation. The arrival of Freud in London in 1938 gave a boost to the already well established influence of Freudianism in Britain. I do not wish to suggest that all these critics had necessarily read and applied *Totem and Taboo*<sup>71</sup> to their critical practice but that Freud was of vital importance in understanding and crystallising the discursive field at work mid-century in the understanding of primitive cultures.

Freudian thinking on the nature of society was profoundly implicated in his conception of primitive cultures. Far from simply offering it as civilisation's "other", it collated the primitive with the universal social and cultural origin of modern society. It is difficult to give a ready synopsis to Freud's work but what was imperative to his position was the fixity of human nature, its drives and processes of repression in all historical and cultural contexts. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud offers a massively universalising paradigm for the genesis of society, culture, law, religion, society, myth, taboo etc. Freud speculates that all society evolved from a pre-historical eruption and rebellion in the "primal horde" in which the father/tyrant was murdered and cannibalised by his sons in order to destroy his exclusive sexual licence in the group. From this first act evolves the institution of totemism, (the symbolic deification of the murdered father), socialisation, exogamy and the end of unrestrained fulfilment of the primal drives as manifested in raw aggression, incestuous desire, patricide, cannibalism etc.

Freud does not explicitly suggest that existing primitive societies display the organisation of the primal horde but, in works such as *Civilisation and its Discontents*, he makes clear the nexus between the advance of civilisation and increasing repression and neurosis.

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<sup>71</sup> Sigmund Freud "Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, Vol. 13, London: Hogarth Press, 1955

Primitive societies are “nearer” to this primeval moment; the cultural production of their cultures are, likewise, closer to symbolically representing the fundamental unconscious drives than more sublimated and “advanced” cultural forms. Cultural, social and technological progress was conceived as entailing increasing repression of the “savage within” and a growth in the mass manifestation of neurosis and personal and social alienation. V. S. Pritchett’s review is remarkable to the extent which the contemporary unconscious is equated with ancient moments in which the substructures of the psyche and consciousness were founded:

The barbarous fantasy is not free, but is ruled by the dreadful conspiracy of primitive belief and sensibility. The other strength of the story is simply its seriousness. .. The marvellous is domesticated...  
Tutuola's fancy is endless; yet it is controlled by the tribal folk lore. It discernibly expresses the unconscious of a race and even moments of the nightmare element in our own unconscious. The slimy or electric movements of nightmare, its sickening logic, its hypnotising visual quality, its dreadful meaningfulness, are put down by an earnest and ingenious story-teller. One feels one has been taken back thousands of years to the first terrors of human nature.<sup>72</sup>

Tutuola becomes an aperture through which the critic can peer into the unconscious mind and “the first terrors of human nature” yet, in the African context, this relation to the unconscious is syncretic with the operations of a contemporary tribal folk lore. The consequence of Freudian genres of the primitive was an association of non-industrial cultures of all kinds with more “authentic” and less repressed psychological, social and cultural organisation. Freudianism, therefore, gave a modern manifestation of well established modes of understanding African culture as a reflection of cultural origins, irrationalist, unrepressed and childlike, as a co-existent example of an earlier stage in the social evolution of the psyche. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was, then, read as a text that was both “contemporary” (in its

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<sup>72</sup> V.S. Pritchett *The New Statesman and Nation*, March 6 1954

African setting) and as a primeval text that gave an insight into the infancy of European culture. Similarly, the text gives access to the violent and nightmarish qualities of the unconscious mind in a manner less mediated and sublimated than in the arts of a more “civilised” culture.

Anthony West’s review of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in *The New Yorker* (December 5, 1953) demonstrates the power of this equation between the primitive and the trans-cultural foundation of all and every cultural tradition. The pre-historical world of the primitive constitutes, for critics such as West, a meaningful arena of “sameness”, continuity and common, if atavistic, humanity. West’s review needs to be examined at length:

Mr. Tutuola tells his story as if nothing like it had ever been written down before, and he gives his themes the pristine quality they must have had when they were the living substance of the culture that produced them and before they were demoted to the nursery. One catches a glimpse of the very beginning of literature, that moment when writing at last seizes and pins down the myths and legends of an alphabetic culture..

..This sounds naive and barbaric, and it is. It is true that when the Muses of our culture, part birds and part women, first frequented Horse Fountain, before the Greek poets made them respectable and neat-ankled young women, their apparently elegant names - Euterpe, Calliope, Terpsichore, and so forth - meant things as simple as Drum, Song and Dance, and that they were conceived in those terms. It is only possible to envy Mr. Tutuola his good luck in being a castaway on a little island in time where he can be archaic without being anachronistic. His situation, however, is unique, and it would be as fatal for a writer with a richer literary inheritance to imitate him as it would be for a sculptor to adopt the idioms of Benin or Mycenae. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* must be valued for its own freakish sake, and as an unrepeatable happy hit. <sup>73</sup>

West unashamedly describes Tutuola’s contemporary Africanity in terms of this authentic Adamic voice, this freakish exclusion from the historical process. Tutuola fortunately “lives” the life of our ancestors and gives fossil evidence of the archaeology of our own culture. West seems unaware of the irony that underpins his position in regard to

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<sup>73</sup> Anthony West *The New Yorker* December 5 1953

the relationship between Modernist and “Primitive” artistic practice. The “idioms of Benin and Mycenae” are, of course, vital in understanding Modernist sculpture from Moore to Frink.

This unique relationship between the primitive and the unconscious was, perhaps, itself founded on a deep-rooted Primitivist conception of the language of primitive people. Critics dealt with the unusual (to them) grammatical and linguistic features of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* through a Primitivist conception of language. The genealogy of this conception of the naive power of the primitive voice is extremely deep-rooted and can be found throughout the philosophical and poetic discourses of European Romanticism. The primitive voice, the untutored word of the native, is collated with an expressivity beyond tutored rhetoric and with a Romantic privileging of the spoken, unmediated word. Johann Gottfried Herder’s commentary on the fraudulent *cause célèbre*, *The Songs of Ossian*, is a wonderful example of this tradition. Herder’s *Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples* <sup>74</sup> (1773) outlines his admiration for Ossian as a Celtic primitive and develops a Romantic conceptualisation of the “folk voice” (*volksprächt*). For Herder, Ossian, Native Americans or any other “savages” speak in a language in which meaning is purely and completely realised:

You know from travellers’ accounts how vigorously and clearly savages always express themselves. Always with a sharp vivid eye on what they want to say, using their senses, feeling the purpose of their utterance immediately and exactly, not distracted by shadowy concepts, half ideas...they comprehend the thought as a whole with the whole word, and the word with the thought. <sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples* (1773) (trans. Joyce P. Crick) in *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel* ed. David Simpson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988

<sup>75</sup> Herder *Correspondence on Ossian* p. 71

Herder was clear in indicating that this mode of expression and cognition was determined by the “barbarity” of people. The “gnomic song of the nation” stems from the life world of the primitive:

Know then that the more barbarous a people is- that is, the more alive, the more freely acting (for that is what the word means) the more barbarous, that is, the more alive the more free, the closer to the senses, the more lyrically dynamic its songs will be, if songs it has.<sup>76</sup>

It is unsurprising, perhaps, to find this spirit at work in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* but, more surprising, in the criticism of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* which is positively saturated with this sensibility. Anthony West’s review is not untypical, it suggests that Tutuola, a latter day Prometheus, transposed an authentic folk voice into literary form. Tutuola’s language is described as the direct articulation of the contents of his consciousness, his patchy grasp of grammar and the English lexicon serving to lend his writing an authenticity impossible to more “sophisticated” artists. The “Nigerian Correspondent” of *West Africa* was thoroughly embroiled in this conception of the *volksprächt*. In the review quoted above he/she outlines the process:

...he can only re-write passages that fail to portray in word pictures the ghostly creatures of his imagination as vividly as he sees them.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, Eric Larrabee describes Tutuola’s language as “English but not an English of this world. The style is unschooled but oddly expressive”.<sup>78</sup>

This expressivity is acknowledged as the product of Tutuola’s fortunate immersion in a culture undivided and undiluted by the effects of cultural progress. Critical response to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was part of a neo-conservative reaction to modernity. In the

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<sup>76</sup> Herder *Correspondence on Ossian* . pp. 71 - 72

<sup>77</sup> “A Nigerian Correspondent” *West Africa* May 1 1954

<sup>78</sup> Eric Larrabee *The Reporter* May 12 1953

decades after World War II, this reaction involved at once a relation to modernity (as a historical and social situation) and to modernism (as a range of artistic practices). This tension makes for complex reaction to the text. Tutuola offered, for critics such as Amis, the stylistic contours of a modernism without the elite cultural politics of an Eliot, Pound or Joyce. A neologistic style, mytho-poetic qualities and surrealist effects could be valorised as characteristic of Tutuola at precisely the time that these aspects of modernism were under attack “at home”. What seems to make Tutuola acceptable to these critics was the perceived politics of Tutuola’s relationship to his culture. In the post-war reaction to modernism, the primitive text could function as a model of artistic creation that was “modernist” in its surface features, yet untainted by the corruption and degeneracy of modernity. The lack of self-consciousness of an author like Tutuola, the perceived organic relation between the artist and his culture, transformed his work into a kind of exemplar that could be used to instruct and chastise the cloistered Western modernist.

Eliot himself was giving some thought to such issues. His 1948 “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture”<sup>79</sup> is an examination of the cultural disintegration of an alienated and divided culture of the West. Eliot’s search for an alternative to modernity made him interested in “primitive” cultures in which religious, cultural and social life were in closer contact with each other. “It is obvious that among more primitive communities the several activities of culture are inextricably woven.”<sup>80</sup> Eliot combines a limited cultural relativism (a truly Christian culture would be an ideal, but a primitive culture was potentially superior to the fallen world of a secular culture)<sup>81</sup> with a

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79 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* ed. Frank Kermode, London: Faber and Faber, 1987

80 Eliot “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture” p.292

81 For example Eliot suggests that “We do not assume that there is over a long period *progress* even in art or that ‘primitive’ art, as art, is necessarily inferior to the most sophisticated” p. 296



fascination with the holistic nature of this cultural organisation. Eliot calls his examination of the rise and fall of civilisations a "social biology" - the primitive being a vision of a kind of cultural "health" that could be compared to the "pathology" of modernity. In this model of Primitivism, the primitive is conceived as a zone of integration in which the "art" object reconciles use value with social, religious and aesthetic functions. A text like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* could be held up to shame the elitism and vacuity of the art of a secularised and stratified Western culture. Amis suggests that Tutuola makes the modern novel look "jejune and vapid".<sup>82</sup>

Yet, by the sixties, some Western critics were tiring of Tutuola. *The Times Literary Supplement* in May 1962, gave a revealing and damning retrospective of early critical opinion:

Mr. Amos Tutuola's first two books, *The Palm - Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, caused quite a literary sensation when they appeared some years ago.... Novelty seekers, propagandists for the coloured races, professional rooters for the avant-garde - any avant-garde, anywhere, and at any time - were alike delighted. But increasingly one's reaction is irritation, a desire to say 'So what?' in quite the rudest way, and to protest against what is dangerously near a cult of the *faux-naïf*.<sup>83</sup>

This review anticipates the neglect into which Tutuola was to fall in later years. There was, clearly, a very particular symbiosis between *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and the discursive horizon of fifties Britain. The text seemed to answer a range of cultural anxieties already in place in its audience. Fifties Britain was a culture particularly ill-equipped to take seriously the possibility of cultural dialogue with an African text, it was inward looking, evaluating otherness through a range of existing, and fatally flawed, discourses and making little effort to establish any contextual co-ordinates for understanding the text. The body of critical material on Tutuola gives an insight into the

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<sup>82</sup> Kingsley Amis *The Spectator* February 26, 1954

<sup>83</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement* in May, 1962 (anon)

discourses available in the mid-century for conceiving Africa and the African text. What is clear is that the critics' criteria were tied into a far broader discursive politics. In a West that had become used to collating the contemporary with a permanent, giddy, spiral of change, Tutuola's Yorubaland was an attractive canvas on which to paint a vision of cultural production outside the threats of history.

I have attempted to outline the dominant discourses used in the interpretation of Tutuola. I have argued that these discourses represent a profound dislocation of literary critical models. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was perceived as too alien and bizarre to be the model of the dominant paradigms of mid-century literary criticism. Models of close analysis, careful and well wrought reading practices inherited from New Criticism were, to the first European interlocutors, a practical impossibility in response to the strangeness of Tutuola. Similarly, the more historical approaches of Leavisite criticism, with the implicit assumption of a self-present English National culture and a definite and definable novelistic tradition, provided a paradigm that simply could not cope with the intellectual displacement needed to answer Tutuola. One can, nevertheless, at times hear echoes of some Leavisite methods in this criticism. There is, in particular, an emphasis on "intensity" as a category of literary effect and imaginative vigour as an aesthetic criterion).

What marks these readings apart from the practice of ethnography in the period was that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was a cultural text which, in the inverse of the cultural experiences encountered through fieldwork, came independently from an African culture to address the Western judging subject "at home". However partial and problematic the practice of ethnographic interpretation may have been, the fieldworker was in unavoidable contact with the broader life of the culture under study. Under such circumstances, it

was difficult to entirely ignore the contextual situation of the cultural data under analysis. This placed the ethnographer in a position of ethical responsibility towards his/her “text”. This is not to suggest that ethnographic interpretation of cultural context was value free, accurate or responsible but that the situation of the ethnologist demanded that this interpretation of context took place. The interpretation of Tutuola was an experience of cultural difference at a distance. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard’s* appearance under the leading imprint of English publishing began both a process of cultural dialogue and a powerful impetus to deracinate the text from its cultural loci. This marks an inevitable consequence of the bridging function of the postcolonial text which, under circumstances of cultural translation and transportation must, to a great extent, fail to bring the richness of its context with it. Yet what the critics of the fifties and sixties failed to endeavour was to take the challenge of this cultural bridging and to follow Tutuola “back” into his culture. These readings superbly delineated the nature, for want of a more nuanced term, of the discourses of the Same. African textuality was brought under the aegis of very deep-seated conceptions of the primitive and into contemporary debates on the future of literary modernism.

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* presents, therefore, a paradigmatic issue in the criticism of postcolonial literatures from the perspective of a different culture. What can lead the critic to avoid a criticism that is overdetermined by the discourses of his or her own culture? What can actuate a contextual criticism for the deracinated text of cultural difference? The challenge is to use the available archive on a culture (with a sense always of this archive’s limits, gaps and history) to create the broader experience of context.

## The Imperialists' New Clothes: Early African Responses to Tutuola.

The early literary critical reaction to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in the United Kingdom was certainly “favourable” but it established an agenda for understanding of the cultural significance of the text that was to have profound influence on the nature of the dialogue between Western and African critics. Critical debate on the novel was established as fundamentally concerned with the text’s mimetic function as a representation of the “truth about Africa”. As I have shown, the Primitivist reading of the text, with its reliance on notions of literary origins, the function of myth and legend and the racial imagination, meant that what was at issue was not the text’s representation of contemporary Nigerian reality, as such, but its “hyper-realist” representation of more fundamental or archetypal truths about Africa and Africans.

Early African criticism of the text is almost exclusively defined by the question of the text’s veracity as a representation of Africa. This fixation was, I suggest, a result of two things; firstly, a direct response to the “horizon of expectation” established by Western criticism and, secondly, by the particular characteristics of the discursive field that both Tutuola and his African critics shared.

The debate amongst African critics can be most economically examined by focusing on the controversy enacted on the pages of the journal *West Africa* between February and June 1954. *West Africa* was a journal devoted to political, social and cultural issues in Anglophone West Africa, published in London, it is an organ of the young, Western educated, African middle class.

A review of Tutuola’s second novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, by Eric Robinson on February 22 1954, sported a sequence of

letters to the journal that fundamentally question the cultural value of Tutuola's work, the nature of Western responses to the text and to the image of Africa that works such as Tutuola's might produce.

Eric Robinson's retrospective of Tutuola's first novel was an alloy of praise at the text's "pungent" and vivid style and a more negative assessment of the improbability of Tutuola's work being of use as an ideal in the development of Nigerian literature. Robinson's insistence on the mimetic qualities of Tutuola's prose is remarkable; "his images seem to come from direct observation" and "Mr. Tutuola has a great talent for using these phrases which bring modern West Africa immediately before us".<sup>84</sup>

The response that this article produced was far from univocal in either their condemnation or praise for Tutuola or of Western opinion of his work. Both Ade Sopido and Mercedes Mackay, in different ways, find real value in Tutuola's work. "A Nigerian Correspondent" provides a startling biographical sketch ("Portrait: A Life in the Bush of Ghosts") which combined biographical details with a kind of Primitivist hagiographic of Tutuola at work.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, what is most striking and "controversial" in this debate are the new voices of condemnation who find in Tutuola a writer who misrepresents Africa to the world. Tutuola is condemned as a writer on whom the West could project its fantasies of Africanity while continuing to claim the exclusive right to judge and promote the African text of its choice.

Babasola Johnson and I. Adeagobo Akinjogbin were most virulent in their attack on Tutuola. In order to do their objections justice, it is necessary to quote their correspondence at some length. Johnson is the most dismissive of the two:

Now let us face facts. *The Palm -Wine Drinkard* should not have been published at all. The language in which it is written is foreign to West

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<sup>84</sup> Eric Robinson *West Africa*, February 27 1954.

<sup>85</sup> "A Nigerian Correspondent" *West Africa* May 1 1954.

Africans and English people, or anybody for that matter..... The language is not West African Patois as some think. Patois is more orderly and intelligible than the language of *The Palm -Wine Drinkard*. Patois does not contain such words as 'unreturnable', 'weird' or such expressions as 'the really road'. Readers who have read *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* will perhaps notice that Mr. Tutuola's attempt consists largely of translating Yoruba ideas into English in almost the same sequence as they occur to his mind. .... The book would have been more readable if Mr. Tutuola had stuck to this method of direct translation, but he mars it by occasional inclusion of words taken from the dictionary at random, by comparison with objects which are foreign to Yoruba speech, and by incorrect and too literal translations. How many English readers know that 'Unreturnable Heaven's Land' is Mr. Tutuola's version of 'The undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns'?

The book ought to have been written in West African Patois proper, or in Yoruba, but then Mr. Tutuola's literary tactics would have been exposed. Besides the fact that his stories are well known, and have been published in one form or another, most of his plots were borrowed from Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode*. He even gave himself away when he referred to this book on one of his chapters as 'The Brave Hunter in the Bush of the Ghosts'.<sup>86</sup>

Akinjogbin was less dismissive of Tutuola's integrity but more explicit in accusing Tutuola of misrepresenting African reality:

Most Englishmen, and perhaps Frenchmen, are pleased to believe all sorts of fantastic tales about Africa, a continent of which they are profoundly ignorant. The 'extraordinary book' of Mr. Tutuola (which undoubtedly contain some of the unbelievable things in our folk-lore) will just suit the temper of his European readers as they seem to confirm their concepts of Africa...books which show no marks of possible future development and which at best are incapable of giving accurate information about Africa (or Nigeria for that matter.)<sup>87</sup>

Significantly, Johnson maintains a conception of Tutuola as a naive artist, one who automatically represents ideas as they enter his mind. Johnson wishes to "expose" Tutuola's "tactic" of translating Yoruba ideas and defrauding Fagunwa's plots. Tutuola is at fault then for being merely derivative of Yoruba tradition and, furthermore, for being an inadequate conduit for this tradition.

Akinjogbin refutes the "inaccurate" information Tutuola's text conveys on Africa and Nigeria and expresses the fear that Tutuola

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<sup>86</sup> Babasola Johnson *West Africa* April 10 1954.

<sup>87</sup> I. Adeagbo Akinogbin letter to *West Africa* June 5 1954.

served to confirm European myths of the Dark Continent. Akinjogbin was not alone in this fear. Another early critic, Ben Obumsele, finds it:

....not easy to escape the suspicion that European admiration of Amos Tutuola's novels comes out of a supposition, conscious, or unconscious, that the Freudian nightmare into which Mr. Tutuola takes his readers, is a true picture of the jungle which is the African mind. <sup>88</sup>

At issue, then, is the representational burden of true "Africanness" placed by Western critics on the text. Even in favourable African reviews of the work, the question of the text's "Africanness", and how this might be understood in the West, inflects critical opinion. Mercedes Mackay's intervention in the debate strikes a balance between the polarities of opinion on Tutuola as "naive genius" or "artless fraudster" but finally comes to value Tutuola as something that could only be African. The ubiquity of the dialogue with Europe on Africanity, nevertheless, invades his argument. Tutuola's peculiar Africanness serves to prove to the world that Africans were not merely "copyists" of Western culture, it demonstrates the existence of African culture and was, therefore, inherently an act of nationalism:

It is perhaps already safe to say that Amos Tutuola's books can be regarded as another beacon to light the road to true West African nationalism. They have been genuinely hailed as literary gems by people who have surely no political axe to grind, the highbrow literary critics of Europe and America, and they are books that no one in the world but a West African could possibly have written. What is more, like the Ife Bronzes of Nigeria, and the xylophone music of the Wachopi of the Portuguese East, they will raise the prestige of African peoples in the world of art, and kill for ever any idea that Africans are copyists of the cultures of other races. <sup>89</sup>

These complex and ambiguous responses to Tutuola are, therefore, linked by the eye that these critics have to European

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Bishop Rand *African Literature, African Critics: the Forming of Critical Standards 1947-1967* London: Greenwood, 1988 p. 52

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Bishop Rand *African Literature, African Critics: the Forming of Critical Standards 1947-1967*, p. 54

perceptions of the text and, through the text, to African cultural life. In another context, Wole Soyinka has looked at the post-war renaissance of African literature and its historical relationship with this “external eye” of European criticism:

In any culture, the cycle of rediscovery - *negritude* or Renaissance enlightenment or pre-Raphaelite - must, before the wonder palls, breed its own body of the literature of self-worship. African writing has suffered from an additional infliction: apart from his own rediscovery, the African writer has experienced discovery by the external eye. It is doubtful if the effect of this has any parallel in European literature. <sup>90</sup>

*The Palm -Wine Drinkard* provoked resentment in a significant number of African reviews, not merely because it presented an “erroneous” representation of African reality, a derivative relationship to Yoruba folklore and Fagunwa and an ungrammatical prose style but because, one might suggest, it disrupted and bypassed the power structures of a Nigerian cultural elite. Tutuola represented a scandal to the Nigerian elite because, far from following the established paths of personal advancement in the colonies - secondary and further education, cultural assimilation and time spent abroad - Tutuola created his own relation with elite Western culture in the face of the mediation of the “comprador” intelligentsia. Anthony Kwame Appiah in his work, *In My Father’s House*, describes the role of this intelligentsia in mediating an acceptable African reality:

In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world. <sup>91</sup>

In a period when political activity in Nigeria was defined by the manoeuvrings of the various ethnic and regional elites for control of

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<sup>90</sup> Bishop Rand *African Literature, African Critics* p. 56

<sup>91</sup> Anthony Kwame Appiah *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* London: Methuen, 1992, p. 240



the gradually changing polity, it is easy to see how Tutuola could be seen as an atavistic product of an Africa the Westernised elites might not wish to acknowledge. The process of decolonisation in Nigeria was, as we have seen, a gradualist exchange of power between colonial administrators and the Nigerian middle class. The consequence of this seems to be a Nationalism without a prolonged and inclusive Nationalist movement. The paradigm for this shift of power was the *readiness* of Nigerians to take over the Institutions of colonial Government and to live as an Independent Nation State. This stance was best exemplified by the policy of “Nigerianisation” of public life. In such a context, it seems that the success of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* on the international stage was something of an embarrassment. The novel’s roots in folk tradition and “low” cultural forms at that (the folk tale), its distinctly Yoruba flavour (in a country only a decade or so away from Civil War) and its disregard for the existing cultural institutions and the exemplar of Western literary norms, marked *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as a text that did not know its place. It was a text that did not fit either the Westernised values of the new political class or any version of a pan-ethnic cultural Nationalism. The nature of the political settlement that was emerging in fifties Nigeria, seemed out of sync’ with a text that, seemingly from nowhere, gave voice to a storytelling tradition that was supposed to belong to the African past.

It is easy to paint a wholly negative picture of early Nigerian embarrassment at Tutuola. What this account fails to acknowledge is the discursive politics at work in this late-colonial situation. While it is clear that Tutuola was not a literary Adam giving first voice to Nigerian literature, it is equally clear that his work was one of the few texts in print in the West that was authored by an African about Africa. The text was placed, inevitably, underneath the weight of this extra burden of representation.

Colonial relations had certainly produced a situation in which literary, anthropological, philosophical discourse about Africa was overwhelmingly the product of Europeans. This disparity and imbalance meant that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* received the concentrated attention of both Africa and Britain in a way that, for example, Graham Greene's 1948 novel *The Heart of the Matter* (set in Freetown, Sierra Leone) never could. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was treated as if it broke the silence of Africans about themselves, as if the silent artefact of Africanity interrupted the hullabaloo of voices discoursing upon its meaning and spoke out for itself.

This imbalance was a direct consequence of colonial relations and it led to a profoundly distorted dialogue in the nature and value of the text. It is unsurprising, in this context, that the novel was shackled with such a burden of interpretation, given the lack of available texts authored by Africans.

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was easily cast as a strange synecdochic trope for Africa itself. Primitivism was a discourse that assumed that the fragment of African culture could meaningfully stand as a representation of the whole. The answering voices of African critics were compelled to engage in a dialogue based upon these distorted terms and, given the absence of a body of texts to "represent" Nigerian and African reality, it is not unexpected that the text proved controversial in this role as Continental representative.

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was the opportunity for a dialogue between Nigeria and Britain, between a waning colonial authority and the emerging postcolonial nation. To what extent, then, does Tutuola offer us a "dialogic novel"? What kind of text, for that matter, was *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*? In one sense, Tutuola is supremely dialogic. His work, by its very existence, initiated and enabled a new possibility for dialogue across cultures. Tutuola clearly brought together hitherto

separate orders of discourse and created a radically hybrid literary form. The opportunities created for an inter-cultural dialogue by the emergence of an indigenous African Literature were not necessarily met, however, by new modes of conducting this exchange. The enduring and determining vocabularies of Primitivism and Nationalism were powerful in delineating the rules of engagement in this instance of cultural exchange. What our analysis of the reception *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* demonstrates is, however, that these new opportunities for dialogue are not necessarily accompanied by radically new and innovative *dialogues*. What is also evident is that “dialogicity” is an attribute of context as much as of textuality. At times Bakhtinian theorisation on the novel implies that the “dialogic” quality of a text was simply a reflection of the dynamics of polyglossia versus monoglossia. Tutuola seems to confound so simple a division and points to a consideration of the “politics of exchange” under which a novel is received.

Nevertheless the stark fact of the novel’s publication transformed the politics of cultural exchange between Africa and the West. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a supremely important text for the simple reason that, as a “pioneering” African literary text created by an African, it served to alter the *proxemics* and direction of the cultural dialogue between Africa and the West. The mediated character of the ethnographic texts by which the West had hitherto understood all things African, was replaced by the challenge of an indigenous African textuality. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was, therefore, an important part of the ground shift in Mid-Century discursive relations between Africa and the West. The discursive event that was *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, therefore, produced a kind of rupture in established orders of discourse - to pursue this geographical metaphor a little further- the advent of African textuality

(heralded by Tutuola) served as a seismic fracture in these orders of discourse. While the sedimentary layers of the history of African/European discourse remained, the landscape of these relations had been inalterably changed.

### Beyond Primitivism? Rereading *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Thus far my analysis of the critical reception of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* has focused upon the discursive horizons that served to shape the politics of response in Britain, the United States and in West Africa. This mode of analysis proceeded from a broad description of the social and literary heteroglossia to the particulars of occasional reviews and articles. The aim of this loosely “Bakhtinian” methodology was to sustain a relationship between these poles of interpretation, to present a broad historical description of discourse from the most “local” and ephemeral of texts. By first establishing a portrait of the social background of discourse (in my description of the political, social and literary contexts of Nigeria and the United Kingdom) the examination of the critical reception of only one novel enables, I would hope, a richly detailed snapshot of discursive relations at a given historical moment. The aim of this current section is to examine the failures of this methodology, the blind spots of Bakhtinian analysis as both a general hermeneutic method and as a technique for reading postcolonial texts. In doing so, I hope to reunite the disparate theoretical and literary critical aspects of my treatment of Bakhtin and Tutuola.

Clearly, my account of the reception of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* focuses on literary critical texts and thus, of necessity, there is a neglect of the role that the text itself plays in shaping and determining these responses. In any reception based hermeneutic, there is a

tendency to underplay the “history of production” that accompanies the other shadow history of reception and dissemination. My own analysis of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* has examined what critics made of Tutuola in terms of genres of reception and of the discursive history of nationalism, modernity and the primitive. Clearly, a historical understanding of the politics of Nigeria shows that many Western critics were plainly “erroneous” in the inferences they drew about African life and about Tutuola himself. What my analysis of the social heteroglossia of Mid-Century Nigeria demonstrates, is that the political, social and intellectual forces at work in the culture were manifestly more complex than these responses acknowledge. Tutuola was no “primitive” working in some atavistic tribal culture but a man living through the enormously complicated historical transformations of an emerging nation. Similarly, this history also demonstrates the burden of representation that early African critics brought to bear on their own interpretations of the novel. Early African critics demonstrated the inequality of discursive power relations in that their readings of Tutuola were refracted by the dominant readings of Tutuola in the West.

Yet this history takes no account of what part *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* played in shaping, anticipating or prompting response. The novel is incidental to this account, the emphasis on response makes this analysis seem viable for any early African novel, makes the textuality of the novel an empty function in an equation of reading. I will, therefore, attempt to redress this emphasis and to examine the productive and allusive textuality of the novel, to examine the role this textuality in engendering the widespread critical misfeasance of the text. What I hope to demonstrate is that the textuality of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, in fact, played a significant role in producing the kind of critical debates that surrounded the text’s reception.

Firstly, however, I will examine more general objections to the kind of “reception aesthetic” I have hitherto been practising. I will then examine the particular problems Tutuola poses to this method of reading. The cross-cultural and postcolonial nature of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* will, I suggest, put a unique strain on the procedures of Bakhtinian reading. David Perkins, in his work *Is Literary History Possible?*<sup>92</sup> points to the inherent problems in a literary historiography based on an aesthetics of reception. Firstly, he suggests that the emotional and cognitive immediacy of literary critical reception is, of necessity, not fully representable in language. Literary critical texts are “secondary” in the fullest sense, they express a response *transformed* into a text. Moreover, an account of reception is entirely dependent on an archive of extant texts. The reconstruction of, in Hans Robert Jauss’ term, “an horizon of expectation”<sup>93</sup> is, therefore, the reconstruction of the few fragments of response that have been transformed into texts. This cannot be a full account of literary response and, like any form of historiography, there are issues that surround the recoverability of raw experience and the nature of documentation. Privacy and historical invisibility inevitably shrouds those responses that did not become literary critical texts. A “Reception- aesthetic” is, therefore, a history of discourse *not* of consciousness.

A literary history which groups readers, rather than texts, in relationships of contiguity and transformation threatens to collate works together at the expense of the specific differences between individual texts, genres and modes of production. Whilst my analysis of Tutuola was no closer to being a full-blown example of a reception-

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<sup>92</sup> David Perkins *Is Literary History Possible?* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992

<sup>93</sup> See in particular Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Timothy Bahti) Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982, pp. 3 - 46

aesthetic reading in the tradition of Jauss or Iser, than it was to being straightforwardly Bakhtinian, some of the inadequacies of my methods are shared by reception-aesthetics proper.

Reception-aesthetics, as espoused by Jauss in particular, takes as its starting problem a form of cultural difference made manifest by historically mutating and evolving reading practices. In the most provocative and sophisticated exposition of this problem - "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" - Jauss examines the ways in which shifting "horizons of expectation" in European literary culture produces a radical, historically actuated, form of cultural difference. The passage of time, the change in reading practices and expectations serves to estrange past literatures and to make problematic any later acts of exegesis. Jauss focuses, in particular, upon the problems the modern reader has in reading certain "distant" poetic genres of the medieval and early modern period. By excavating the structures of readerly expectation, the modern critic can surmount or explain the strangeness of, for example, certain medieval animal lyrics. The "fusion of horizons" (a term culled from Gadamer's hermeneutics) between the text and the reader, enables a synthetic understanding of the text, of the historical changes in horizons of expectation and in the broader "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) of both epochs:

It is the peculiarity of the aesthetic object that it both preserves and discloses the historically other, since it not only allows subjective experience of the world to be represented, but, in the space opened by art, also renders this experience understandable as an apprehension of the self in an apprehension of the other. <sup>94</sup>

In Jauss' work, reading is conceived as a dialogue between text and critic. The text forms an alien "horizon" to which the reader brings his or her own experience and "horizon of expectation". Exposure to the otherness of the text leads to a subtle interplay between horizons and

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<sup>94</sup> Jauss "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" p. 208

to the modification of the reader's starting position. The "fusion of horizons" is achieved, firstly, through an historical investigation of the structures of readerly expectation that appertained at the time of the text's production and, secondly, through the engagement of these expectations with those of the reader. The theorisation of the fusion of horizons between differing cultural experiences was a seductive model for the treatment of Tutuola and for cross or inter-cultural criticism. The inadequacies of this model for the situation of postcolonial cultural difference are, however, the very same as those manifested in my reception based analysis of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Reception-aesthetic takes as its paradigm of cultural difference the process of interpretative estrangement that occurs over long passages of time. Despite the demonstrable fact that intervening years and centuries produce the effect of cultural difference and the need for the hermeneutic reconstruction of reading context, Jauss' work on cultural difference is limited by the fact that it is bound within the historical continuities of a common European culture. The procedures Jauss proposes for the reconstruction of context presuppose the literary historians placement in later manifestations of the "same" culture. While the reading process enables a "fusion of horizons" between radically different cultural experiences and the "apprehension of the other" there is a predisposed community of language and history between the horizon of the critic and the text.

The conditions for the reconstruction of context and the fusion of horizons in the case of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* are very different. Firstly, the contemporaneity of a text transforms the situation of reception. As I will argue in reference to the work of Michel Foucault, the relative poverty of the archive of materials on contemporary works serves to unalterably change the process of interpretation and reconstruction of reading context. The immediacy of interpreting



contemporary works precludes some of the process of contextual orientation that are foundational in reception-aesthetic. In a sense, this is a rather unfair criticism of Jauss' work which exists, primarily, as a theory of literary historiography, yet this distinction seems crucial to the understanding of the literary critical problems of reading emerging literary traditions.

In a much more profound sense, Jauss' work on cultural difference is limited in its usefulness in regard to postcolonial literatures. Its culture-bound definitions of alterity presuppose, as I suggested earlier, a community of aesthetic and social conventions that, despite the alienating and disorienting effects of time, ensure the possibility for a dialogic hermeneutic. When the reader and the critic have a more abstruse and geographically distant relationship, combined with the further complexities of postcolonial political relations, the procedures for the "fusion of horizons" become problematic. My own analysis of Tutuola shares some of these problems. By focusing on literary critical discourse, one can avoid the more vexed questions of cultural difference. The practise of literary criticism is, I would argue, far more international and comprehensive in its conventions and practices than other forms of cultural activity, such as the production of novels. By examining the politics and history of response, I was able to examine important patterns in discursive power relations but I avoided the more complex and intractable questions of interpretation that surround a reading of the novel.

I will attempt to redress this imbalance through examining one episode of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and attempting, at the most simplistic and straightforward level, to construct a reading of the text. The episode<sup>95</sup> I have chosen to examine is the one surrounding events

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<sup>95</sup> I choose to call one of Tutuola's short narratives an "episode" purely for convenience. The structure of the text is as much a matter of controversy as any other aspect of the novel. The term "episode" is potentially problematic. Some critics have seen the work as a concatenated string of individual,

in “UNRETURNABLE-HEAVEN’S TOWN”. This is a particularly striking and germane episode that offers an excellent example of some of the interpretative problems that are central to this thesis. The episode is framed by two other major encounters, firstly, with the creatures of “Wraith-Island” and, subsequently, with the Drinkard and his wife’s sojourn with “FAITHFUL- MOTHER”. These episodes form the central events of the novel (in a literal sense) and seem important in that they form a pattern of alternating ease and plenty (on Wraith-Island and with Faithful-Mother) with the suffering and tortures of Unreturnable Heaven’s Town.

Whilst the main body of the narrative takes place in the Chapter “ON OUR WAY TO UNRETURNABLE HEAVEN’S TOWN”<sup>96</sup> the episode could be really said to begin in the previous Chapter “NOT TOO SMALL TO BE CHOSEN”.<sup>97</sup> The term “Chapter” is itself a difficult one to sustain. Tutuola’s use of headings and the internal sectioning of the text seem to have little to do with the sub-divisions usual in conventional Western novels. Individual narratives often span chapters as if the peripatetic nature of the Drinkard’s experience overflows the notion of contained narrative units. The Chapter headings seem, instead, to form a kind of para-commentary on the text, sometimes offering synoptic information on events and orientation and sometimes giving “thematic” commentary on the events narrated within.

After leaving Wraith-Island, the Drinkard and his wife have a variety of adventures which culminate in their travels through a “various bush”<sup>98</sup> of ruined towns and villages. In a deserted village they encounter an “image”<sup>99</sup> with a full basket of kolas held in front of

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interchangeable, episodes while others see the novel as structured in a more interdependent and organic sequence. I will address this issue below.

<sup>96</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* pp. 57 - 68

<sup>97</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* pp. 48 - 57

<sup>98</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 55

<sup>99</sup> It is difficult to ascertain from the text whether an “image” is an animate entity like the spirits and deads or an icon or statue.

it. A voice warns the couple not to take the nuts but, unheeding, they take them only to be pursued through the bush by a “man who was walking towards his back or backwards, his both eyes were on his knees, his both arms were at both his thighs, these both arms were longer than his feet, and both could reach the topmost of any tree; and he held a long whip too”.<sup>100</sup>

They are pursued tirelessly by the creature until they reach a wide and deserted road upon which it will not tread. For reasons unknown, the couple suspect that the road leads to “UNRETURNABLE-HEAVEN’S TOWN”. The narrator describes the nature of this heaven thus:

..the town in which human beings or other creatures were bound to enter; if anybody entered it, no doubt he or she would not return again, because the inhabitants of the town were very bad, cruel and merciless.<sup>101</sup>

The road to Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town would not let them leave its path, nor slow down or turn back but draws them onwards, ever faster, towards the town. Even the Drinkard’s most reliable juju cannot break the hold the road has over them. They arrive in a town inhabited by the “enemies of God”<sup>102</sup> devoted to the violent torture and mutilation of human beings:

If any earthly person mistakenly entered their town, they would catch him or her and begin to cut the flesh of his or her body into pieces while still alive, sometimes they would stab a person’s eyes with a pointed knife and leave it there until that person would die of much pain.<sup>103</sup>

The Drinkard describes the upside down world of the creatures of the town in which domestic animals are washed and manicured, while the villagers themselves go filthy, where they sleep on top

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100 Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 56

101 Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 59

102 Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 60

103 Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 59

instead of in their houses and where they climb a ladder before placing it against the tree they wished to climb. They are captured, beaten and taken to the king of the town who decides to have the hair and skin flayed from their heads. This proves to be “fortunate” in that it stops the baying crowd from killing them immediately. Their heads are scraped with stones and with bottles, burnt and abraded with pepper. Battered and bleeding they are buried up to their necks, allowing passers-by and village children to casually abuse and torture their exposed heads. The torments they are subjected to are both physical and mental, food is placed just outside their reach and an eagle is tethered nearby in order to pluck out their eyes.

The hero’s luck and resourcefulness saves them. He befriends the eagle and they escape their captors through a fortuitous downpour of rain (which softens the earth and allows them to squirm free). They escape the villagers by hiding in some uncultivated bush (within the compound) and, under the cover of darkness, they enact their revenge by burning down the thatched roofs of the compound, killing most of their torturers and, finally, leaving the “Unreturnable” town. After months recuperating from their injuries, the sufferings of their time in Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town are eased in the “heavenly” and idyllic world of “FAITHFUL-MOTHER”.

The above account seems to be the most straightforward form of paraphrase, a simple and unproblematic representation of the most fundamental aspects of the text. In some senses it is true. Yet even this most simplistic form of synoptic commentary on the text raises a number of interesting and not insignificant questions. Firstly, the evaluative procedures I have used to frame the episode hide criteria of judgement and demarcation that might be invisible in the examination of a “part” of another text but which are glaringly apparent when dealing with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. What I am suggesting is that

while one might sub-divide a familiar text into distinct units (the city episodes of *The Prelude* for example), this same exercise is less straightforward for *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. In framing the episode with the events in the deserted village (the incident with the kolas) and the retreat into the gratifying world of Faithful-Mother, I am ordering and dividing the text with an unstated narrative progression from transgression to punishment to merciful release. While this progression is not necessarily erroneous (indeed we know from biographical details that Tutuola's Christianity might have suggested such a pattern) there is, nevertheless, no unequivocal evidence in the text of a causal link between these narrative events. Contiguity and temporal progression might suggest that the Drinkard's experiences in Unreturnable-heaven's Town are the result of his transgression in taking the kola or that the ease of his life with Faithful-Mother was connected to the trials he had undergone. Yet the text does not make this explicit and to make these connections is an act of *interpretation* and not of *paraphrase*.

As I will hopefully demonstrate, the text constantly demands that the process of *exposition* be replaced by one of *supposition* on the part of the reader in particular, though not exclusively, the non-African reader.

There are, then, some rather fundamental problems in the critical paraphrase or commentary of the text. I will return to these later (with reference to Derrida's notion of "doubling commentary") but I wish, firstly, to raise some more rather plain and unsophisticated questions that arise from the episode. I hope that by asking questions that are, like the novel, superficially naive, I may be able to approach the elusive character of the text.

At the beginning of the episode, the narrator tells us that they recognise the road to be the one that leads to Unreturnable-Heaven's

Town. They also understand the deadly nature of the town and yet are happy to travel upon it:

As the road was very clean, we noticed that a foot mark could not be traced, then we believed that it was the road that led to the 'UNRETURNABLE-HEAVEN'S TOWN' the town in which human-beings or other creatures were bound to enter; if anybody entered it, no doubt he or she would not return again, because the inhabitants of the town were very bad, cruel and merciless.

...Now we followed this road from the north side and we were very glad to be travelling on it.<sup>104</sup>

This suggests one of two things, either there is what we might call a narrative inconsistency or that there is a fairly complex “split” in the narration. The description of the town (and what awaited them there) might represent an intrusion of the retrospective time-frame through which the Drinkard recounts his adventures. These details seem to be contemporaneous with the couple discovering the road but, in fact, they function as a kind of “aside”, serving a stylistic purpose.

Similarly, they are able, initially, to travel the road without compulsion and to leave its path to make camp. Are we to suppose that the Drinkard is willing to risk the journey to the town in order to find his tapster or that he is sufficiently confident of their resourcefulness to meet the dangers of the town? Does the road only become enchanted near the town itself?

The pedantry of these questions seems to be anathema to the narrative spirit of the text and yet I pose them to point to a consistent doubt we experience in our encounter with the novel and to the process of causal elision we constantly have to overcome in reading across cultural division.<sup>105</sup> These kinds of questions lead to an

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<sup>104</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* pp.56 - 7

<sup>105</sup> I do not wish to become embroiled in the complex anthropological questions that surround the type of causal and epistemological “lifeworld” inhabited by other cultures. This is, in part, because Tutuola was, as I have demonstrated, a man whose experience was of many different cultural knowledges. The most lucid examination of these issues I have encountered

acknowledgement of the more wide-ranging suppositions we make in reading the text. In this vein we might ask why the Drinkard's various juju cannot "escape" him in this instance, why he cannot transmogrify himself or achieve some of the other "supernatural" feats of earlier episodes? The pig-headed "rationalism" of these questions serves only to highlight the degree to which Tutuola's narrative inhabits a differing paradigm of causal reality. One suspects that Tutuola's text reflects a differing cultural system for both narrative and for causation. Our lack of knowledge of the narrative traditions of Yoruba culture or of traditional "Magical" practice leaves us unable to fully answer these questions. The fact is that we do not know, as non-Yoruba readers, why the Drinkard cannot use his juju to escape this situation, moreover, we do not know if it is meaningful to expect a normative criteria of consistency to work in the narrative structure of the text.

The kind of doubt and uncertainty these kinds of question foster does not stop at seeming inconsistencies in the narration or at issues concerning the cultural conventions of narrative. They open up a world of further questions. In these few pages alone, the non-Yoruba reader might well wonder at the significance of the kolas on the events in the town. What, if any, are the cultural significances of taking a kola nut, uninvited, from an "image"? We know, perhaps, from our reading of Achebe that the kola has a special significance for Igbo culture, functioning as a token of welcome and propriety, yet we do not know the import of this event for Tutuola or for the Drinkard. It is possible to speculate that kola is, in all probability, a ritual offering to a sacred figure. This generalised assumption does not provide the necessary *detail* for a properly informed reading. While one can explore the transgressive significance of beard-pulling for the Elizabethan, it is difficult to ascertain the same details for a living Yoruba culture.

Lacking the range of details that would constitute a thorough knowledge of Tutuola's culture, it is then difficult to "read", in a conventional sense, an incident like "Unreturnable-Heaven's Town". A statement about the creatures of the town such as:

When we entered this town we saw creatures that we had never seen in our life and I could not describe the whole of them here, but however, I should tell some of their stories which went thus:- 106

strongly suggests that the Unreturnable-Heaven's Town is a conventional setting in Yoruba folktale as does the fact that the phrase is placed in quotation (implying a direct translation from the Yoruba). *If* this is the case then one's sense of dislocation and inadequacy as a reader are compounded. What conventions accompany the motif of the town, how is it traditionally used etc.?

I would suggest that a lack of cultural competence in one's engagement with the text makes it difficult to know how to "read" the violence and the horrors of the episode. The kind of contextual overtones which allow the reader to judge the "tone" of a piece of writing are difficult to "hear" in the case of Tutuola. The "comic" lifestyles of the creatures of the town (their upside down lifestyles and back-to front mores) are followed by violence and cruelty. It is hard to see how the connection between the two is made or whether the tortures are to be understood in a register of pity, horror or even laughter. The lack of apparent emotional pointers as to how we should "take" the violence and the humour of the text, our sense of unease in making causal links between events and emotional and cognitive response produces a sense of the uncanny or the unhomely<sup>107</sup> in our reading experience. Reading Tutuola is, for the Western reader an

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106 Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 58

107 Freud's theory of the Uncanny can be found in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1955



“unhomely” experience in quite the most literal sense of the word. We are exposed to a form of cultural difference that takes us away from the familiar and leads us into a position where we have to recreate the shelter of a stable meaning from the fragments of the unfamiliar world of the drinkard. Tutuola does not seem to furnish us with any of the comforting causal, narratological or emotional furniture we expect to find in the novel. Instead we experience the most immediate and familiar aspect of our consciousness, the language we inhabit transformed and estranged. The uncanniness of Tutuola is the possession of “our” language with the foreignness of cultural difference.

Tutuola’s textuality leads us, again and again, to a reading experience that is radically contingent and equivocal in nature. It is a text of constant contradiction. Though I have examined the “UNRETURNABLE-HEAVEN’S TOWN” section in some detail, examples are legion. Other episodes offer a similar overall reading experience (defined by the questions of cultural competence and judgement outlined above) but with very different “micro-analytic” problems concerned with textual details. For example, the episode in the “Red-Town”, contained mainly in the “WE ARE THE RED-PEOPLE IN THE RED TOWN” section of the novel,<sup>108</sup> is a narrative that hovers tantalisingly between the comfortably familiar and the disconcertingly strange.

The episode lies at the heart of the novel; it is the couple’s first experience after leaving the idyll of the land of Faithful-Mother. Yet like other episodes, the adventures in Red-Town are prefaced and complexly interwoven with surrounding episodes. As the couple’s “punishments”<sup>109</sup> are about to recommence, the drinkard stresses the importance of the fact that they had sold their deaths (but not their fear) in previous adventures. This is a detail which will come to dominate the episode. Many other connections tie the episode into the

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<sup>108</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* pp.73-85

<sup>109</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 71

novel's overall narrative structure. The figure of DANCE (who had been important in earlier episodes) re-emerges, without warning, towards the end of the episode.<sup>110</sup> The complex links between episodes reveal *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as something other than a randomly concatenated chain of narratives or a structureless body of folk materials. Yet the red-bush episode also reveals the extraordinary nature of these links and the complex and elusive aesthetic of transformation that governs the way one episode impacts, infringes UPON and emerges from another.

This complexity is not immediately apparent. The episode presents a narrative pattern to which the Western reader might be quite familiar. The couple find themselves in a vermilion microcosm, an area of the bush in which everyone and everything is deepest red. Taken by a mysterious female guide, ten feet tall and red, to see the king of this world we ask ourselves, with the drinkard, "what was his aim, the Red-King of the Red-people in the Red-Town"?<sup>111</sup>

We are offered some answers as the drinkard passes the reins of the narrative over to the king of the Red-Town who recounts how he and his Universe moved, collectively, into the red. The story he unfolds is a "classic" narrative of transgression and punishment. As a young man the king had gone out hunting and, on inspecting his traps, had found a red-bird in his fishing net and a red-fish in his trap in the bush. Bewildered, he takes his strange game home to his parents (who are also, we learn, parents to Faithful-Mother). They tell him to return the still living creatures back to where they had come from. Ignoring this advice, he burns the strange talking creatures over the fire. Far from killing them, the fire generates a huge cloud of red smoke which transforms the whole village into a red micro-universe of the living

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<sup>110</sup> DRUM, SONG and DANCE were first mentioned at page 38 of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

<sup>111</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 74

dead. The boy eventually becomes king and the strange creatures terrible monsters, living on the edge of the village, demanding an annual human sacrifice. The red-fish and red-bird have changed into something quite sinister and horrific. The fish has become a horned, furry beast, a grotesque *flying* creature. The bird had become equally gigantic and covered with teeming insects.<sup>112</sup> As the drinkard had sold his death he is able, with the aid of his powerful juju, to kill both creatures.

The episode, perhaps more than others, makes itself amenable to a kind of inter-cultural, comparative analysis. The narrative pattern of transgression and magical entrapment is one encountered in European, Graeco-Roman and Arabic folklore. Its echoes and analogies are extremely varied. Yet what makes this narrative so typical of Tutuola are the many ways in which the flesh he puts on the bones of this narrative structure makes one reluctant to place the story of the Red-Town in a casually trans-cultural mythical category. Much as we might wish to make analogies between Tutuola's red-bird and a certain albatross of the Western tradition, the welter of irreducibly particular details in the narrative chasten our best efforts at trans-cultural synthesis. For one, the drinkard's actions have unexpected consequences. Killing the monsters does not immediately lift the curse on the village or, for that matter, make a hero of the drinkard. Fearing the drinkard as a creature even more terrible than the bird and the fish, the king and his subjects transform themselves first into a great fire and then into two red trees with singing leaves. The drinkard's actions send the narrative spinning off in an entirely unexpected direction. The narrative changes and we follow the drinkard as he pursues the transmogrified red-people in search of his missing wife. Eventually reunited with his wife, the drinkard settles in the no longer

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112 Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* pp. 79 & 81

red village and becomes a prosperous farmer until the red lady who had first brought them into the village is revealed as “DANCE” and the narrative spirals away in a new direction.

The episode is as puzzling and culturally different as it is familiar and analogous to other narrative traditions. What interests me in Tutuola is not so much the “recognisable” mythic structures of his text but the heteroglossic details of the work, those elements that resist the Western reader’s interpretive efforts and remain puzzling and somewhat unnerving, details such as this from the Red-king:

‘The whole of us in this Red-town were once human-beings; in the olden days when the eyes of all the human-beings were on their knees, when we were bending down from the sky because of the gravitiness and when we were walking backwards and not forwards as nowadays.’<sup>113</sup>

This brief sentence holds the real challenge of reading Tutuola, it touches upon the text’s radical and irreducible hybridity. The Newtonian and the Yoruba imagination merge into a form of textuality we cannot find anywhere else.

It is not difficult, then to see how the text could be read as a nightmarish fantasy of random association, alogical and frenzied connections and unconscious projection. One of the most striking aspects of the text is the lack of anthropological detail provided in the narrative. This sounds a perverse statement. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is an acknowledged masterpiece of Anglo-Yoruba culture and yet it does not provide details of the cultural life of the Yoruba in an anthropological or explicatory manner. Tutuola does not tell us why, in the Red-King’s narrative, people used to walk backwards or why our eyes were once located on our knees. Tutuola does not provide, in passing, the kind of contextual or “background” information that would answer the puzzled questions I have been forced to pose. I have

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<sup>113</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 75

borrowed the coinage “anthropologising” from the critic Anthony Kwame Appiah <sup>114</sup> who uses it to describe the kind of contextual detail found in other African writers. Achebe is an “anthropologising” writer because he furnishes the non-Igbo reader with a wealth of necessary detail about the cultural practices of his characters. Appiah (echoing Geertz) calls this method a style of literary “thick description”. <sup>115</sup> The absence of these details become apparent as a kind of radical elision in Tutuola’s text. Tutuola’s text manifests a kind of cultural difference that permits, through its “thin description” of anthropological details, a distinct and complex experience of African culture. In response to the challenges of this mode of writing, commentary has often, of necessity, been a kind of permanent extemporisation and improvisation between the many spaces in the text. It is, perhaps, in this respect only that an affinity can be drawn between Tutuola and Western modernism. In the receptive experience of the Western reader, the novel becomes something like the “readerly” text of modernist modes of production.

The Bakhtinian frame of reference I used in examining the politics of reception for the novel is again of use in understanding the process of inter-cultural reading. I will attempt to use some of the concepts culled earlier from Bakhtin to give some kind of formal shape to the questions raised above. As I suggested, in reference to the early critics of Tutuola, many of the difficulties encountered in reading the novel are a result of an inability to grasp the various “speech genres” at work in the text. I will return, then, to Bakhtin’s essay “The Problem of Speech Genres” in an attempt to unravel the governing conditions for the type of reading elaborated above.

What makes all this reference to Bakhtin, a Russian Neo-formalist aesthete, of relevance to these discussions of postcolonial African literatures, is that his work offers a micro-analytics of the reading

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<sup>114</sup> Appiah *In My Father’s House* p. 107

<sup>115</sup> Appiah *In My Father’s House* p. 113

process. His work helps us unpack the process of cross-cultural reading and to understand the reading procedures that produce the “hermeneutic of uncertainty” that characterised my approach to the Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town.

To recap, Bakhtin analyses discourse as an assembly of speech genres or “relatively stable types of utterances”.<sup>116</sup> What I am interested in, in this instance, is Bakhtin’s understanding of how these genres operate in the act of linguistic communication. Bakhtin, as one might expect, offers a dialogic conception of signification. What we might call authorial intentionality is only realised in the “actively responsible”<sup>117</sup> understanding of the addressee. Communication is the mediation between the intentionality of the addresser, which Bakhtin calls the speaker’s “speech plan” and the responsible understanding of the addressee. Bakhtin calls the nature of this relationship the utterance’s “addressivity”:<sup>118</sup>

In each utterance - from the single-word, everyday rejoinder to large, complex works of science or literature - we embrace, understand, and sense the speaker's *speech plan* or *speech will*, which determines the entire utterance, its length and boundaries. We imagine to ourselves what the speaker *wishes* to say.<sup>119</sup>

The realisation of the “speech will” relies on a kind of contract between (for our instance) author and reader in which there are certain agreed conventions of intelligibility. Central to this is a grasp of each other’s range and command of speech genres. Clearly, there is an enormous range of communicative common ground between Tutuola and any other English language speaker, likewise, there is a tremendous complicity in terms of narrative and stylistic aspects of signification

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116 Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p. 65

117 Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p. 68

118 Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p. 95

119 Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p. 77

between Tutuola and his non-Yoruba readers. Nevertheless, the context or the structure of the novels addressivity produced a unique and complex form of utterance. Many of the problems the Western reader has with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* stem from our difficulty in understanding the nuances of Tutuola's speech plan. Our ignorance of many of the speech genres that constitute his intellectual milieu and of his use of them (this might include the narrative conventions of Yoruba orature) make a reading of the text both a liberating and a rather unnerving experience.

Tutuola's pioneering position as an early African author is, again, vitally important. Bakhtin's analysis of the dialogicity of verbal communication stresses the importance of perceived audience and reception upon the speech plan of an author. Communication is always communication for a given situation:

When speaking I always take into account the apperceptive background of the addressee's perception of my speech: the extent to which he is familiar with the situation, whether he has special knowledge of the given cultural area of communication, his views and convictions, his prejudices (from my viewpoint), his sympathies and antipathies - because all this will determine his active responsive understanding of my utterance. <sup>120</sup>

It is not outlandish to suggest that no speech situation existed for a text such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. This is not to suggest that Tutuola was uninformed as to the intended "apperceptive background" of his text but that, as a pioneer of African literature, there was no existing audience for his work. Similarly, the internationalism of the dissemination of a work like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* makes assumptions about the cultural constitution of audience rather complex. Before Tutuola there was no international audience for African literature, his speech plan was formulated, perhaps, to break this silence. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is, therefore, a very singular

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120 Bakhtin *Speech Genres* pp. 95 - 96.

form of utterance. It represents, in a sense, a quite unique speech situation :

If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be quite impossible. The speaker is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time.<sup>121</sup>

Bakhtin is, of course, right to suggest that all communication, including Tutuola's, is dependent on communicative conventions which are always already in place. What this quotation fails to highlight is the degree to which the complicity and mutuality of communication is a relative phenomena. I would argue that, in a very important sense, Tutuola's work did have an affinity with a kind of Adamic and originary utterance. In Bakhtinian terms, Tutuola could only speculate as to the nature of his "projected interlocutors". While Bakhtin's concept of "dialogicity" is important in understanding Tutuola's textuality, it is in need of tailoring to fit its new contexts. In fact, Tutuola demands a reevaluation of many aspects of Bakhtinian analysis. The issues of competence that surround cross-cultural criticism seem to suggest that one needs to be a Bakhtinian critic (to have, like Bakhtin, a polyglot and Byzantine knowledge of one's material) to perform any kind of Bakhtinian criticism.

In the light of the special conditions that surround a reading of the text, the most straightforward act of commentary takes on a new significance and is forced to obey very different procedures from that used in the criticism of "conventional novels", or novels from one's own cultural matrix. As I suggested earlier, synopsis of Tutuola is a difficult and complex task. In *Of Grammatology*<sup>122</sup> Derrida begins his more complex mediations on Rousseau through an examination of the

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<sup>121</sup> Bakhtin *Speech Genres* p.93

<sup>122</sup> Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology* (trans. G.C. Spivak) Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976



process he calls “doubling commentary”. In his deconstruction of the reading process, Derrida points out the originary procedure through which critical discourse creates a duplicate of a text through a procedure of synoptic commentary. Having “reproduced” the text in paraphrase, the critic then has a “body” of meanings to work upon. While this process is *always* actively interpretative, always fictional, Derrida takes pains to demonstrate the possibility and necessity of a consensual commentary on the text. Whether the critic is attempting to “deconstruct” the text (as Derrida was Rousseau’s) or is undertaking a more conventional form of critical reading, doubling commentary is the bedrock or “guard-rail” upon which critical commentary is based. Derrida is surprisingly definite and unequivocal about the necessity of this process:

..the moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading (and that without) this indispensable guard-rail...critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. <sup>123</sup>

Derrida is not, of course, suggesting that this doubling commentary is a perfect replication of intentional meaning and part of his deconstructive task is the exposure of the constructed and “fictional” aspect of paraphrase but he, nevertheless, suggests that this first layer of reading begins in a fairly secure “reproduction” of surface meanings. In *Limited Inc*, a book which deals with his discussions and disputes with the American philosopher Searle, Derrida comments on these aspects of his earlier work. He outlines what he considers to be the “conditions of minimal pertinence” <sup>124</sup> which govern this most fundamental aspect of critical reading:

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<sup>123</sup> Derrida *Limited Inc* p. 158.

<sup>124</sup> Derrida *Limited Inc* p. 146

Simply, this *quasi*-paraphrastic interpretation bases itself upon that which in the text .. constitutes a very profound and very solid zone of implicit 'conventions' or 'contracts.' <sup>125</sup>

What my analysis has demonstrated is that this “very solid zone of implicit conventions” between text and reader are not always stable in a cross-cultural reading. In attempting to construct the most simplistic form of synoptic commentary on Tutuola, one is (as a Western critic) necessarily improvising and constructing interpretative readings *between* those conventions and contracts (or after Bakhtin “speech genres”) with which one is familiar. Tutuola, in fact, helps reveal the invented and unnatural aspect of all paraphrase, it gives us an insight into the conventional and ideological aspects of synopsis.

In *Limited Inc*, Derrida offers us a valuable and unexpected insight into his work. It is a text largely devoted to clarifying his objections to Searle’s reading of his work. One is surprised to find the arch-deconstructor taking issue with a critic on the grounds that he had *misread* his work. Yet Derrida suggests that, before deconstruction and before critique, there are ethical procedures for reading, conditions of minimal competence and responsibility. In reading Rousseau, for example, Derrida suggests the following requirements for responsible discussion:

..one must understand and write, even translate French as well as possible, know the corpus of Rousseau as well as possible, including all the contexts that determine it (the literary, philosophical, rhetorical traditions, the history of the French language, society, history, which is to say, so many other things as well). Otherwise, one could indeed say just anything at all. <sup>126</sup>

What Derrida suggests for Rousseau might well be as important for reading Tutuola, these conditions of minimal competence demand a

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125 Derrida *Limited Inc* p. 144

126 Derrida *Limited Inc* pp. 144 - 145.

complex immersion in the cultural, political and linguistic situation of the text. In the case of cross-cultural criticism, this immersion becomes less an issue of diligence and more a matter of access. Cultural competence comes, according to Derrida, through an exploration of contexts - these contexts are realised through an examination of a body of texts.

Central to these problems, then, is the vexed question of the archive. The reconstruction of critical and intellectual context is dependent upon access to a body or archive of texts that constitute the documentary realisation or articulation of that context. As we are not necessarily privy to the context of *any* texts' production, the examination of these circumstances is, inevitably, an immersion in more and more texts. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>127</sup> Michel Foucault examines the question of the archive in the light of a broadly structuralist<sup>128</sup> approach to the formation and the economy of discourse. For Foucault the "archive" is both the body of accumulated historical documents and the axiomatic system for the regulation of texts in any historiographic system. The archive would regulate, for example, the distinction between an historical text such as Elizabeth I's "Golden speech" and some ephemeral and forgotten sonnet by one of her courtiers. The rules of the archive govern the admissibility of a text into a system of discursive knowledge and also forms the underlying principles that order and organise that system. The archive establishes the transformation of mute experience into a readable and reproducible text, it is "the general principle for the transformation of events".<sup>129</sup> His deep-rooted and, in a sense, invisible system for the

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127 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, ed. R. D. Laing, (trans A.M. Sheridan Smith) London: Routledge, 1991

128 It is always problematic to use so straightforward a moniker as "structuralist" in reference to Foucault's work. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is structuralist in the broadest sense in that it seeks to uncover axiomatic principles for the historical emergence of forms of discourse.

129 Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p. 129

organisation of discourse is a complex and elusive concept which is best represented with reference to the complexities of Foucault's text:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct features, composed together in multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars... it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability*.<sup>130</sup>

The relevance of these concepts to the "problem of Tutuola" lies in the nature of the "archive" of framing texts that accompany and envelop a novel such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. The archive of texts that serve to document the context of the novel is somewhat problematic. In one sense, the number and scope of these texts causes problems for the critic and, in a more profound sense, so does the system of enunciability for these texts. This is in need of explication. For the critic working across cultural divisions there are a limited number of ways that "contextual competence" can be acquired. One is through direct experience of another culture (which presents another, very different, set of problems to those addressed here) and through an exhaustive investigation and immersion in a body of texts that can enable the kind of "ethics of reading" suggested by both Derrida and Bakhtin.

The body of texts that might provide the contextual orientation for the reading of Tutuola is, in a practical sense, somewhat sparse and underdeveloped. Reading Tutuola is to read a text for which an archive of *useful* or, more accurately, enabling marginalia is not in

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<sup>130</sup> Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p. 129

place. From the perspective of a non-participant in Tutuola's culture, the practical problems in acquiring cultural competence in mid-century Yoruba working class culture, highlights issues of the archive as a valuing and evaluative structure which transforms events into texts. Indeed, the criticism of Tutuola I have examined for the purposes of this study tends to operate through a fairly repetitive evocation of other critics. Given the limited nature of these materials, the product is a supremely self-referential body of criticism. This displays a profound disquiet over the archive (in which, ironically, this study also partakes.) This constant retelling and reiteration is indicative of a kind of crisis in method. If the archive does not transform the events that might help us excavate Tutuola's context into usable texts we are in the presence of a hierarchy of value that surrounds Tutuola's world in silence.

The politics of this silence are quite complex. In attempting to reconstitute context through an archive of *texts* we are constrained by a number of factors. Firstly, by a consideration of the volume of materials on a given culture - in one sense it is far easier to reconstruct the heteroglossia of Shakespeare than it is of many contemporary authors. Secondly, it is the *nature* of the archival materials that determines the kinds of knowledges that might be produced. The determining structure of the archive in regulating "the enunciative field" of a text can operate in a number of ways. In one sense, it transforms events into texts (operating as a productive regime) in another, it serves to limit the possibility of this transformation. If an archive of texts that might help us with the practicalities of reading Tutuola does not exist this is, in part, due to the regulative force of a system that fills this space with, in the early years after the novel's publication, discourses of Primitivism and Nationalism and, of late, with silence.

The current “disappearance” of Tutuola from the theoretical investigation of postcolonial literatures suggests that the conditions and the vocabularies through which a literary critical apprehension of his work might be constructed are simply not there. This latter-day “genre of silence” (to which I have eluded before) serves to exclude Tutuola’s work from the newly emerging canon of postcolonial literatures. Tutuola’s work finds a limited audience in postcolonial studies, precisely because it is difficult to place his work within the various counter-discursive paradigms in which these literatures are most often conceptualised. A number of the most pressing of recent debates within the field can be reduced to competing modellings of the nature of postcolonial textuality.<sup>131</sup> Two poles seem to govern these debates and, like any two poles, these positions are locked in a mutual process of attraction and repulsion. Attendant to these critical practices are favourite or favourable authors and works upon which the critic can practice his or her dark arts. On the one hand, there is a position which broadly stresses the role of the postcolonial text as an act of discursive resistance to be located within very specific political milieu and ethic of liberation. In these models, the postcolonial text is conceived as an act in a process of National or cultural liberation, as a refutation and reversal of the ideological misrepresentations of colonialism. The work of Jan Mohammed, Chinweizu and many others could be seen as typical of this tendency. In contrast, there are a range of positions which, informed by various strands of Western poststructuralism, offer a more *rhetorical* model for postcolonial inscription. In these models there is a greater stress upon the disruptive effect of postcolonial cultural difference upon official

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<sup>131</sup> Clearly, this synopsis of an extremely broad theoretical debate is flawed by the extremity of its elision and concision in its treatment. The poles of critical practice I offer are not either/or options but represent an attempt to describe tendencies rather than schools of critical practice. This study is not, however, the place to fully explore these ideas.

discourse and a less straightforward emphasis upon the text's refutation and resistance of colonialism. In this "school" (though this is an inappropriately collegiate term) is the work of Said, Spivak and, above all, Bhabha. What both models seem to share, in their different ways, is a model of postcolonial literatures as, at root, a form of ideological critique. There are, however, very real and important differences in the way that these critics understand both ideology and the process of critique. Yet, at both poles, there is a foregrounding of the text's mediation, transformation and resistance of discourses of oppression.

Tutuola's work seems to have little place in this artificially engineered debate, his texts seem to represent another postcoloniality, one not easily co-opted into a National narrative of liberation or into a knowing textual polemics of cultural difference and subversion. It is difficult to see, in Tutuola's textuality, either a call to arms or the deconstruction of the symbolic orders of colonial authority. Tutuola's position in these debates is somewhat more complex. Clearly, every area of literary critical activity works within a given paradigm and upon a finite and discrete body of texts, this is neither remarkable nor sinister. It is only reasonable to expect theorists of the postcolonial to favour certain literary texts over others. What makes Tutuola's neglect significant, is that in the debates over the nature and status of the "postcolonial" as a textual practice or historical context, there is a "Universalising" and trans-cultural tendency in both these dominant paradigms. Evidently there is a blind spot in contemporary postcolonial discourse analysis which either overlooks Tutuola or finds nothing in his work to fuel the theoretical machine. This becomes significant only when theory is so immodest as to attempt to foreclose the nature of the postcolonial and, in so attempting, fails to cast a glance towards the texts it precludes and ignores.

It is easy to ascribe the lack of materials on Tutuola to a kind of poststructuralist conspiracy theory. What must be noted, however, is the problems of dealing with *any* form of popular contemporary (or near-contemporary) culture in an academic register. It would prove difficult to excavate the cultural production of the British Working class of the forties and fifties. Contemporary culture escapes the archive by the very pace of its emergence and transformation. For all kinds of political, social and pedagogical reasons, popular culture (perhaps fortunately) slips the net of academic discourse. Tutuola presents us with a genuine case of a cross-over. The politics of the archive, as it pertains to Tutuola, is defined by emerging postcolonial power structures as well as those that relate to Tutuola's emergence from working class culture. This point can be highlighted by briefly considering the differences in the archive on Yoruba culture that one would be presented with in exploring, for example, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.<sup>132</sup> The text demands a high degree of knowledge on Yoruba concepts of the relationship between the living and the dead, political institutions and social relations. It would seem that a reading of this text would require the same kind of cultural competencies as a reading of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Yet the pertinent archive on the two texts is very different and the acquisition of cultural competence in the context of the works equally different. There is a wealth of materials that would allow the textual exploration of Yoruba Cosmology, the relationship between the domain of the living and *Egbe*, the domain of the dead. Soyinka's own work as an apologist for the genius of Yoruba culture serves precisely this function as do works such as Segun Gbadegsin's *African Philosophy: Traditional*

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<sup>132</sup> In Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* London: Eyre Methuen, 1975



*Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* <sup>133</sup> or specific works on Egungun ritual and the wealth of literary criticism on Soyinka's individual works. It is possible to find texts that can give the outsider a rudimentary understanding of the Yoruba pantheon of Gods, kinship and theories of selfhood. This knowledge is vital in understanding *Death and the King's Horseman* in its intellectual context, and yet these knowledges of Yoruba culture are not significantly useful in facing the hermeneutic problems I presented in relation to Tutuola. It is important to understand that Yoruba metaphysics presents us with a co-existent relationship between the living and with the dead, yet this does not assist in the hermeneutic problems of reading "Unreturnable-Heaven's Town" or with understanding details of Yoruba orature. This imbalance in the archive suggests that Tutuola's works are the victim of an economy of value that operates on both an international and on a national level.

Yet I would suggest that issues of the archive are far from the only problems Tutuola presents critical exegesis. While I believe that the nature of the archive of materials on Tutuola's intellectual and social context is important to the types of reading possible for *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, I would also suggest that the difficulties of such a text could not be "resolved" by the existence of a more thorough or differently constituted archive on Yoruba working class culture. While a larger body of sociological, anthropological, linguistic and historical materials on Tutuola's world would surely help in a reading of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, it would not serve as some critical panacea, the text is rather too heterogeneous for that. This is self-evident in the fact that the novel is not simply the reflection of any *one* set of cultural co-ordinates. In a text of a distinctly inter-cultural constitution, the reconstitution of context is more than an investigation

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<sup>133</sup> Segun Gbadegsin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*, London: Peter Lang, 1991

of Yoruba and British, colonial and postcolonial backgrounds. The kind of textuality we find in Tutuola is not merely the aggregate of any set of cultural co-ordinates (be they British/Nigerian/Yoruba) but is, somehow, all and none of these, it is in a very real sense *between* these categories.

Similarly, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* offers no readily available “aesthetic” categories for our apprehension as Western readers. The text’s inter-cultural coordinates means that the categories we might wish to apply to the text are made problematic. The most fitting category from the canon of Western aesthetics through which one might read *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* seems to be the concept of the grotesque. Creatures such as the “curious and terrible” Complete Gentleman<sup>134</sup> or the many perverse and cruel inhabitants of “Unreturnable Heaven’s Town” do seem to belong in an aesthetic of the monstrous, the prodigious and the bizarre. If we take but one of Tutuola’s creations, “the Spirit of Prey” and examine Tutuola’s description of it, we seem to be in a world akin to that inhabited by the grotesque creatures of *Gulliver’s Travels* or of Borges:

As we sat down under this tree and were thinking about that night’s danger, there we saw ‘Spirit of Prey’, he was as big as a hippopotamus, but he was walking upright as a human-being; his both legs had two feet and tripled his body, his head was just like a lions head and every part of his body was covered with hard scales, each of these scales was the same in size as a shovel or a hoe, and all curled towards his body.<sup>135</sup>

This description seems to be entirely, fantastically, grotesque. It is very tempting to take a broad theoretical sweep across West African cultural life and to find, in Tutuola, in funerary figures, religious sculpture, masks rituals etc. a common category of the “folk grotesque”. Indeed, one is tempted to go further still and to find affinities with the brothers Grimm or with *Beowulf* and with Nordic sagas. The surface

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<sup>134</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 25

<sup>135</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p. 54

similarities between the creatures of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and those of some traditional African art cannot be collated, however, without reducing the particularity and contextual specificity of individual works. A Pan-cultural, even a Pan-African aesthetic of the grotesque can only be achieved through the questionable procedure of conflating literary culture and material culture, and a rather shallow examination of the surface features of different forms of “the monstrous”. The concept of the “folk grotesque” is problematic in both its referents. The notion of a “folk” that spans ethnic, historical and social differences is one that is not theoretically tenable and the “grotesque” is a category whose origins in Western art criticism is in need of examination. I will examine, therefore, the pertinence of the category of the grotesque in the light of the issues of cultural difference and competence outlined earlier and will attempt to find if there is anything valuable in the history of the category of the grotesque that could contribute to understanding *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

The grotesque can be understood as a species of the fantastic, a transformative aesthetic mode that represents “reality” in an estranged and mutated aspect. Unlike either the category of the beautiful or the sublime, the grotesque is a concept that has evolved in a somewhat *ad hoc* basis and has not been the focus of sustained philosophical aesthetics. Wolfgang Kayser’s work *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* <sup>136</sup> is, however, a supremely useful work in tracing the eclectic genealogy of this plural and hydra-headed concept. One of Kayser’s many definitions of the grotesque seems to be somehow appropriate to the world of *The Palm- Wine Drinkard* . For Kayser, the grotesque represents:

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<sup>136</sup> Wolfgang Kayser *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (trans. Ulrich Weisstein), New York: Columbia University Press, 1981

the fusion of the realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of 'natural' size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality and the fragmentation of the historical order.<sup>137</sup>

Yet this vision of the estranged world, of a grotesque that reveals “the hidden madness of the normal” makes certain unfounded assumptions about reality, culture and the fantastic. While Tutuola’s “world” of deads, spirits, prodigious children and monstrous adversaries seems to be an example of a “world turned upside down”, one is forced to ask questions as to the nature of the “reality” that has been inverted. To assume that Tutuola is using a metamorphic aesthetic procedure to create a strange and distorted fictional reality is to assume an understanding of the “reality” and structures of perception in which Tutuola lived. Definitions of the grotesque that rely on a transformation of the normal, therefore, rest upon assumptions on the nature of the “real” that simply cannot survive the transposition to the criticism of cultural difference. This is not to suggest that Tutuola shared his lived experience with creatures such as the “Spirit of Prey”, but that one cannot conclude that this creature is the same kind of creation as the griffin or the Leviathan. The double parenthesis I use in referring to this creature highlights something rather significant, the fact that Tutuola himself always places the creature in quotation serves to warn us that this spirit may be drawn as much from folk belief as from the imagination. It cannot, therefore, be understood as a “fantasy” in a straightforward sense.

The problems for reading posed by Tutuola and the issues of translation and cultural hybridity that surround the criticism of his work should warn us that we cannot transpose *any* normative version of the real onto another culture. This may sound a somewhat solipsistic argument and one that threatens to resolve itself around

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<sup>137</sup> Kayser *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* p. 185

rather tired questions on the universality of “the category of objects” and on the possibility of understanding another’s experience. Yet one does not have to suppose, on the one hand, that the world of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is any way a mimetic portrayal or representation of Tutuola’s experience of material reality (as some critics have suggested) or, conversely, or that Yoruba reality is completely unknowable to a non-participant. The cautionary arguments I have marshalled in examining the problems of cross-cultural interpretation, merely require that we show a proper wariness in our use of terms such as the grotesque. The modes of transformation through which Tutuola represents social experience in novelistic form cannot be collated to those of Rabelais, Swift or even, for that matter, to those of Okri or Soyinka. Kayser’s understanding of the European tradition of the grotesque as “the expression of the estranged or alienated world”<sup>138</sup> seems, in fact, to describe the Western reader’s experience of otherness in reading a text such as *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. The fact that the text might be received in the aesthetic of the grotesque does not license the inference that this was the mode of aesthetic production under which the text was written. The circumspection we have had to learn in using normative categories for differing experiences of the world precludes the meaningful export of these concepts. In truth, we cannot speculate as to the degree to which *The Palm -Wine Drinkard* represented an “estranged” vision of the social reality of Mid-Century Nigeria. Clearly, the novel is not, in any way, a straightforward representation of the social heteroglossia outlined in my earlier analysis. Even clearer, however is the fact that the novel was not divorced from this context. What is so difficult, elusive and fascinating about the novel is understanding how the struggles of

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138 Kayser *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* p. 184

Nigerian history and social experience emerged in the fabric of the text.

The concept of the grotesque seems to be simply too culturally specific to be of use in understanding Tutuola. Yet while one must take care in using a concept of the grotesque that presupposes a “reality” and an alienated “grotesque vision” of that reality, there are aspects of the grotesque that are, nevertheless, superbly descriptive of the kind of radically hybrid textuality of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Firstly, however, it is necessary examine the genealogy of the term rather more closely. The term “grotesque” is of a somewhat more recent etymology than other concepts of philosophical aesthetics. The term derives from the fifteenth-century discovery of a decorative mode of painting in underground Roman Grottoes. The “Grotesque” was coined to designate this ancient ornamental style that came to light in excavations (in both a literal and a figurative sense) of classical culture. Characteristic of this style was a mixture of animal and vegetable elements figured together, with human forms growing from plant stems, with female figures with fishes tails. It was, therefore, an aesthetic of admixture and hybridity. As early as Horace’s *Art of Poetry* <sup>139</sup> this ornamental style was described as one which “bares all shapes and mixes all extremes”.<sup>140</sup> Similarly the complex interplay of “form” and “content” has always had a part to play in the theorisation of the grotesque. Schlegel’s *Conversation on Poetry* <sup>141</sup> points to this aspect of the grotesque, suggesting the possibilities of form and content in a relationship of mutual estrangement.

In these senses of the term then, Tutuola is a “grotesque artist” at a profound and deep-rooted level. He is the author of a magnificently

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<sup>139</sup> In *Classical Literary Criticism*, eds. D.A. Russell, and M. Winterbottom Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 99 - 111

<sup>140</sup> *Classical Literary Criticism* p. 98.

<sup>141</sup> In David Simpson ed. *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, pp.177 - 204

bastard form, of a textuality that does more than simply conjoin Yoruba and English elements, it produces a new form from the two. In grammatical, stylistic and linguistic terms, Tutuola is an author who mixes the fish and the flesh of an African oral tradition and a Western novelistic setting. It is the deep rooted dialogicity of Tutuola's textuality that is monstrous, it is the audacity and incongruity of his achievement that is "grotesque" and transgressive. Tutuola's monster is a fusion of disparate and unrelated elements that seemed to have no place together. As an author, he initiated cultural dialogue from a place entirely unexpected, short-fusing the established patterns of colonial relations and scandalising and horrifying the vested interests of his epoch. As one might expect from such a remarkable and unconventional artist, Tutuola both is and isn't a grotesque artist and, more unusual still, he achieves this paradox within the same textuality.

My analysis of Tutuola has concentrated on issues of indeterminacy and doubt, it has failed somewhat in providing any kind of "positive" agenda through which one might understand the text. As I suggested in reference to Foucault and issues of the archive, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a text constituted in a complex *inter-cultural* relationship between Yoruba and English cultures (which from my investigation of social heteroglossia, we understand as manifestly heterogeneous cultural systems). As Wole Soyinka suggests, in reference to the novel, this complexity of social, linguistic and ideological determinants produced an exquisitely complicated work:

Of all his novels *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is his best and least impeachable. This book, apart from the work of D.O. Fagunwa who writes in Yoruba, is the earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer gathering multifarious experience under, if you like, the two cultures, and exploiting them in one extravagant whole. 142

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142 Wole Soyinka, in "From a Common Backcloth: A Reassessment of the African Literary Image" pp. 7 - 15, from the collection *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. London: Methuen, 1993, p. 9

While there might be problems in both the reconstitution of context and in the acquisition of a multi-faceted cultural competence, it is possible to explore the nature of the intellectual synthesis Soyinka suggests as central to the novel's textuality.

One of the most useful pieces of scholarship on Tutuola is by a Nigerian linguist, A. Afolayan's "Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola" <sup>143</sup> is a brief work that provides an excellent analysis of Tutuola's unique use of language. Using both the resources of linguistic analysis and his knowledge of the Yoruba and the English language, "Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola" is an instance of enabling marginalia, precisely the kind of closely focused and exact scholarship that is, on the whole, so lacking in the archive of materials on Tutuola.

Afolayan offers a convincing and thorough account of Tutuola's use of language in the novel, identifying and explaining aspects of the text that appear puzzling to the non-Yoruba speaker. Such an instance is the tendency to place the name of a character after the use of a personal pronoun. In the opening chapter, for example, we have numerous instances of this usage:

When I reached his (Death's) house, he was not at home by that time, he was in the yam garden which was very close to his house... I met a small rolling drum in his veranda, then I beat it to Death as a sign of salutation. But when he (Death) heard the sound of the drum, he said thus:-  
'Is that man still alive or dead' <sup>144</sup>

What this tendency illustrates, for Afolayan, is not any "literary" phenomenon but the lack of inflectional third person pronouns in Yoruba. Indeed, he accounts for many aspects of the prose structure of

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<sup>143</sup> A. Afolayan "Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola" in *Perspectives on African Literature: (Selections From The Proceedings Of The Conference On African Literature Held at The University of Ife 1968* ed. Christopher Heywood London: Heinemann, 1971, pp. 49 - 64

<sup>144</sup> Tutuola *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* p.12



the novel through reading the deeper structures of Yoruba grammar though its English veneer:

The apparent wordy and repetitive style of original Yoruba seems to arise from the need to be clear, unambiguous, and explicit whereas the language lacks any morphological inflections and there is only one form of the third person singular pronoun in the language (Yoruba o = he, she, it.)<sup>145</sup>

Afolayan's examination of Tutuola's particular "idiolect" of Nigerian English concentrates on examining the relationships of translation and mediation between Yoruba and English. Afolayan carefully takes examples of "unusual" grammatical structures from the novel and finds an explanation for their English structures in the patterns of Yoruba usage. He goes on to outline a number of sources of Tutuola's narratives in collections of Yoruba folktales, in the work of Fagunwa and in a more generalised exposure to an oral tradition. While his analysis tends to be too deterministic (at one point he attempts to assess Tutuola's competence in the use of English in terms of Secondary school attainment levels), his work points to something vital in understanding *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. As I suggested in reference to the name "Unreturnable-Heaven's Town" or to the Drinkard's self-promotional nick-name "Father of Gods" there is a constant sense of this interplay between languages (in their broadest sense) in the text.

The novel is the product of a form of translation. The question remains, however, as to what kind of translation the text represents. Afolayan suggests that the text represents a direct but flawed English translation of Yoruba materials. It is a "Yoruba English" in which the Yoruba language (and, perhaps, values and experiences) provide the dominant structures:

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<sup>145</sup> A. Afolayan "Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola" p. 53

Tutuola's English is 'Yoruba English' in the sense that it represents the expression of either Yoruba deep grammar with English surface grammar, or Yoruba systems and /or structures in English words.<sup>146</sup>

The dominance of Yoruba as, one might say, a “source” language over English as a “target” language suggests to Afolayan a model for Tutuola’s creative process:

When the material is related to the language it seems reasonable to suggest that Tutuola first organises his Yoruba material in his Yoruba mother tongue and then expresses the organised, though not necessarily vocalised or visually expressed, material in English. This means that some sort of translation (at least psychic) of literature takes place in the process of producing Tutuola's novels.<sup>147</sup>

The text is, for Afolayan, a translation of Yoruba materials in an imperfect English that ultimately fails in its attempt to travel from source to target language. Tutuola interests the linguist in him because of his inability to render Yoruba into English. The consequence of this “deep grammar” of Yoruba syntax, idioms and narrative traditions in a reading of the “surface features” of the English text is that the text becomes “unreadable” to any but the bilingual:

And this means that Tutuola may not be fully comprehensible to any but a Yoruba-English bilingual, particularly the one who is a native speaker of Yoruba.<sup>148</sup>

This somewhat depressing conclusion (for one lacking these skills or this background) is not altogether different from my own analysis of the problems in reconstituting Tutuola’s context and in acquiring a minimal standard of cultural competence. Yet there is something tellingly final about this conclusion. Moreover, it denies the experience of millions of non-Yoruba readers of the text (including many of

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146 A. Afolayan “Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola” p. 50

147 A. Afolayan “Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola” p. 61

148 A. Afolayan “Language and Sources of Amos Tutuola” p. 63

Tutuola's fellow Nigerians). Afolayan takes, however, a somewhat restricted model for the process of translation and fails to look at the full consequences of Tutuola's use of language.

Afolayan's paradigm for translation is one central to traditional theories of the process. As I hinted above, he considers translation through a classic and common sense model of transference between languages. Susan Bassnett in her work *Translation Studies*<sup>149</sup> offers a summation of this paradigm:

What is generally understood as translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into a target language (TL) so as to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted.<sup>150</sup>

By this criteria, Tutuola, through distorting the structures of the target language, through "Yorubarising" English into an unrecognisable form, certainly "fails" as a translator. Tutuola's "Secondary School English" was, by these standards, inadequate for the task of translation. Yet this position suggests the possibilities of a more complete and competent act of transference, it depends on a notion of what Popovic calls an "expressive identity"<sup>151</sup> between languages.

What this kind of theorisation of linguistic and cultural translation fails to acknowledge is the more disquieting notion that there may be no natural synonymy between languages. What if Tutuola's text is *not* a translation in the classical model and what if his work instead serves to destabilise the very coherence of traditionally conceived translation?

*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a "translation" without a source text. In spite of the work of a number of scholars in tracing motifs in

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<sup>149</sup> Susan Bassnett *Translation Studies, (Revised Edition)* London: Routledge, 1991

<sup>150</sup> Bassnett *Translation Studies* p. 2

<sup>151</sup> A. Popovic *Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation* Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1976, *passim*.

Tutuola to published texts of Fagunwa or to other collections of Yoruba Orature, the novel is *sui generis*. The novel is a “translation” only in the broadest sense, it is rather “translational”. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is translational in a meta-textual way, it enacts a form of cultural translation, not between texts but between cultures and languages.

Yet this not the only distinct feature of the text as translation. The mauling of the target language in Tutuola’s early artistic practice throws the binary model of translation into confusion. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a text that is somehow neither Yoruba nor English but an evocation of the untranslatable distances between them. Tutuola takes liberties with both sides of the process of translation. He uproots and transforms Yoruba orature and bends and shapes English to accommodate or host this material. The *translational* and *transnational* aspect of the text stands, in a quite literal way, in between languages and national discourses. To describe Tutuola’s work as “translational” rather than as a “translation” seems somewhat tautological. What I wish to indicate is the sense that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is very different from a straightforward translation of Yoruba tales, idioms and language into a completed written English language form. A clear example of this difference would be made manifest through examining Soyinka’s *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter’s Saga*,<sup>152</sup> a translation of Fagunwa’s *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*.<sup>153</sup> *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is translational in that it, unlike a translation proper, it enacts and captures the act or the process of translation, it leaves us between the “source” and “target” languages and texts of traditionally conceived translation studies. The “text” upon which Tutuola’s translation is based are the multifarious

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<sup>152</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter’s Saga* London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1982

<sup>153</sup> D.O. Fagunwa *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1949

experiences of a whole narrative tradition. The text uncannily evokes the moment of transition and, in this strange moment, acts as a complex and unresolved cultural hyphen between the poles of its formative discourse. A Bakhtinian analysis that seeks to separate literary discourse into its constituent parts finds, in Tutuola, a melange of heteroglottal ingredients that simply refuse to split into culturally distinct units. The pursuit of a Bakhtinian analysis demands, to echo the language of ethnography, a profound *penetration* of the text. The force of the text's translational surface seems to resist this intrusion. An examination of the text as a translation finds, instead, what Bhabha calls "the foreignness in translation".<sup>154</sup>

Tutuola, therefore, achieves two seemingly contradictory things, firstly, he points to this "foreignness of translation", to the zones of the untranslatable between cultures while he simultaneously creates a hybrid form that evokes and makes manifest this very untranslatability.

J. C. Catford in his work *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*<sup>155</sup> distinguishes two types of untranslatability, the "linguistic" and the "cultural". Linguistic untranslatability would represent, for example, the non-equivalence of personal pronouns between English and Yoruba, or the absence of the semantic equivalent of the French "jouissance" in the English lexicon. Linguistic untranslatability would also include syntactical non-equivalence between languages. "Cultural" untranslatability would represent the lack of a *situational* referent in the target language. Such a situation might be the problem of manifesting Yoruba relationships with the dead in an English medium. Neither "ancestor"

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<sup>154</sup> Homi K. Bhabha "HOW NEWNESS ENTERS THE WORLD: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation" in *The Location of Culture* London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 212 - 235, Passim.

<sup>155</sup> J.C. Catford *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965

or “ghost” properly convey the Yoruba conception of the relationship with the co-existent dead. Clearly what a text like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* demonstrates, is that this division between cultural and linguistic untranslatability is untenable or, more exactly, that lexical and cultural problems of translation are one and the same (Bakhtin also serves to remind us of the self evidence of the relationships between culture and language). A phrase such as “Unreturnable-Heaven’s Town” stages this very process of simultaneous untranslatability. An early Nigerian critic complains that phrase is a mistranslation and offers the more “correct” rendering “The undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns”.<sup>156</sup> The phrase ‘Unreturnable Heaven’s Town’ both excludes and evokes the Yoruba referent it “translates”. The patterns and expectations of English usage pull us away from Yoruba experience while the sheer force of Tutuola’s “speech will” convulses and writhes beneath the surface of English forms. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* lives as a text in both these ethereal regions of untranslatability and demonstrates the broader implications of cultural translation.

Yoruba aesthetics offers a concept that seems to evoke this sense of “speech will” in Tutuola’s writing. In “Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of Ase”,<sup>157</sup> Rowland Abiodun uses traditional Yoruba vocabularies of creativity and form to explore the formal characteristics of Yoruba material culture. His work seems to offer the beginnings of a new kind of research into African aesthetics and is doubly useful in that it examines, in the concept of *ase*, a central characteristic of both Yoruba sculpture and orature (particularly Oriki). The concept of *ase* is, however, an extremely

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<sup>156</sup> Babasola Johnson from *West Africa* April 10 1954, in *Critical Perspectives on Tutuola* p. 21

<sup>157</sup> Rowland Abiodun, “ Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of Ase” *African Arts* Vol. XXVII No. 3 ( July 1994) pp. 68 - 79

“enigmatic and effective phenomenon”<sup>158</sup> that cannot be reduced to any simplistic definition. Abiodun offers the following *definitions* :

In Yorubaland, depending on context, the word *ase* is variously translated and understood as ‘power’, ‘authority’, ‘command’, ‘sceptre’; the ‘vital force’ in all living thing and non-living things; or a ‘**coming to pass of an utterance**’, a *logos proforicos*...[emphasis added] <sup>159</sup>

*Ase* can be understood as force or power, as the communicative energy of an utterance, as the vital force in the sacred citation poetry of *Oriki*. The *ase* of Tutuola’s text lies in the sense of sheer communicative and dialogic will of the work in the face of the problems of cultural translation.

In understanding the paradox through which Tutuola can translate untranslatability and evoke the culturally unrepresentable, I will invoke the assistance of a number of critics who have explored the far side of translation, Benjamin, Bhabha and Derrida. Benjamin’s text “The Task of the Translator”<sup>160</sup> forms the foundation for both Derrida and Bhabha’s work but it is to these secondary works that I will primarily turn in that they provide a more useful set of conceptual tools for my situation.

Derrida, in his text on translation and on Benjamin “Des Tours de Babel,”<sup>161</sup> attempts to evoke the degree to which translation acts to destabilise the self-identity and referential coherence of any one language. Through reading the myth of Babel and the work of Walter Benjamin, Derrida replaces as the dominant metaphor of translation, the notion of transference, with one of replication and profusion. In a complex and demanding text, Derrida examines the way translation exposes what is absent from both the source and target languages. The

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158 Abiodun “ Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics” p. 71

159 Abiodun “ Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics” p. 72

160 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*: [1973] ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, (trans. H. Zohn) London: Fontana Press, 1992, pp. 70 - 83

161 Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel” *Difference in Translation* ed. and trans. Joseph F. Graham, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 164 - 205

process of translation is seen, not as a replication or reproduction, but as an addition to the original; Tutuola adds to Yoruba oral traditions, he multiplies and expands their exposure and the media in which they are expressed. Translation operates, for Derrida, under a regime of supplementarity not of equivalence. It adds to an original lack in the “original”. Tutuola’s translational textuality exposes both zones of untranslatability between Yoruba and English culture and gestures to an inexpressible relation of affinity and analogy between them. It is in this sense that one has some sympathy with critics who have sought to read Tutuola as an example of a universal mythological imagination. His text’s structure lends itself to an “analogous reading” that seeks cultural equivalence beyond the text itself. Derrida suggests, (echoing Benjamin’s notion of a “pure language”) that translation tells us something about structures of enunciation that cannot themselves be expressed in language:

In a mode that is solely anticipatory, annunciatory, almost prophetic translation renders *present* an affinity that is never present in this presentation. One thinks of the way in which Kant at times defines the relation to the sublime: a presentation inadequate to that which is nevertheless presented.<sup>162</sup>

Once again, our discussions of cultural difference return to the aesthetics of the sublime, and to the presentation of the unrepresentable. I do not wish to dwell on this aspect of translation at the moment but to attempt to clarify my somewhat confusing and contradictory expression of the translational aspect of Tutuola through the assistance of the work of Bhabha.

Bhabha’s work “HOW NEWNESS ENTERS THE WORLD: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation” is another text that takes its theoretical orientation from Benjamin’s

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<sup>162</sup> Derrida “Des Tours de Babel” p. 188



essay. It is largely devoted to issues of migrancy and diaspora but, in its focus on the broader aspects of cultural translation, it covers some of the same ground as my own work. Bhabha is interested in the way translation gestures towards the inexpressible aspect of cultural difference. The centripetal forces of a National language strive to exclude alternative orders of signification. The act of translation exposes the sham of this performance and allow us to glimpse the space between cultures. As always, with Bhabha, it is dangerous to go too far with any synopsis, it is always “safer” to quote his work directly. (In the following passage he quotes from Benjamin):

Walter Benjamin has described the irresolution, or liminality, of ‘translation’, the *element of resistance* in the process of transformation, ‘that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation’. This space of the translation of cultural difference at the interstices is infused with that Benjaminian temporality of the present which makes graphic a moment of transition, not merely the continuum of history; it is a strange stillness that defines the present in which the very *writing* of historical transformation becomes uncannily visible. ... and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture’s difference. <sup>163</sup>

Translation is, for Bhabha, a form of performance that “stages”<sup>164</sup> cultural difference. Bhabha’s understanding of cultural difference as a kind of unrepresentable lacunae within languages of cultural authority suggests that its presence cannot be “shown” but can be glimpsed in certain moments in which the surface of language reveals a sense of the social and historical pre-conditions of enunciation:

Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication. It is language *in actu* (enunciatio, positionality) rather than language *in situ* (énoncé, or propositionality). And the sign of translation continually tells, or

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<sup>163</sup> Bhabha “HOW NEWNESS ENTERS THE WORLD” p. 227. Benjamin is quoted from “The Task of the Translator” p. 77

<sup>164</sup> Bhabha “HOW NEWNESS ENTERS THE WORLD” p. 228

'tolls' the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices.<sup>165</sup>

Tutuola's work serves precisely this purpose. Beneath the surface of its language we sense the constant efforts of cultural translation and the remarkable circumstances of the text's dialogic characteristics. Bhabha, Benjamin, Derrida and Bakhtin help us understand something of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard's* fascination and its elusive, fugitive heart.

What I am attempting to express is the manner in which *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* gives us a sense of the pre-conditions of utterance, of the addressivity of cross-cultural address. By necessity, my exposition is elliptical and refracted and my analytic tools rather eclectic and ill-suited. In one sense, I am attempting to examine that which Benjamin calls "that pure language" which it is the translator's task to release from the text into the medium of another language. There are many other ways to express this "concept" (though metaphor seems a better term). Bhabha himself flits between terms, moving between terms such as the "performative" aspect of the utterance, "enunciato", "positionality" etc. He opposes these terms to the Lacanian *énoncé*, or perhaps "meaning". What I believe he is expressing is the distinction between the propositional and referential aspect of an utterance (*énoncé*) and the fact or the act of speech, (*énonciation*), between what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls, far more succinctly, the Said (*le Dit*) and the Saying (*le Dire*).<sup>166</sup>

It is in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* that Levinas proposes a fundamental distinction between, the Saying (*le Dire*), and the Said (*le Dit*). The Saying is contained within and is prior to the

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<sup>165</sup> Bhabha "HOW NEWNESS ENTERS THE WORLD" p. 228

<sup>166</sup> While Levinas begins to consider related issues as early as *Totality and Infinity* it is in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (trans Alphonso Lingis) The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981, that he give full expression to his philosophy of language and otherness.

Said. It is the performance of communication before an Other, it cannot be transformed or reduced into the constative language of the Said. The Said, on the other hand, is meaning, the thematised and propositional content of communication. The meaning of one's words (or even one's thoughts) is the Said and the Saying is the fact that these words are addressed to an interlocutor. The Saying is the "speech event" or, to echo Bakhtin, the dialogicity and addressivity of utterance. The Saying is the "ethical residue"<sup>167</sup> of one's relationship to another. The Saying, like "pure language" escapes comprehension, arrests interpretation, enacts, what Levinas sees as the essential ethical responsibility between Self and the Other, it is expressive of one's "non-indifference to the other".<sup>168</sup> It would be wrong to merely paraphrase the complexities of Levinas' position:

...Prior to the said, saying uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object, discloses oneself by neglecting one's defences, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults to wounding. But saying is a denuding of denuding, a giving sign of its very signifyingness, an expression of exposure, a hyperbolic passivity that disturbs the still waters in which, without saying, passivity would be crawling with secret designs.<sup>169</sup>

Levinas devotes the rest of his text to exploring hermeneutic strategies to evoke the Saying within the Said. The patterns of meaningful discourse threaten to obscure and exclude the ethical residue of the Saying. Levinas repeatedly suggests that this can only be achieved through an "abuse of language". Tutuola's unique form of translational creativity manages this task, the "dialogicity" of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* manifests rather than "signifies" the Saying of cultural difference. While the interpretation of the Said of the text is interminable and profoundly complex (for the various reasons I have discussed above), the text, nevertheless, displays the originary

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<sup>167</sup> Levinas *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* p. 18

<sup>168</sup> Levinas *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* p. 48

<sup>169</sup> Levinas *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* p. 49

radicalism of Tutuola's inter-cultural address, of the Saying that demands our ethical responsibility. To read *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is to experience the demands of a discourse that mediates between the familiar and an alterity that Levinas describes as the hidden foundation of all language:

Discourse is the experience of something absolutely foreign, a pure experience, a *traumatism of astonishment* <sup>170</sup>

The evocation of the "Saying" of inter-cultural communication is a function of the context and the content of the novel's address to an uncreated audience. But an experience of only "the traumatism of astonishment" is, in so many ways, a recreation of the kind of decontextualised response found in Primitivism. The extremities of poststructuralism and the conservatism of colonialist response threaten to touch hands over an again silent text.

I have hoped to demonstrate two contradictory aspects of Tutuola's position- that his work was a part of both a vibrant cultural life and history and that his text was simultaneously ground-breaking and unprecedented. In a sense, these points are intimately related, the emerging nationalism of a culture readying itself for the overthrow of colonial authority enabled the kind of inter-cultural address that Tutuola was to pioneer. The politics of colonialism and the discourse of Primitivism meant that the procedures for cultural exchange were organised, almost entirely, for the one way exchange of culture from metropolis to margin, for an inter-cultural *monologue*. Tutuola's text evokes the "Saying" of an inter-cultural that insists on a dialogue.

The affinities I find between *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Bhabha's theorisation of cultural translation, masks an important distinction. I would hope that my lengthy exposition of the context of

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<sup>170</sup> Levinas *Totality and Infinity* p. 173

the novel's intervention in the literary heteroglossia stresses that Tutuola's textuality is, in a sense, unique, the conditions that governed his production (the silences he interrupted, the dialogues he initiated) were changed by the performative force of that very intervention. I use Bhabha's work, as always, advisedly in that I do not wish to suggest, as Bhabha seems to, that there is a structure of postcolonial utterance that can be applied across contexts. Tutuola is, in so many ways, a case apart.

I have attempted to evoke the astonishing nature of the text and to explore, from this point onwards, the enormous range of philosophical and critical issues that arise from one's interaction with the novel. And yet the text has served, in all its simultaneous simplicity and complexity, as a prelude to all the hermeneutic and aesthetic problems of the study. The examination of the translational and hybrid nature of the text (of the *différend* actuated in reading), of the vista of the Saying, in no way negates the massive problems the text has posed for me on the level of the Said. The pleasures of the text as "pure discourse" do not eradicate the responsibility of exploring the issues his text highlights. In Levinas' work, there is an insistence that the moment in which one recognises otherness is not the end of a finite scene of recognition, but the beginning of a process of ethical responsibility. The study will revolve entirely around the exploration of this responsibility. Tutuola is, therefore, implicit in all aspects of the study as both a literary "founding father" and as an interpretative problem I have (with all my recourse to the tools of modern literary theory) merely touched upon. No other text in the study provides the same opportunity or the same challenge as Tutuola's, the work his text has demanded is, however, a vital and necessary journey of initiation and exploration - a journey that the Drinkard might recognise.

## The Aesthetics of Embodiment.

### The Flaying of Marsyas: Naipaul, Bissoondath and the Dissected Postcolonial Body.

..another man remembered the tale of the satyr whom Apollo punished, after having defeated him in a competition on the reed-pipes, the instrument Minerva invented. 'Help!' Marsyas clamoured 'Why are you stripping me from myself? Never again I promise! Playing a pipe is not worth this! But in spite of his cries the skin was torn off the whole surface of his body; it was all one raw wound. Blood flowed everywhere, his nerves were exposed, unprotected, his veins pulsed with no skin to cover them. It was possible to count his throbbing organs, and the chambers of the lungs clearly visible within his breast. Then the woodland gods, the fauns who haunt the countryside mourned for him; his brother satyrs too, and Olympus, dear to him, even then. The fertile earth grew wet with tears, and when it was sodden, received the falling drops into itself, and drank them into his deepest veins. Then from these tears, it created a spring that sent gushing forth into the open air. From its source the water goes rushing down to the sea, hemmed by sloping banks. It is the clearest river in Phrygia and bears the name of Marsyas.

Ovid. *Metamorphosis* Book VI

Curious, he examined his lower half. The cut had been clean. There was no blood. The wound appeared to have been coated in a clear plastic and he could see the ends of veins pulsing red against the transparent skin. There was he knew no danger. Neil Bissoondath "Veins Visible"

We have but to scratch the rustic to find the barbarian underneath.  
E. Clodd 1893<sup>1</sup>

I have evoked the ancient story of Marsyas to introduce my chapter on Naipaul and Bissoondath because it raises the themes of reason, vision and the punitive dissection of the other that will be central to my treatment of V.S. Naipaul and Neil Bissoondath. The

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* (trans. Mary M. Innes) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 Book VI, pp. 144 - 145  
Neil Bissoondath "Veins Visible" from *Digging Up the Mountains* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, pp.210 - 224, p. 220  
E. Clodd, quoted in Ruth Richardson *Death Dissection and the Destitute* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 22 The inspiration for my reading of Marsyas as a trope for the punitive dissection of the other's body comes from Jonathan Sawday's *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* London: Routledge, 1995, a text which contains remarkable examples of Renaissance anatomical diagrams of Marsyas in the process of shedding his skin. My use of the myth of Marsyas also echoes Dr. David Richards more thorough and historical treatment of similar materials in his *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature, Anthropology and Art* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

myth of Marsyas is a powerful model through which one might consider the politics of postcolonial representation. The Satyr, the primitive half-man of the woods is flayed alive for losing his musical contest with Apollo. The God of light and reason then offers the spectacle, for this is the purpose of the flaying, of the body opened and displayed in anatomical perfection to the world, to the reader, and to Marsyas himself. This is a knowledge of the body that both punishes and kills, it exacts the penalty for presumption and satisfies a rapacious Apollonian curiosity. As my quotation from the nineteenth-century folklorist Clodd suggests, the epistemological connection between Primitivism (the examination of the barbarity beneath the rustic) and a dissective rationality is an enduring one. The rustic is still a creature to be pierced and exposed, still in possession of a secret nature. Apollo's destructive curiosity is, however, also part of a myth of transformation and endurance, of the survival of the flayed body in transmuted forms. I would hope, in tracing the "flaying of Marsyas" in the work of V.S Naipaul and Neil Bissoondath, to explore this sense of "metamorphoses".

The following chapter aims to examine one of the major figures of postcolonial writing, the Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul and a member of the younger generation of Caribbean writers, Naipaul's nephew Neil Bissoondath. The major works in question will be V.S. Naipaul's novels *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* in addition to a range of supporting materials drawn from Naipaul's considerable body of travel writing and non-fiction.<sup>2</sup> I will refer to all of Neil Bissoondath's published works, the two collections of short stories *Digging Up The Mountains* and *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*

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<sup>2</sup> V. S. Naipaul *Guerrillas* (First Published By André Deutsch, 1975), references from Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. V.S. Naipaul *A Bend in the River* (First published by André Deutsch, 1979), references from Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980

and the novel *A Casual Brutality*.<sup>3</sup> Their work comes together in my analysis not through kinship or even through consistencies in their geographic co-ordinates (both writers originate in and have left Trinidad in order to pursue literary careers) but in affinities I hope to demonstrate in both their textual practice and in their responses to aspects of colonial and Primitivist discourse. There is an important and oft-forgotten distinction between these two modes. While Primitivism was certainly an aspect of colonial discourse, it was far from being the only or even the dominant register of power and knowledge through which the colonial was known. Primitivism seems important because of the manner in which its dominant tropes seem to have endured into the postcolonial world and the way, for example, they saturate the work of Naipaul and others. I will argue that Naipaul and Bissoondath share an affiliated aesthetic sensibility that is rooted in a way of *looking* at the postcolonial world, that their representations of vision and, in particular, of the postcolonial body share a related *scopic* regime. I will examine the relationship of this regime as it impacts upon the politics of Primitivism. It has become commonplace to examine the privileging of sight in European culture and on the links between vision and the construction of both knowledge and power. Feminist criticism has been at the forefront of this critique with an examination of the politics of “the male gaze”. This chapter aims to examine the intersection of issues of power, vision and the body in quite a sharp focus, with an examination, for want of a better term, the scopic politics of a given textuality.

I am postulating a complex and polyvalent connection between the discourse of Primitivism (itself a complex part of colonial and neo-colonial discourse), with categories of pleasure and perception more commonly called “aesthetic” and with the cultural meaning of the body

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<sup>3</sup> Neil Bissoondath *Digging Up The Mountains* and *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*. London: Minerva, 1991. *A Casual Brutality* London: Minerva, 1989



of the colonised. Similarly, these concerns form a nexus with various visual regimes that are at once aesthetic and epistemological. In this chapter I hope to explore this network of relations through an examination of a number of postcolonial texts and, in particular, a reading of Naipaul's travel writing and the novel *Guerrillas*.

Naipaul's later fiction has often evoked a violence of response that, in its marked defensiveness, is worthy of study in itself. The politics of response I examined in my work on Tutuola helped reveal the characteristics of the international discursive politics of the early fifties. Naipaul's work is just as useful in this regard. Naipaul is both lauded and vilified in the "first" and in the "third" worlds, the extremities of response engendered by his work are even more pronounced than those around Tutuola. Moreover, there is a discernible geography (though in no way a definitive cartography) to this response, with the most damning opinion arising in the Caribbean and in other developing nations, the most vaunting praise coming from Britain and the United States.<sup>4</sup> Like Tutuola, Naipaul is an author whose literary production has been denied any representative relation to the postcolonial world it purports to depict. Naipaul, it is often argued, *misrepresents* the Third World. Unlike Tutuola, the *faux naif*, Naipaul is accused of maliciously misrepresenting both his "own" and other cultures. Naipaul's "vision" of postcolonial reality is, then, often accepted or denied *en mass*. This kind of approach seems to be both reductive and less than useful. A more productive methodology would be to examine the tangible means by which Naipaul's "nightfall vision" organises itself, the authority it evokes and to allow this analysis to serve its own ends in the politics of value that surround his work.

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<sup>4</sup> Rob Nixon's recent work *London Calling V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, devotes considerable attention to the problem of Naipaul's audience. His investigation of the status of his work in different contexts is extremely enlightening.

Similarly my analysis (unlike that offered for Tutuola) does not proceed by the reconstitution of the context of either the production or of the reception of the text. For reasons I shall explore in what follows, Naipaul's "place" in the world makes an exploration of context rather problematic. His recreation of himself as the deracinated intellectual-sans community, sans cultural tradition, sans *place* means that we cannot use concepts like "context" in the same way as we would with an author such as Tutuola. In a real sense Naipaul's "context" is defined in the act of writing; it is textuality that provides his sense of self and locale. Naipaul, tortoise-like, takes his "context" with him. Likewise, Naipaul's work cannot be said to be *inter-cultural* in the sense of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. I therefore propose to examine Naipaul's constitution of place through the textuality of *Guerrillas* and through the statements Naipaul has made about his peripatetic contexts in some of his other works.

I have, therefore, chosen to avoid the more obvious reading of *Guerrillas* as a transformation of the history of Trinidadian Black Power politics in the early seventies, in particular, the Michael X murders which Naipaul treats in his essay "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad".<sup>5</sup> This stems from my wish to examine the relationships between vision and fiction, between *imaginative* geographies and history and also to avoid some of the more deterministic reading practices that seek to *refute* Naipaul's vision through an appeal to "reality" and to an easily accessed historical context. I will treat the novel as a fiction whose origins are as much in Naipaul's general conception of the visual and the historical as in the specific analogies between Jimmy Ahmed and Michael X.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I

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5 V. S. Naipaul "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad" in *The Return of Eva Perón* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988, pp. 9 - 93

6 Bruce King in his *V.S. Naipaul* London: Macmillan, 1993, nevertheless makes interesting use of this approach. See Chapter 7 "*The Overcrowded Barracoon, 'Michael X' and Guerrillas*" pp. 98 - 115

do not wish to assume that the island of *Guerrillas* is the Trinidad of the 1970s because the novel seems to work through the textual dynamic of an “outsider’s” experience which places the novel in what Timothy F. Weiss describes as Naipaul’s “Fourth World”, an environment defined by a pan cultural, postcolonial condition of terror and cultural collapse.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult and unrewarding to sustain a reading of the novel as simply a representation of Trinidad by a Trinidadian. As I shall demonstrate in what follows, the novel is as much a representation of the cultural “Other” as any of Naipaul’s works on Africa or South America.

I have determined to offer a very different kind of analysis to the one I used for *Tutuola*, not because the politics of response around Naipaul are any less complex or revealing, but because there is none of the hesitation and sense of methodological crises around the criticism of Naipaul. The very opposite seems to be the case, Naipaul is almost definitively a critic’s writer. Criticism of almost any school or political persuasion finds ample material in Naipaul’s work. His works offer no apparent “problems” on a referential plain, one can seemingly “extract” the essential features of the “Naipaulian vision” from the subject text and then use this very solid body of conventional and consensual readings to engage in one’s own critical practice. Naipaul is, in many contexts, a definitive figure in debates around postcolonialism and his texts offer few of the specific hermeneutic dilemmas I found in *Tutuola*. There are, then, few “problems” in interpreting Naipaul the theorist of postcolonial mimicry who always makes good copy.

Naipaul’s literary works are often treated as rather straightforward denotive statements about the third world. This “said”, this referential aspect of Naipaul’s work is often refuted by

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<sup>7</sup> See Timothy F. Weiss *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* Amherst: University of Minnesota Press, 1992 and in particular Chapter 7 “The Fourth World” pp. 164 - 175

critics of Naipaul in an equally straightforward way. This comes in part from his dedication to travel writing and its conventions of documentary realism but it is also a unique and prevalent response to *all* his writing. All kinds of “psychologising” readings of Naipaul’s “alienated consciousness”, his neo-colonial dependency and his cliental relationship to his former colonial masters work to explain his misrepresentation of unmediated postcolonial “reality”. Derek Walcott comments simply “there is something alarmingly venal in all this dislocation and despair. Besides, it is not true.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, such criticism of Naipaul is not simply the disgruntled murmuring of Caliban before the mirror. The nature of Naipaul’s vision, his seemingly self-consistent mode of address is a textual construct that works through the creation of what Bakhtin calls a “monological unity”. It is something consistently and purposely constructed by Naipaul in the self-mythologising of his own creative persona, a persona created through a consistent privileging of a mode of seeing. It is tempting for any of the peoples marginalised by Naipaul (which includes the non-Metropolitan British) to treat this unity as a single position about the world and to reject it out of hand. I hope to generate a rather more involved critique through tracing the construction of Naipaul’s visual authority.

### The Traveller’s Eye: Naipaul and the Authority of Vision.

In *Finding the Centre*<sup>9</sup> Naipaul presents his most explicit exploration of “the Traveller’s I” that dominates both his fiction and his travel writing. In the text he reflects on his relationship, as traveller,

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<sup>8</sup> Wayne Booth in his Introduction to Derek Walcott’s *Selected Poems* London, Heinemann, 1988, p. ix.

<sup>9</sup> V. S. Naipaul *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* in particular the “Author’s Foreword” pp. 7 - 13, “Prologue to an Autobiography” pp. 13 - 73, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985

to the cultures he visits and comments: "I recognised my own instincts as a traveller, and was content to be myself, to be what I had always been, a looker."<sup>10</sup> Central to my argument is the complex construction of the authority of the gaze in Naipaul, the ways that Naipaul's satisfaction with the position of peripheral observer becomes a "scopic regime" that installs the looking I/eye into a position of authority over the spectacle of the postcolonial world. I have used the term "scopic regime" to denote both the authority of vision in Naipaul and, more specifically, to examine the economy or organisation of Naipaul's use of this visual authority. Naipaul's work shows the construction of a sensibility dominated by sight as a means of knowing and uncovering the postcolonial world. What Said acerbically calls "Naipaul, the phenomenon, the celebrated sensibility on tour"<sup>11</sup> is the construction of both a narrative persona and a rhetorical and epistemological trope of visual knowledge. In an interview with Ian Hamilton, Naipaul examines his preoccupation with the different "ways of seeing" across cultures:

Since I went to India [in the early 1960s] I've become interested in the way different cultures have different ways of seeing. Columbus, a medieval man, voyaging in a miraculous world, which causes him no surprise. Gandhi coming to England and leaving not a word of description, remembering only that when he arrived at Southampton, he was dressed in white.<sup>12</sup>

Naipaul comes to define his artistic project through a visually conceived paradigm of seeing/knowing; his travel writing and fiction constitute an attempt to bring his experiences under the scrutiny of what he calls "straight simple vision of the West".<sup>13</sup> It is the bid to

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<sup>10</sup> Naipaul *Finding the Centre* p. 11

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said "Bitter Dispatches from the Third World" quoted in Rob Nixon's *London Calling : V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.72

<sup>12</sup> V. S. Naipaul "Without a Place. Interview with Ian Hamilton" in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul* ed. R.D. Hamner, Washington: Three Continents Press, 1977 p. 45

<sup>13</sup> V. S. Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975

“make a pattern of one’s observation, one’s daily distress; one’s lack of representation in the world, one’s lack of status.”<sup>14</sup> The collation of knowing and seeing in Naipaul leads to a prevalent interplay between insight and blindness, between his ordering vision of the world and the inability of postcolonial peoples to “see” their own experience in a meaningful and clear-sighted way. In his journey through India, outlined in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul casts himself as a latter-day “seer” who has learnt to view what the dimmed perceptions of native Indians could not. “I had learned to see; I could not deny what I saw. They remained in that other world.”<sup>15</sup> It is the privilege he accords his outsider status that allows Naipaul to see what the insider cannot or will not acknowledge. What Naipaul calls the Indian “collective blindness”<sup>16</sup> becomes a necessary condition for the “sanity” of the Nation:

It is well that Indians are unable to look at their country directly, for the distress they would see would drive them mad.<sup>17</sup>

This interplay between his own clear-sightedness and the other’s inability to see is not, of course, limited to his experience of India. It is endemic to the various “half-formed” cultures that come under his gaze. In Argentina he finds “a collective refusal to see, to come to terms with the land: an artificial, fragmented colonial society, made deficient and bogus by its myths.”<sup>18</sup> The effects of postcolonial blindness are irrationality, disorder and national degeneration; “when men cannot observe, they don’t have ideas; they have obsessions.”<sup>19</sup>

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p. 74

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Rowe-Evans “V.S. Naipaul” (Interview) Quoted in Rob Nixon’s *London Calling*: p. 23

<sup>15</sup> Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* p. 213

<sup>16</sup> Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* p. 70

<sup>17</sup> Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* p. 201

<sup>18</sup> Naipaul *The Return of Eva Perón* p. 114

<sup>19</sup> Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* p. 70

Similarly in *Guerrillas* Meredith recounts the birth of his own “sight” from the general “blindness” of the island:

We're all born as blind as kittens in this place. All of us. We can see nothing, and we remain like that even when we are educated, even when we go abroad. It can take a long time to start seeing. And then you can see and see. You can go on seeing but you must stop. You can start seeing but you must stop.<sup>20</sup>

Naipaul's elevation of a visual paradigm for knowing serves to create an eminently portable narrative persona. Any problems of cultural deracination are overcome in the objective and objectifying scrutiny of Naipaul's eye. The cultural assumptions and associations that accompany the visual confer objectivity, rationality and veracity on Naipaul's “observations” of another culture. Naipaul wishes to create a persona that does not just interpret but “shows” the postcolonial world. Yet the qualities of this eye are not simply its rational and empiricist purview of disparate experiences - it is equally defined by a geometry of the margins. Naipaul's scrutiny is from the periphery of the culture towards its “centre”. Naipaul defines his work through his “outsider” status in his interaction with a culture, his position is always at the edges looking in. In his interview with Ian Hamilton, Naipaul claims the “privilege” of the position of the outsider forever looking in, “I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral.”<sup>21</sup>

The conception of Naipaul as the “speaking eye”<sup>22</sup> of the postcolonial world is one with some critical currency. What is stressed in accounts of Naipaul's “vision” is its dispassionate coldness and its

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<sup>20</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 144

<sup>21</sup> “Without a Place: V.S. Naipaul Interviewed by Ian Hamilton” in *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, p. 41

<sup>22</sup> Foucault writes, in a different context, of the “the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure Language: a speaking eye” as the zenith of the taxonomic gaze of the Classical period. M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic : An Archaeology of Medical Perception* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, London: Routledge, 1973, p. 114

willingness to examine the more unsavoury aspects of experience. William Walsh describes Naipaul's eye with a metaphor to birds of prey :

His is intent and focused as a bird, as unsympathetic as a hawk and as high above the object. Naipaul's cool gaze sweeps over the subcontinent from Bombay to Kashmire, its capacity for observing unaffected both by his troubled soul or by the deadening poverty on every side.

..an eye without prejudice as well as an eye unclouded by fear that he might be prejudiced, a timidity common among a number of English writers.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Eugene Goodheart valorises the “mandarin” sensibility that does not flinch from telling us the truth about postcolonial culture:

It doesn't matter whether the scene is the half-developed or 'mimic' societies of the Caribbean, of the abysmal material squalor of India or the cruel places in Africa where revolutions are being made or, for that matter, the advanced societies of the West. Naipaul encounters one and all with a cold-eyed contempt . . .<sup>24</sup>

Naipaul's “vision’ is often understood as a self-consistent and relatively homogeneous textual and philosophical relation to the cultures he represents. The examination of “vision” is both an aspect of the elevation of Naipaul's reputation as a “great writer” with a unique and singular literary practice and a reaction to the dominance of visual metaphors in his works. Naipaul's *vision* is aptly dominated by the *visual*. Naipaul is consistently lauded for the rhetorical and scopic stance he takes in regard to the cultural terrain he views. The authority of sight is more than a metaphor or an appeal to empirical observation over the vagaries of opinion, it is an identification with a mode of knowledge that has had a traditionally important role to play in both the history of Western epistemology and with European relations with other cultures. The elevation of sight above what Kant

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<sup>23</sup> William Walsh *V.S. Naipaul* Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973 pp. 72 - 73

<sup>24</sup> Eugene Goodheart, “V.S. Naipaul's Mandarin Sensibility” *Partisan Review* No. 50, (1983) pp.244 - 252



called “the rabble of the senses” is as old as the Western Philosophical tradition itself. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle inaugurated this hierarchy of the senses in relation to knowledge and rationality:

above all others [is] the sense of sight .. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.<sup>25</sup>

The “simple straight vision of the West” that Naipaul seeks to focus upon other cultures has, therefore, an ancient, complex and diverse genealogy. The history of the cultural authority of sight in Western societies is, of course, too massive a subject to be treated here. Martin Jay’s work *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*<sup>26</sup> is a prodigiously encyclopaedic work that examines the “ocularcentrism” of the European philosophical tradition and the recent challenge to the hegemony of sight in Continental philosophy. Jay outlines the foundational hierachisation of the senses through which sight and vision became the pre-eminent faculty for knowing the world:

The development of Western philosophy cannot be understood, it bears repeating, without attending to its habitual dependence on visual metaphors of one sort or another. From the shadows playing on the wall of Plato’s cave and Augustine’s praise of the divine light to Descartes’ ideas available to a ‘steadfast mental gaze’ and the Enlightenment’s faith in the data of our senses, the ocularcentric underpinnings of our philosophical tradition have been undeniably pervasive.<sup>27</sup>

Central to Jay’s examination of the “denigration” of the authority of vision is the discovery of the reifying and violent logic of the “simple vision of the West” in its relationship to its “Others”. This critique has

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<sup>25</sup> Aristotle *Metaphysics* Quoted in Anthony Synnott *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society* New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 132

<sup>26</sup> Martin Jay *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994

<sup>27</sup> Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* pp. 186 - 7

come from both the challenge of decolonisation and various analyses of the “phallic gaze” in feminist discourse.<sup>28</sup> The critique of the “ocularcentrism” of the Western tradition has interesting implications for some of the questions of Primitivism and the representation of the postcolonial as something *seen*, above all, a spectacle.

There is an interesting and significant link between the discourse of Primitivism, the dominance of visual knowledge and Freudian speculation on the origins of society. In Freud’s footnotes to *Civilisation and its Discontents*, he links the origins of civility (understood through the indices of beauty, cleanliness and order) to the adoption of an upright stance by early hominids.<sup>29</sup> The consequence of this breakthrough was the elevation of sight to the pre-eminent faculty for both knowing and *desiring* the world. As a corollary of this, the other senses (in particular touch and smell) were demoted and underwent an “organic repression”<sup>30</sup> in the newly visually dominated and dominating man. Man’s erect posture also, Freud speculates, put the genitals on display and inaugurated shame as a dominant relationship to one’s own body.

The elevation of sight is thus Freud’s founding myth for both the inception of civility and the repression of all that is “primitive” in man. The elevation of sight as the dominant sexual and cognitive sense is, clearly, less a history of early man than a description of the dominance of the visual in Freud’s own context, yet the problem of vision and the Primitive is a constant theme in Western thought about the nature of

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<sup>28</sup> See Martin Jay’s excellent Chapter on Contemporary French Feminism “‘Phallogocentrism’: Derrida and Irigaray” in *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 493 - 543.

<sup>29</sup> Freud’s suggestive footnote reads “the diminution of the olfactory stimuli seems itself to be a consequence of man’s raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait; this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him”. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition Volume 12, Civilisation Society and Religion* eds. Angela Richards and Albert Dixon, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, p. 289

<sup>30</sup> Freud *Civilisation and its Discontents* p. 289

other cultures. It is a theme which re-emerges in many different contexts. In Lévy-Bruhl's work, as much as in Senghor's version of Negritude, there is an exploration of the possibilities of *different* perceptual worlds prevailing amongst Non-Western cultures. Similarly there is a whole tradition of Modernist literary practice, beginning perhaps with Rimbaud, that has sought to "derange" the conventional hierarchies of sense to achieve creative states such as synesthesia.<sup>31</sup>

In Naipaul's context, I am interested in both the broader authority of his appeal to the gaze, the "appetite" of Naipaul's eye<sup>32</sup> and in a more specific "way of seeing" that Naipaul uses in his textual practice. Freud's is, nevertheless, an interesting myth to address to Naipaul's textual practice. Despite the Naipaulian elevation of sight, his eye is constantly drawn to the "shameful" in postcolonial experience. It is fixated upon visions of defilement and decay.

*Guerrillas* is, in many ways, typical of Naipaul's exploration of vision and the postcolonial world. Set in an unnamed and collapsing Caribbean socius, it is a novel of fragmentary kaleidoscopic images and perspectives, of violence, decay and disintegration. The novel combines moments of profound emotional and physical violence with a sense of everchanging/neverchanging time. Violence "erupts" in a spectacular world of circularity, repetition and boredom. The effect of his textual practice is a profound sense of self entrapment, circularity and metaphysical closure. This characteristically Naipaulian mood of frenzied boredom is achieved through a particular representation of the visual reality of his island, of how the island "looks".

This process of fractured representation is achieved in Naipaul through the creation of a particular scopic regime that serves to

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* is particularly useful in the examination of French literary modernism's explorations of the alternatives to a visually conceived literature, in particular, the work of Bataille and the Surrealists. pp. 211 - 263

<sup>32</sup> Lacan's phrase "the appetite of the eye" quoted in Jay's *Downcast Eyes*. p. 331

fragment and fracture the representation of both the postcolonial body and a broader postcolonial reality. I will aim to account for this microscopic dynamic and, in a broader sense, to delineate the more expansive nature of Naipaul's "vision" of postcolonial reality. I have termed this regime "dissective vision" though the characteristics are, in fact, far more complex. Naipaul's text operates under a scopic regime that is exotopic, dissective and anatomic. I borrow the term "exotopy" from Todorov who uses the expression to translate a Bakhtinian Russian neologism that is literally translated as "outsideness".<sup>33</sup> I use "exotopic" instead of "exoteric" because I wish to indicate that Naipaul's outsideness is always tied to *topos*, to place, and that his habitual position "outside place" (or exo-topic) is definitive of his way of seeing the world. Naipaul's exotopic perspective is far from being "exotic" (with its associations of sexual titillation and domesticated otherness) though exotic and exotopic share a semantic root. In my context I wish to examine Naipaul's exotopy as both a narrative and as a scopic strategy. Naipaul's persona, particularly in his journalism and travel writing, carefully exploits a kind of exotopic authority that comes from looking at a culture with the "disinterest" of an outsider. This persona is indivisible from representations of Naipaul's "eye" which hovers from the margins of a culture and finds the *esoteric* heart of what is surveyed. The logic of Naipaul's dissective vision recreates the Apollonian violence of observational rationality which is driven by the desire to overcome the meaningless surface of things and to uncover the "insides" of the object of vision. In *Guerrillas*, the exotopic nature of Naipaul's scopic regime is defined by the demarcation of landscape from marginal and peripheral perspectives, yet this marginality is combined with a violence that wishes to "pierce" into the heart of what is represented: Naipaul's scopic regime is

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<sup>33</sup> Tzvetan Todorov *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle* (trans. Wlad Godzich) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 99.

“dissective” in that it divides its object of sense (both literally and metaphorically) in parts by a cutting and splitting. Dissection is, of course, a mode of knowledge; the aim of dissective division is the display of the internal structures and properties of the object in the interests of understanding their hidden nature.

In a similar vein Naipaul’s methods are anatomic in that the logic of his divisive mode of seeing and knowing is the reduction of things to their smallest particles. It is concerned with establishing the smallest meaningful detail of the object under scrutiny. The cognitive paradigm of “dissective” vision is the anatomising and penetrating gaze of the anatomy room. In Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic* the anatomical gaze is analysed as a metaphor for the emergence of a kind of rationality that penetrates phenomena to uncover the logical configurations “beneath” the surface of objects; like the anatomist’s scalpel, the “culture of dissection” was a ubiquitous mode for uncovering the mechanistic structures of things. Foucault’s work is concerned with understanding the morbidity of a “knowledge [which] is not made for an understanding; [but] ..for cutting”<sup>34</sup> and forms part of a tradition that has excavated the instrumental rationality behind the Western gaze. Thus, in Heidegger, the catastrophe of technological modernity is tied in with the visual “conquest of the world as picture”<sup>35</sup> and with a dissective visual apparatus:

..there comes to the fore the impulse, already prepared in Greek thinking, of a looking-at that sunders and compartmentalises. A type of encroaching advance by successive interrelated steps toward that which is to be grasped by the eye makes itself normative in knowing.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> M. Foucault *The Birth of the Clinic* p. 13

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger “The Age of the World Picture” quoted in Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* p. 272. Also see Timothy Mitchell “The World as Exhibition” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* No. 31, Winter, 1989, which focuses on the transformation of the world, under Capitalism, into a vast spectacle.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Heidegger “Science and Reflection,” Quoted in Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* p. 270

Clearly, the broader questions of the Imperialism of the gaze cannot be fully explored in the context of my treatment of Naipaul. Nevertheless, I would like to touch upon these “macro-critical” issues in my very local analysis of Naipaul’s “way of seeing” (as manifested in the textuality of *Guerrillas* ). I would argue that Naipaul’s pervasive appeal to the visual is an attempt to exploit the broader epistemological status of “seeing” in order to mask the sense of the local and contingent nature of subjective perception. Naipaul appeals to the impersonal/inter-personal value attached to sight and to the objective operation of vision in *showing* what Aristotle called “the many differences between things”. It is Naipaul’s attempt to keep his metaphors, his immersion in the vagaries of language and consciousness, *out of sight*.

The scopic regime in Naipaul operates not only in the representation of perception (with all that this implies) but also on a stylistic and linguistic level and serves to create a textuality that is subtly subversive of “realist” tropes of perception in literature. Naipaul, so often described in terms of his patrician and traditional uses of the English literary tradition is, in *Guerrillas*, rather liberal with the familiar tropes of the visual in this culture.

*Guerrillas* is a novel that exploits an exotopic or peripheral use of perspective to traverse its fictional “terrain”. The island landscape is not “mapped” in a meaningful or systematic way but is rendered by the relationship of different “views” from the Ridge, from the “area of darkness” between the Ridge and the Grange, from Harry’s summer house, the studio’s window, from the windows of interminable taxi journeys across the island. Naipaul creates a particularly disturbing sense of space by creating a fictional geography surveyed from a limited and divergent number of “points of view”. The effect of this is to render invisible or meaningless the “hinterland” between these

subjective, peripheral and marginal perspectives. Location is, therefore, determined by relativity between points of view. The metaphor, of Naipaul as surveyor, is evoked by Wayne Booth:

There are writers, the Trinidadian novelist, V.S. Naipaul is one, whose books like a surveyor's measurements, constitute successive examinations from different angles of the same terrain. <sup>37</sup>

Likewise, in *Guerrillas*, the emphasis of the entire text is upon a visual paradigm for knowledge which is manifested through both the minute observation of phenomenon (the appearance of the landscape, the city, the individual) and, on a larger scale, through the emphasis upon the exotopic position or perspective of the mediating consciousness of the viewer. Naipaul's exotopic perspective does not allow an elevated and central view of the island that might organise its space into a meaningful geography. Perspectives on the island are always contingent, marginal and subjective. Perception is, therefore, embedded within a perspective. Thus we observe the folds on the neck of the taxi driver "through" Jane, the menstrual spots of Jane "via" Jimmy and Roche. There is no dominant viewer through which the island's geography is consistently mediated. The postcolonial world is, in a sense, denied an overview, it is constructed of "views". Even the authorial voice gives way in a regime of perception that gives, always, a mediated and incomplete experience.

Naipaul offers a perspective of the island that subverts the Foucauldian model of a central, panoptical, point of view that organises and disciplines the surrounding space. The exotopic geography of Naipaul's scopic regime gives us contingent and peripheral views of experience. This is a striking feature of a writer who so clearly conceives knowledge and cognition in visual terms. Naipaul does not

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<sup>37</sup> Derek Walcott *Selected Poems* (ed. and introduction Wayne Booth) London: Heinemann International, 1988, p. ix.

allow a central organising perspective (even his own) to establish his fictional terrain. Foucault famously defined modern societies as being societies of surveillance with “power” located in the imagined surface of an all-seeing eye, a power exercised through a centralised “panoptic machine”.<sup>38</sup> Naipaul does not deny the nexus of sight and power but shows a view of a culture that cannot be seen/known through this kind of apparatus, it is not viewed from the elevated centre of vision but glimpsed, piecemeal, from the margins. The city in *Guerrillas* like the whole island “no longer had a centre”.<sup>39</sup> The implication is that Island society is, in a sense, pre-modern and random in the structures of its authority, a fact reflected in the absence of the “governing heights” of a central perspective. This arrangement of multiple, marginal, perspectives is very different from the classical scopic regime of realist narrative fiction. As D.A. Miller argues in *The Novel and the Police*,<sup>40</sup> the eye of an author like Balzac corresponds to the Benthamite model of the Panoptical prison as analysed by Foucault. The “realist” novel often operates through the God’s eye perspective of a third person narration, centrally posted in a relationship of surveillance and interpretation over the novel’s fictional terrain.

The effects of this arrangement of marginal perspectives is more than a character-based device to create the illusion of individual fictional, seeing, feeling, beings. The island and that which occurs on it are located in the matrix of perceptions set up between Jane, Roche, Jimmy and others. As we are exposed to any new act of seeing on the part of a character, the half-formed “reality” of the island is further modified (without any cumulative effect upon our “picture” of the fictional environment) - similarly, England, London and the shadow of

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<sup>38</sup> M. Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan) London: Allen Lane, 1977, passim

<sup>39</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 31

<sup>40</sup> D.A. Miller *The Novel and the Police* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988



South Africa and South America, transform and inflect the experience of the island's imaginative geography.

While Naipaul does not use some of the overt stylistic devices of high modernism to create a shifting perspective (stream of consciousness techniques or a multiple framing) we are aware, almost subliminally, that the "eyes" of the narration change. Clearly, the eighth chapter depicts Roche's introspection (a privileged perspective in Naipaul's scheme of viewing in that it is through this, for example, that we are shown the genesis of his relationship to Jane); yet within chapters or brief passages, the point of vision recurrently changes and we move between the eyes of many characters. In the scene at the beach house, we observe Jane's position, posture and actions through or from Roche (a view fixed once more upon the vaginal and menstrual).<sup>41</sup> In contrast, we then see the blackened molar roots of Roche through the mediation of Jane's consciousness. The effect is almost surreal, the constant shifting of perspectives and the changing "eye" of the text creates a sense of abstraction and of distance, space is deranged and we move from the half perceived broader perspective towards the minute and the corporeal surfaces of the body.

The shifting perspectives of the journey is a fundamental and recurrent motif through which the island is perceived and represented. The endless car journeys from the Ridge to the Grange evolve into the chief "vehicle" of Naipaul's scopic regime and for his depiction of space:

The junked cars; the little houses. The factories set in ordered grounds behind fences and then the rubbish dump, the endless town..... the rusting corrugated iron....the electric wires, crooked walls, broken pavements, unswept gutters. ...a view of the bay flatland below, indistinguishable from swamp and sea. <sup>42</sup>

Once again:

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<sup>41</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p.122

<sup>42</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p.46

Past the junked cars in the sunken fields past the factories, past more country settlements, the suburbs, they approached the city, the rubbish dump smoking yellow grey, the smoke uncoiling slowly in the still afternoon, rising and spreading far..<sup>43</sup>

These passages may appear to be a kind of impressionism, a literary device aimed at creating the idea of totality by an accumulation of local detail, yet the details never amount to anything, they remain isolated, anomic and atomic impressions. These scenes are presented on an undifferentiated backdrop of an obscure and merging land, sea and sky.

The eye of the text not only looks for fragments of Island life, it actively fragments that experience with all the violence of anatomical vision. Dissective vision moves towards an entry into the core of the object, it breaches the surface to view within. It looks towards exposing the ontological heart of matter. The general is particularised again and again and then again. The forest that surrounds the Grange becomes individual trees, these trees become only “living, rotting hearts, bandaged” with bark.<sup>44</sup> The gaze, therefore, focuses inwards and pierces surfaces, it is a penetrating gaze that exposes the internal details of the object.

Naipaul uses a well-established epistemological mode of seeing/knowing to create representations that, like Okri, produce a kind of inversion of traditional aesthetic categories. Naipaul transgresses and uncovers the “essence” of his objects of representation. Naipaul’s dissective vision finds, at the heart of the objects he rends, not any principle of order or the workings of a system, but a vision of decay and corruption. On the island the scrutinising gaze finds, at the centre of things, not the Kantian *nuomena* but a putrefying core. Decay based on temporality is now

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<sup>43</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 74

<sup>44</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 18

located, in a parody of idealism, in the position of the essential and eternal attribute of the object. This condition pervades the island, it is everywhere one might choose to look, in the children's den which "looked whole but had begun to rot"<sup>45</sup> and in the bodies of the central characters which are defined by decay and through a view into their "insides" via the orifices of the body (in particular their gaping mouths) and the minutia of the surfaces of the skin. The dissective vision that exposes the rotting core beneath the surface, beyond the "first impression" is, therefore, marked off as clarifying and revelatory mode of perception, one which gives access to a "special" knowledge of the putrid heart of things.

Contributing to this incisive mode of seeing and knowing is the emphasis on the textural thinness on the surface of the object. Images of incompleteness proliferate, for example, Jimmy's carpet, to him a view of anglophile luxury and sophistication, is seen in detachment as something which "almost covered the floor", a floor which could be "easily imagined without it".<sup>46</sup> Life on the island is both inchoate and decrepit, half made and half undone. Dissective vision, therefore, locates the incomplete and subverts the external coherence of things by atomisation and isolation. It is a process, a fissuring and a flaying. It can hollow the substance from bricks and mortar:

So fragile this world.... It was easy to have a sense of the house as a hollow, flimsy structure in a small patch of yellow dirt.<sup>47</sup>

Naipaul creates a kind of harmony between the exotopic and dissective operations of his scopic regime and the compromised subjects that variously constitute the eyes of the text. All suit each other, all display a kind of "harmony", half-formed postcolonial

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<sup>45</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* pp. 58 - 9

<sup>46</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* pp. 24 and 235

<sup>47</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 103

subjects are displayed gazing at their fragmented world through the lens of an eye (Naipaul's) always ready and open to find the world in tatters. The text sets up a complex interplay between blindness and insight, between privileged moments in which the subject can overcome colonial myopia and see their world through Naipaul's eyes and their habitual inability to perceive the dangers of their situations.

The microscopic scrutiny of dissective vision, always obsessed with detail, (the means by which Roche observes the particles of dust adhere to his spittle) moves towards a disruptive operation upon its object yet, conversely, the object itself is not total, it is already a splinter. The text is, therefore, defined by a profound circularity, the ostensible absence of a non-mediated act of perception (or a view in which we are not aware of the compromised role of the viewer) makes it impossible to be clear as to the nature of the observed. One is asked to trust in the subjective world created by the eyes of characters we know to be haunted, tormented and untrustworthy. All characters, nevertheless, "see" the same things; they see a world in the process of unravelling. The novel is, therefore, profoundly repetitive, voyeuristic and foreclosed. Hence, an exact demarcation between the role of vision as dismemberment and the object as already dismembered is impossible for us to establish with any certainty. Note the following description of disorder outside the Albert Hotel:

The rails had not been replaced and there was no longer a true division between pavement and park. The pavement had puckered here and there from the spreading roots of great trees and patches of the park had been worn through.<sup>48</sup>

In the same vein are the recurrent images of the bush in a creeping war against the tarmac of the roadside. The crumbling edges of the roads do not merely suggest the general flavour of mild decay

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<sup>48</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 69

but provide a glimpse of a compromised and inexact line between states of being. Road and bush merge. We are so firmly planted in the subjectivity and partiality of the island's regimes of perception that we cannot find an anchor to stabilise our world of shifting and ruined fragments. Naipaul's characters become like hollowed out phantoms, they cannot be conceived outside the matrix of another character's perceptions. One wonders if they are still there when our backs are turned.

Naipaul has created a sense of perspective that exploits the epistemological authority of sight yet cuts the ground from beneath his viewing subjects. Perspectives certainly differ and power or privilege is given to one viewpoint over another (Roche's over Jane's for example) yet a point of fixity from without remains conspicuously absent. We may speculate that England, or the assumptions of Western culture, may provide this point of assurance but "even" the European characters who come to the island are either blinded or rendered unable to act upon their perceptions. England itself is only a refraction and a chimera within the text (there are "many Englands" of Jane, Roche, Jimmy and Meredith) which acts as a shifting, indeed, a "vanishing point" that confers reputation but never meaning. The text continually stresses its own self enclosure, the island is repeatedly distinguished as "another world" a "whole parallel society".<sup>49</sup> Naipaul's exploitation of the peripheral and exotopic perspective gives one no point of solidity or fixity through which one can "orient" oneself. Unlike the modes of imperialist vision embodied in the surveyor or the cartographer, none of the perspectives are points of view "triangulated" in meaningful relation to each other.<sup>50</sup> Place in Naipaul

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<sup>49</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* pp. 17 and 30

<sup>50</sup> Triangulation was the classic mode for surveying new territory. From two established points a third point could be charted by measuring the angles from these points to the third. Simple trigonometry would then give one the relative distance to the third point. This process could be then repeated, using this newly established point of reference, in an ongoing "triangulated" mapping of space.

is “atomic”, or rather, *autistic* in that it is not set up in a network of relations (either economic, historical, geographical or political) but exists, instead, in fragmented isolation.

The idea of the individual undergoes a similar rendering into casuist units, the source of Jane’s language and opinions are exposed to view, her linguistic borrowings ironically underlined and her body reduced to the traces of the menstrual cycle. Her words are always exposed as the echoes of others and her body is rendered into unrelated parts. In a world of colonial mimicry, dissective vision exposes the constituent parts of a character’s borrowings and mirrorings. We are placed in a world of shattered shards in which no one is permitted their image in the mirror. Roche though apparently more “complete” than Jane (an attribute of gender?) is, in the end, a character utterly trapped, utterly denied agency, “he could neither act nor withdraw, he could only wait”.<sup>51</sup> The potentiality for a central, “inner” individuality is denied, Jimmy’s “interior” monologues are transparent delusions of virility and power; they are reactions to the racism and guilt of the white world. They are defined by Jimmy’s fantasies which are themselves the refractions of other peoples perceptions and desires. His diary entries are, characteristically, an empty third person fantasy of how he appears to Jane, how he hopes he is seen. Similarly, Jane’s view of her partner Roche, her “glimpse of the man”,<sup>52</sup> is a vision of decay, of the corruption of the teeth and gums. Roche becomes a kind of grinning satyr as her eye peers into the recess of his mouth. Jane herself is seen to be merely a chaos of words and attitudes derived from others. Consciousness is “opened” and broken into its constituent parts. The constitution of the subject in

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This was the method of, for example, Everest’s survey of India and the Himalayas. The operation of triangulated knowledge is almost a conceptual paradigm for the process by which unknown space is brought into meaning. New space was brought, point by point, into a network of meaningful relations.

<sup>51</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 91

<sup>52</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 13

language becomes a kind of proto-Lacanian hall of mirrors in which the constituent social voices of the Metropolis speak themselves onto the empty canvas of a variety of “half-formed” postcolonials.

Naipaul’s metaphysical inversion, his location of temporality and putrefaction in the place of essence is complemented by a re-interpretation of the transcendental moment of Romanticism and a movement towards the aesthetics of the sublime. In the place of the idealist transcendence, there is a euphoria of corruption, a privileged observation of an absolute decay. The kind of miasmatic sublime we experience in Okri is replicated and transformed in Naipaul. Yet Okri’s use of the sublime enacts a shifting of the poles of beauty and terror, Naipaul’s use of the sublime is located in a more straightforward representation of colonial “horrors”. The epiphanic moment, so familiar in English Romanticism, in which the viewing subject experiences a sense of the forces beyond the apprehension of self is recontextualised and transformed in Naipaul’s scopic regime. Often experienced through an elevated exposure to landscape, to overviews of Alpine peaks, vast chasms, the turbulent sea, the sublime moment of Romanticism reconfirms the subject in an expanded relationship to place and to self. It is an aesthetic moment which is characterised by pain and fear and the disjunction between the faculties of apprehension and an overwhelming object of sense. Central to the Romantic sublime is the almost *ersatz* nature of this fear and pain and the return again to a selfhood re-animated but secure. If we take these lines from *Tintern Abbey* we can examine the features of the transcendental moment:

And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
 A motion and a spirit that impels  
 All thinking things and objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things<sup>53</sup> *Tintern Abbey* 95/103

We can observe, in Jane's journey, a profound inversion of this transcendental moment of consciousness and a dynamic awareness of corrupted sublime. Naipaul, literally, stands the Romantic epiphany on its head:

...She had driven through the city many times and long ago ceased to see it. Now in the excitement that amounted to stupor, the feeling of a dissolving world she found herself catching at details; the top galleries of old fashioned Spanish style buildings overhanging pavements where ragged beggars sat vacant.....In this sense of being transported out of herself, transported out of a stable world into something momentarily unstable lay the adventure a feeling, a sudden descent into the city itself, until then unknown unexplained taking them in detail by detail were like the things she was surrendering to ..... that vision of decay piling on decay, putrefaction on putrefaction. <sup>54</sup>

The experience is of one of the dissolving world whose fragments accrue into a sense of a broader "principle" of disorder and decay. The atomic detail is a detotalised glimpse of something larger, a whole "transcendent" world of dissolution and spiralling collapse. There is no comforting return to self. Naipaul's sublime is one paradoxically based upon minute rather than grand observation but one which is, nevertheless, tied to a real sense of horror and sensory collapse. The implication is that the moment in which the object is fragmented leads inevitably to a universal unravelling and that only the particle is available for scrutiny, that the whole dissolving universe is incomprehensible in anything but the fragment. The fragment, therefore, presents itself as a necessary exclusion of the unrepresentable totality. Naipaul's vision of the postcolonial links the world in a vision of societies which are almost ontologically unstable.

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<sup>53</sup> William Wordsworth "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" lines 95 - 103, from William Wordsworth *William Wordsworth The Oxford Authors*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 131 - 135, p. 134

<sup>54</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* pp. 75 - 6



They are defined by a kind of inner putrefaction that inheres in all their objects of sense, within the individual and lurking in the landscape. The corporeal body of Naipaul's characters and the various "bodies" and objects of sense in his writing are linked in corrupt and compromised vision of decay.

Naipaul has shown a remarkable alacrity for inverting the central moments of metaphysical modes of thought; he inverts the metaphysic of idealism, he inverts the transcendental moment of Romanticism. Similarly, with his dealings with city and the panorama of the landscape, he inverts some of the conventions we find in the "gothic" novel<sup>55</sup> and in the conventions of pastoral representation.

In the classical texts of the gothic tradition, the "unknown", the chthonic and chaotic reside within a compartmental and hidden space; it is associated with the interiority of the house, the castle in *Northanger Abbey*, the vaults of Lewis' *The Monk*, or the attic in *Jane Eyre*. It is bounded and excluded into a *secret* recess. The paradigm of this conception of the unknown is a kind of Pandora's box containing the unnamed ills of the text. The textual dynamic of gothic narrative is the ever-deferred exposure or revelation of this hidden space and it is the movement towards the moment of discovery of this turbulent secret that drives the narrative. In *Guerrillas* this "power of horror" is no less important in understanding the narrative structures of the text. However, the source of fear is relocated as the pervasive element in which the characters are adrift. Hence the "plot" combines Naipaul's static representation of an ever-changing/never-changing postcolonial world with a dynamic that seeks to evoke, finally, the "heart of darkness".<sup>56</sup> In Naipaul, the source of such nightmarish potentialities

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<sup>55</sup> Timothy Weiss describes Naipaul's later fiction as a kind of "afro-gothic" in his *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* Amherst: The University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 19, yet he fails to fully explore the oxymoronic nature of his neologism.

<sup>56</sup> Derek Walcott's poem "Ruins of a Great House" in *Selected Poems*, ed. Wayne Booth, London: Heinemann, 1988, similarly experiments with a transformation

lies *without* and surrounds the home and the Ridge within the creeping miasmic logic of the bush and the tom-tom cadence of the reggae of the slums. Landscape becomes the secret source of fear; a darkening power that is not “hidden” in the unlit corners of the text but provides the novel’s very environment. Naipaul’s use of the bush (to be discussed in more detail below) works a kind of inversion and reversal of both the pastoral and the gothic. It is an essentially Primitivist understanding of landscape in which place becomes the setting of the dark habits of the unknown other. The exterior is a constant source of fear and its formlessness, its subliminal, near spectral, presence give the city and the bush the attributes of horrors which are “enclosed” in the European gothic.

The chaos and void found to be resident in the interior of the object are also anterior in the environment of an island which is all consuming and rapacious. Bush and city become massive irrational forces, the flux that dissective vision finds at the heart of the object is also found in the broader environment of the novel. The island’s negativity, its “disorder” is portrayed as fearfully self-replicating. On the Ridge:

The gardens were too big, they would contract. The disorder of the city and the factory suburbs would spread up through roads and woodland, and eventually overwhelm. This place had produced no great men and its possibilities were now exhausted. <sup>57</sup>

Moreover, this disorder is indiscriminate. Roche “realised” that his emotional weakness would lead to violence in the city “to go outside into that city in that mood was to invite physical attack.”<sup>58</sup> It

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of the gothic and the representation of the Great House. Walcott also takes the horrors of colonial history out of the domestic space of the gothic tradition and “hides” it in the landscape of the house’s ruined gardens. Walcott’s “slave in the manorial lake” is a horror that is tied to the history of colonial violence and not, as in Naipaul, to the instability of the Postcolonial world.

<sup>57</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 168

<sup>58</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 115

becomes a mirror of the disorders of the psyche, a canvas that both receives projected phantasms and reciprocates with violence and disorder.<sup>59</sup>

The city moves out of any framework of “civility” and civic orders of space and becomes another kind of bush. The city, the fragmented unrepresentable miasma of noise and fear comes, ironically, to function as a single hostile unit, its very disunity leads to a kind of organic anti-wholeness. It is towards the “unity” of this presence of bush and slum that everyone on the island is seen to react. If there are any non-relative criteria within the novel it is the common hysterical reaction to the experience of the island.

Dissective vision and the aesthetic modes that accompany it outline a complex and diverse transformation of both vision and representation of landscape and the body. Fortunately, *Guerrillas* focuses all these ambivalent and contradictory aspects of dissective vision on one character. Central to the logic of dissective vision in *Guerrillas* is the fate of Jane. The history of Jane’s experience of the island is the metaphorical heart of Naipaul’s dissective vision. Jane is the chief object of the intrusive gaze of the novel’s scopic regime. If the feminised landscapes of excess provide the environment of the novel, it is upon the character of Jane that all the violent potentialities of the novel are finally enacted. Jane is first viewed by Roche as a mouth, then as the “period spots” around the edges of her lips and then as teeth and gums.<sup>60</sup> The mouth becomes a kind of gash in her flesh and our eyes are focused in upon the increasingly unconvincing physical details that are to “represent” her being. The representation of Jane is, then, the “focal” point of the novel’s regime of dissective vision. The eye of the text is always struggling to peep into the “healed wound” of her mouth, a mouth that is always directly linked to her

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<sup>59</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 115

<sup>60</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 122

vagina and to menstruation. Jimmy observes her vagina as “the cleft (that) was like a dumb stupid mouth”<sup>61</sup> and her face is, again and again, reduced to an index of her menstruation. Like the landscape of the island, her body is “traversed” but never represented in totality. Her body is seen as meaningless both to herself and to others. Roche watches her gracelessly insert a tampon and sees, in this gesture, a sign of her alienation from herself:

It was as though she didn't belong to her body, as though there were some spirit within her that was at odds with the body which she cherished and whose needs she sought to satisfy.<sup>62</sup>

To others her flesh is equally meaningless. In her spasmodic sexual encounter with Jimmy Ahmed he “feels” her only as “flesh below him”<sup>63</sup> and is excited by only the thought of viewing himself in the act of sexual conquest. It is upon this mute and uncomplaining flesh that the violent atomisation and dissection of the novel is enacted and made concrete.

Jane moves from being a friend and a lover to being a bodily part, a fragment of that part, and so on until she is finally “undone” by the hands of Ahmed and Bryant. Similarly, she is caught and fragmented in Jimmy’s view of the minutiae of the stubble upon her legs and the lines of sweat in her shaved armpits. Division is placed within the division, Jane is observed in fragmented form, the fragment then divided again. Jane’s physical presence is constantly rendered in vocabularies of excretion, waste and sanitation. Her attempts to “control” her own body in cosmetic rituals again collate her with the bush and with the futility of resisting change :

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61 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 78

62 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 127

63 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 90

With what care she had rendered that leg hairless. The skin looked abraded, but already there were the beginnings of new hairs. <sup>64</sup>

Naipaul's scopic regime is entirely inconsistent with the notion of a sustaining and unified selfhood. It objectifies the body into flesh or "rotten meat" <sup>65</sup> yet, simultaneously, it works upon a dynamic which spirals the view, ever downwards, towards the minuscule surfaces of the body (the pores on the face of the policemen, Roche's spittle, Jane's menstrual spots, the minute cracks on the skin). The view from the Ridge is said to be like that of a microscope, the city and the bush like specimens of vegetative reproduction on a slide, so the body is magnified and viewed in an extreme "close up" that exposes every "flaw". Naipaul creates a schema which piles reduction upon reduction, division upon division. Sublimity adheres in this process, the sublimity of the microscopic. It is the movement to the microscopic, towards the smallest, meaningless, detail of the postcolonial world that is the deep grammar of Naipaul's scopic regime. Joseph Addison, another good empiricist, wrote in *The Spectator* of the sublimity of the "very great or very little":

.....When the imagination works downwards and considers the bulk of a human body in respect of an animal a hundred times less than a mite.... But if, after all this, we take the least particle of these animal spirits, and consider its capacity of being wrought into a world, that shall contain within those narrow dimensions a heaven and earth..... in the same analogy and proportion they bear to each other in our own universe....Nay, we might yet carry it further, and discover in the smallest particle of this little world, a new inexhausted fund of matter, capable of being spun out into another universe. <sup>66</sup>

Unquestionably, there is something of the same process at work in *Guerrillas*, yet Naipaul achieves a remarkable difference in effect.

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<sup>64</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 80

<sup>65</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 111

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Addison *The Spectator* No. 420, eds. Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell Junior, Marshall Waingrow *Eighteenth Century English Literature* London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969, pp. 349 - 351, p. 350

Naipaul replaces the wonder of Addison's enlightenment enthusiasms with the horror and disgust of the exotopic and appalled observer who finds corruption in the smallest detail. The contemplation of a receding view of division upon division of smaller and smaller fragments is, in Naipaul, transformed by the fact that a repugnance of physical presence is placed at the determining instance of this chain of thought. It is with horror that we contemplate a dissective vision receding and spiralling into the ever smaller fragment of totality. The aim of this dissective schema is, therefore, to effect an idea of decay or abhorrence that overwhelms our capacity for apprehension. The atomising logic of Naipaul's scopic regime, his eye for the waste products of a culture, is one that threatens to dissolve the particular in an a-representational void.

The aggression of Naipaul's empiricism comes to its fitting conclusion upon the body of Jane and in the explosion of the city into riot. The tenor of the novel moves into the quasi-apocalyptic as the suppurating corruption at the heart of the text finally erupts into explicit acts of violence. The violence subsisting in perception and the corruption perceived as both transcendent and essential is transformed into explicit acts of violence and dissection. The city, like a putrescent corpse, "explodes"; and the violence inherent in the scopic regime of the novel is made explicit in the representation of physical cruelty and murder. The world of Jane, Roche and Jimmy, collapses into rape, mutilation and destruction. The violence of Naipaul's scheme of perception moves from material objects to the feminine body as the ultimate trajectory of dissective vision is realised in the flesh.

During their second "sexual" encounter, Jane is finally reduced to an effect of sense upon the body of Ahmed. Jimmy feels her as flesh beneath him, perceives her death throes as only "his own strength". She is "offered" to Bryant as a piece of white flesh whose "meaning" is

established by the act of exchange. His intrusion into the flesh of her body is the ultimate logic of the violence of dissective vision which, not content with the exotopic world of surfaces, must cut into its "object". The relationship between Jimmy's intrusion and Jane's already "violated" status, mirrors the circularity of object and sense, the fragmented object and the fragmenting perception that defines the scopic regime of the entire novel. Jane is already always violated, her personality as easily intruded and destroyed as her flesh. The eye becomes the knife and the knife the eye, both caught in an intrusive piercing of the skin.

Just as in the incision of vision, the catching of detail leads to or defines itself against a massive principle of undifferentiation (the unknown that is the island), so in the murder:

Sharp steel met flesh, skin parted, flesh showed below the skin, for an instant mottled white, and then all was blinding disfiguring blood and Bryant could only cut at what had already been cut. <sup>67</sup>

The first cut, therefore, moves towards and contains the moment when its own dissective logic is overcome in cuts that can only act upon other cuts. Just as the atomising of experience contains within it the spiralling sublime that destroys the stability of the atomic, the dissective cut, (in theory a paring and a splitting into "meaningful" segments) leads, instead, to a submergence of the understanding. The anatomical and forensic leads to the bloody and undifferentiated. The canvas of racialised meanings that Jane's skin has represented for Bryant and for Jimmy Ahmed is flayed into a bloody mass of non-meanings and the silence of raw flesh. Inherent in this first cut is the fall into this disorder. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul tells of an illuminating dream of incision and sublimity:

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<sup>67</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 243

An oblong of stiff new cloth lay before me, and I had the knowledge that if only out of this I could cut a smaller oblong of specific measurements, a specific section of this cloth, then the cloth would begin to unravel of itself and the unravelling would spread from the cloth to the table to the house to all matter *until the whole trick was undone*.<sup>68</sup>

Dissection, aimed at extracting the small manageable fragment of experience, leads to an unravelling of the very “fabric” of the universe, the contemplation of a massive negative disorder. Thus, the effect upon Jimmy, the murderer by proxy, is of submergence in an existential chasm.

He entered a void, he disappeared in that void....He was lost, lost since the beginning of time. But time had no beginning. And he was disembodied.... He was lost in time itself and didn't know who or what he was, he was betrayed.<sup>69</sup>

Jimmy becomes trapped in an atemporal void that reflects the atrophy of the bush, in a timelessness that cannot be escaped and a sense of space that overwhelms the subject.

### Three Bushmen-Naipaul, Céline, Tutuola:

The scheme of Naipaul's perception generates, through an intrusive piercing of the surface of “things”, through entering and exploring the recessive and excessive centre of objects, a violent aesthetic of the sublime. Yet this regime and the aesthetics of the incommensurable that accompany it cannot be understood without consideration of Naipaul's sense of landscape (his broader perspective on postcolonial place and space). It is in Naipaul's consistent evocation of the metaphysics of the bush that his debt to Primitivist discourse

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<sup>68</sup> Naipaul *An Area of Darkness* p. 266

<sup>69</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* pp. 243 - 244



and to Conrad, the literary father who had always “been everywhere” before him,<sup>70</sup> is most clearly visible.

The Bakhtinian theory of the chronotope is an ideal vehicle for the exploration of the Primitivist conception of landscape and the bush because it permits a highly nuanced understanding of the relationships between space, narration, and history. As I will demonstrate, there are recognisable and recurrent characteristics in common between a variety of Primitivist depictions of “the bush” that suggest a literary, ideological and representational trope for describing colonial and postcolonial landscapes (usually tropical). The chronotope of the bush in Primitivism is centrally concerned with issues of temporality and with history, with a mode of representing landscape that is as much a conception of historical possibilities as it is of geographical and botanical features. The chronotope of the bush is a discursive locale that exerts its own narrative possibilities, it defines the kind of events that are possible in that space and is saturated with vocabularies of an ethical and metaphysical nature. I have chosen to briefly compare Naipaul’s use of the chronotope of the bush with examples from Louis Ferdinand Céline, partly because Céline’s pestilent nihilism offers an almost visceral experience of the Primitivist chronotope of the bush, partly because of the relative distance between Naipaul’s and Céline’s traditions (demonstrating the perverse currency of the chronotope) but chiefly because Céline seems to offer an example of what a Naipaulian textuality might look like if denied the solace of good form. In the lengthy West African section of *Journey to the End of the Night*<sup>71</sup> Céline takes his all encompassing misanthropy on its travels. The text provides us with some of the most suppurating and extreme examples of the corrosive conception of the bush that can be found in Western

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<sup>70</sup> Naipaul “Conrad’s Darkness” in *The Return of Eva Perón, with The Killings in Trinidad*, p. 208

<sup>71</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* (trans. Ralph Manheim) New York: New Directions Publishing, 1983

Literature. In a tone which characteristically hovers between satire and hysteria, Céline presents the apotheosis of all the most moribund myths of the dark continent: <sup>72</sup>

We were heading for Africa, the real, grandiose Africa of impenetrable forests, fetid swamps, inviolate wildernesses, where black tyrants wallowed in sloth and cruelty on the banks of never-ending rivers. <sup>73</sup>

If Céline's work represents the *ne plus ultra* of the Primitivist chronotope of the tropical landscape then Tutuola offers one a very different representation of the bush, one which is inscribed with a contrary set of spatial, historical and narrative possibilities. Tutuola offers an example of a radically different chronotope of the bush and establishes an alternative tradition that is fundamental in understanding the evolution of postcolonial representations of landscape. I will briefly refer to this contrasting literary world in order to "see" the contours of the Primitivist Bush more clearly.

What I am suggesting is that a novel like *Guerrillas* "works" through the representation of a fictional environment that is embedded in a well established Primitivist conception of tropical landscape. This chronotope can be found in various and divergent forms throughout the literary representation of the "bush" from Conrad to Okri to Bissoondath. It is through the consistencies of Naipaul's representation of landscape (and the narrative possibilities that accompany it) that the "Fourth World" of Naipaul's postcolonial reality is created.<sup>74</sup> The bush is a consistent chronotope in Naipaul's fiction

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<sup>72</sup> My analysis of "Primitivism" focuses, perhaps deceptively, on exclusively African sources. Clearly Primitivism was an important discourse in Western conceptions of many different cultures including those of the Americas and Polynesia. I have chosen to limit my examination to purely African examples because of the need to focus on quite closely related motifs of space and narration.

<sup>73</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 95

<sup>74</sup> The term "Fourth World" derives from Timothy Weiss' *On the Margins* pp. 165 - 193. Weiss' conception of Naipaul's "personal, mythic, literary landscape" (p. 168) only gestures towards the origins of this representation in Colonial

and non-fiction, linking the postcolonial world in what Céline calls “a meridian apoplexy”.<sup>75</sup> The famous anecdote of the young Naipaul, sweltering in an English bedsit, dreaming a nightmare vision of Trinidad, is more than an amusing parable of the deracinated exile. It points to the conflation of the tropical with an engulfing sense of the terrors of self annihilation.<sup>76</sup> Naipaul’s eye surveys an ideologically constituted terrain that is international and Pan-cultural, the bush exists as a fictional and ideological motif that links certain non-Western cultures in narratives of entrapment and corruption. It is a kind of ethical geography.

The “topos” of the chronotope of the bush, the space of the bush has readily recognisable characteristics. Firstly, a rampant, overwhelming, energy drives vegetative growth. The tropical chronotope transforms the abundance of the natural world into a never-ending and annihilating surge of destructive reproduction. The accelerated growth of the bush is always a threat in Naipaul’s landscapes. Man’s attempts to control the awful fecundity of nature are seen as inherently futile. In *Guerrillas* bamboo erupts from the plants burnt roots in an awful negation of humanity’s efforts to control and contain the bush, “One clump had ignited, but green shoots were already sprouting from its blackened, ashy heart.”<sup>77</sup> and in *A Bend in the River* the “quick-growing, quick-dying tropical vines”<sup>78</sup> constantly threaten to engulf the grandiose developments of the Domain, to return town to bush. In the Primitivist chronotope of the bush, nature is invested with a rapacious and indiscriminate will to reclaim the vain efforts of cultivation and containment. The “garish raw greenery”<sup>79</sup> of

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discourse. In contrast, I would wish to emphasise the “ready made” nature of the chronotope of the bush in a variety of literary contexts.

75 Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 148

76 Naipaul “Prologue to an Autobiography” in *Finding the Centre* pp. 13 - 73

77 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 21

78 Naipaul *A Bend in the River* p. 10

79 Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 109

countless insensate tendrils are invested with a kind of blind aggression. The bush becomes a kind of proper noun denoting a single darkening force. The flora of the tropics is infused with an almost Schopenhaurian will to conquest. The bush takes on, therefore, an *organic* unity, a paradoxical homogeneity built upon the very multiplicity and violence of its vegetative growth. The bush serves to homogenise space and moves towards returning town or country to inviolate wilderness. In Naipaul the logic of the bush also drives those other postcolonial wildernesses, the slums and shanty towns that are equally excessive and threatening. In one of his essays on Zaire, Naipaul writes of the “immemorial ways of the bush” which, even in the cities, are still dominant. At night the city and the slum is overtaken by “a more enduring kind of bush life”<sup>80</sup> and in *Guerrillas* the slum and the bush merge in a seamless and miasmatic landscape of disintegration.

The undifferentiated bush of *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* constantly spans the contradictions of fecundity of decay, growth and waste, expanse and enclosure, change and stasis. In Céline’s West Africa the military pointlessly build roads into the bush to be immediately consumed “under a dense growth of vegetation”,<sup>81</sup> the processes of growth and decay become indistinguishable as “rot sets in quickly in the green mansions”<sup>82</sup> of the tropics. This emphasis on the galloping, hand-in-hand, progression of growth and putrefaction can be found in many representations of tropical excess, not least in Conrad, and is central to the kind of perverse and miasmatic aesthetic found in both Céline and in Naipaul. It is more than a description of the objective reality of tropical fauna, it is a conception of primitive space that is inlaid with a kind of apocalyptic and horrific spirituality, with a

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<sup>80</sup> Naipaul “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” *The Return of Eva Perón*, pp. 165-196, p.193

<sup>81</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 115

<sup>82</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 98

sense of “an unstable dissolving world and the half knowledge of a catastrophe.”<sup>83</sup>

The Primitivist bush is a landscape bound by a logic of expenditure and excess. This is most often realised by metaphors of menstruation and discharge. Menstruation, inscribed as a reproductive femininity that has moved into an economy of waste, becomes a kind of index of the unruly energies of the landscape of the tropics. It is defined by corruption, decay, disease and an atavistic sense of taboo. In Céline the bush is a fetid and excessive force that is both “corrupt” in itself and an agent in drawing the rancid humours from the European subject. The white women of Céline’s Africa exist “menstruating interminably and languishing for days on end in deep reclining chairs on their verandas”.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, in *Guerrillas*, Jane’s menstrual cycle becomes an index of her compromised personality and serves to link her to the fate of the excessive and corrosive landscape of the Island. Discharging and emasculating femininity become central to the gendered poles of Primitivist landscape. Adrienne Rich describes, in a different context, the deeply embedded cultural conception of femininity that engenders the Primitivist chronotope of the bush:

the female body (as) impure, corrupt and site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contaminations, the ‘devil’s gateway’.<sup>85</sup>

Both European men and women are transformed by the forces of heat and humidity, climate and landscape which act to amplify the hidden natures of the European. On the *Admiral Brugueton* the steamer that

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<sup>83</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 178

<sup>84</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p.122

<sup>85</sup> In Anthony Synnott *The Body Social: Symbolism Self and Society* p. 36

takes Céline's characters into the tropics, a bestiary of homicidal colonialists are revealed in their true colours:

From that moment on we saw, rising to the surface, the terrifying nature of white men, exasperated, freed from constraint, absolutely unbuttoned, their true nature, same as in the war. That tropical steam bath called forth instincts as August breeds toads and snakes on the fissured walls of prisons. In the European cold, under grey, puritanical northern skies, we seldom get to see our brothers' festering cruelty except in times of carnage, but when roused by the foul fevers of the tropics, their rottenness rises to the surface. That's when the frantic unbuttoning sets in, when filth triumphs and covers us entirely. It's a biological confession. Once work and cold weather cease to constrain us, once they relax their grip, the white man shows you the same spectacle as a beautiful beach when the tide goes out: the truth, fetid pools, crabs, carrion and turds.<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, the bush in Naipaul serves to amplify and expose the secret corruptions at the heart of people and things. In *Guerrillas*, the island serves to denude both Roche and Jane of the stable identities they had constructed elsewhere, "And so what London had masked the Ridge had layer by layer exposed".<sup>87</sup> The "biological confession" of Naipaul's characters is constructed by the scopic violence of dissective vision and the harsh apperceptive environment of the Primitivist bush.

In Primitivist representations of the bush, this apperceptive background is defined by a fierce and unrelenting light which serves to create a hyper-real environment of primary colours and disintegrating, merging, forms. Céline is characteristically vivid in his description of the hysteria of primitivist perception:

It is hard to get a faithful look at people and things in the tropics because of the colours that emanate from them. In the tropics colours and things are in a turmoil. To the eye, a small sardine can lying upon the road at midday can take on the dimensions of an accident. You've got to watch out. It's not just the people who are hysterical down there, objects are the same way.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 95

<sup>87</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 100

<sup>88</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 108

The dissective eye of Naipaul's vision is located in a related conception of the atomising and fracturing world of meridian light. Céline is again most useful in delineating the features of the disintegrating world of Primitivist space:

Men, days, things - they passed before you knew it in this hot-bed of vegetation, heat, humidity, and mosquitoes. Everything passed, disgustingly, in little pieces, in phrases, particles of flesh and bone, in regrets and corpuscles; demolished by the sun, they melted away in a torrent of light and colours, and taste and time went with them everything went. Nothing remained but shimmering dread. <sup>89</sup>

In the chronotope of the bush, light takes on a force that is both the amplification and the inverse of the metaphysical and rational light of the Western tradition. It is light that does not illuminate, or rather, it illuminates far too much and renders objects hysterical and meaningless. The *overexposure* of Primitivist light sears and negates the representative power of referential language. Light becomes as annihilating and obscure as darkness. The bush, undifferentiated and rapacious is, therefore, the adverse of the organised and productive spaces of the pastoral; equally, it does not afford the "pleasures" of the traditional landscape of the sublime; the bush is a kind of *terra nullius* <sup>90</sup> that negates and inverts established orders of European space.

The bush is understood through a particular abysmal geometry and geography of *depth*. Distance in the Primitivist bush is conceived in terms of chthonic declination, bush is never "far bush" but always "deep bush". This geography of depth serves to accentuate the a-representational and non topographic "topos" of the bush.

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<sup>89</sup> Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* p. 126

<sup>90</sup> V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* examines the origins of colonial space in the concept of *terra nullius* (nobody's land) which was enshrined in a number of Fifteenth Century Papal Decrees that legitimised early European colonialism ( see his Third Chapter "The Power of Speech" pp. 44 - 97). What is interesting is the originary "voiding" of space at the outset of Europe's relationship with colonised cultures.

The hysteria of place visible in Céline and Naipaul's evocation of Primitive space is only half of the characteristics of the chronotope of the bush. Central to the effect of the chronotope as an organising centre for narrative is that "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole".<sup>91</sup> The spatial characteristics of the Primitivist bush are, therefore, indivisible from the temporal and historical aspects of the chronotope. The bush is a space where a certain form of temporality is realised, where "time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible".<sup>92</sup>

The bush presents a paradoxical temporality that replicates the topological extremities of the chronotope. Naipaul represents "bush time" as an amalgam of movement and stasis, change and changelessness, imminence and belatedness, flux and atrophy. The very rapidity of change in the bush (again defined through vegetation) seems to both compress and to stretch time. The recently abandoned housing of *A Bend in the River* quickly become "ancient" ruins:

Sun and rain and bush had made the site look old, like the site of a dead civilization.. You were in a place where the future had come and gone. <sup>93</sup>

The African bush, typified by the motto "Semper aliquid Novi" ("Always something new")<sup>94</sup> is also the "Old Africa which seemed to absorb everything".<sup>95</sup> Change and stasis merge and become indivisible. Naipaul's bush is a place that never changes because it is always already changing. In *A Bend in the River* Indar's answer to the horror of African flux is to "trample on the past",<sup>96</sup> to flatten the bush into a path that can lead to the future; yet this ability is vitiated by the

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<sup>91</sup> Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* p. 84

<sup>92</sup> Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* p. 84

<sup>93</sup> Naipaul *A Bend in the River* p. 32

<sup>94</sup> Naipaul *A Bend in the River* p. 41

<sup>95</sup> Naipaul *A Bend in the River* p.108

<sup>96</sup> Naipaul *A Bend in the River* p. 120



rampancy of a vegetative change as “the bush grows fast over what were once great events or great disturbances”.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, in *Finding the Centre*, Naipaul evokes his usual exotopic authority when writing of the Ivory Coast “to the man from outside, whatever his political or religious faith, Africa can often seem to be in a state of becoming. It is always on the point of being made something else. So it arouses hope, ambition, frustration, irritation.”<sup>98</sup>

The Primitivist chronotope of the bush establishes a kind of timelessness, an historical “void”<sup>99</sup> that denies the possibility of sequential or eventful time. Instead the chronotope is defined by the timelessness of river and jungle and the “immemorial ways of the bush”. The chronotope, as used in Céline and in Naipaul, defines and curtails certain narrative possibilities. The enclosed and abysmal spaces of the bush, the undifferentiated world of meridian apoplexy is a locale that cannot exhibit the sequential or causative operations of conventional “plot”. Events within the space of the bush are defined by an ineluctable repetition of decay and re-growth, the bush cannot be plotted into any linear or progressive conception of time. The Primitivist bush tends to dissolve time and is inscribed within dreamlike states of delirium and nightmare, with circular events (as evidenced in *Guerrillas*) and with compressed and visionary depictions of physical and spiritual decay. Primitive bush is inimical to certain forms of writing, a *billdungsroman*, a romance, a *historical* novel of any kind, is inconceivable within the chronotope as are other forms of plot that demand change, progression and meaningful development. The episodic world of the picaresque is excluded from

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<sup>97</sup> Naipaul “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” p. 183

<sup>98</sup> Naipaul “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” in *Finding the Centre*, pp. 73 - 160, p.77

<sup>99</sup> In “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” Naipaul writes “To arrive at this sense of a country trapped and static, eternally vulnerable, is to begin to have something of the African sense of the void.” p. 196

the bush as are a world of narrative possibilities that demand a less homogeneous temporal and spatial locale. In *Journey to the End of the Night* as in *Heart of Darkness*, the bush is an abscess in space and in time, a chronotope that threatens to consume the narrative possibilities of the Western subject. It is this abscess in time and space that defines both the narrative possibilities of Primitivist space and the broader modalities of the aesthetics of the bush.

What Tutuola teaches us is something of the vast world of narrative possibilities that this self-same space can offer in a chronotope of the bush stripped of the hysteria and neurosis of Primitivism. Tutuola's novels are, above all, novels of the bush. Writing in the "same space" Tutuola creates a textuality that is vastly different from the world of Céline, Naipaul and Conrad. Tutuola's bush is not without its horrors but it is, above all else, a plural space of infinite spatial extension (in contrast to the enclosure of the Primitive bush) and any number of temporal possibilities. Time and space in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* or indeed in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* functions in a variety of ways. A chronological time (of passing hours and days) co-exists with a changing mythic time of the changing seasons and the dialogue between the time of the living and the dead, a "realistic" space of the peripatetic hero walking to and from his adventures is co-existent with the strange spaces of a tree that contains a hidden kingdom or a hunting bag that contains teeming improbable multitudes of prey.

Tutuola's bush is a massive and variegated cloth that can be cut to suit the narrative demands of a particular episode. It offers an expansive range of possibilities, it has an almost *abstract* sense of space that allows the "chance time" of his adventurers encounters to

unfold.<sup>100</sup> Clearly, the Tutuolan conception of the bush is founded on entirely different principles than those of Primitivist bush. Tutuola's texts are defined by a surfeit of narrative events, of changes and prodigious transformations. Tutuola breaks the cycle of eternal recurrence typical of the Primitivist bush and presents a textuality that teems and swarms with movement. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, for example, Tutuola locates his narratives in the many bushes (including the "Spider's Web Bush" and the eponymous "Bush of Ghosts") of a superbly adaptable literary practice.<sup>101</sup> Tutuola presents a world in which "the bush" is a pluralised noun, it is the "various bush" of endless narrative possibilities.

Once again, Tutuola is important in subtle and unexpected ways. His work does not offer a counter-discursive attack on colonial and neo-colonial discourse of the bush but *enables* a reclamation of postcolonial space for a new range of narrative possibilities. Tutuola frees the chronotope of the bush to new narrative potentialities not through the re-writing of Primitivism but through the presentation of space configured by the traditions of Yoruba orature.

For the moment, however, I wish to look more closely at the implications of Naipaul's negation of place for his representation of time.

### Negative Dialectics: *Guerrillas* and The Negation of History.

As I have hoped to demonstrate, Naipaul presents a fictional environment that is inimical to certain forms of historical writing.

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<sup>100</sup> If Tutuola's bush can really be identified in terms of any *one* chronotope, it does seem to have significant affinities with Bakhtin's description of the "Adventure Time" of the early classical novel. ( See *The Dialogic Imagination* p. 94 ). The radical differences of context between Bakhtin's examples and the work of Tutuola demands caution in stating anything more than an affinity between these literatures.

<sup>101</sup> Amos Tutuola *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* London: Faber and Faber, 1990, passim.

Naipaul embeds the atomising perspective of dissective vision in his sense of the “essential” non-meaning of colonial cultures, in a kind of chasm around the perceiving subject. To “see” the postcolonial world as Naipaul, in its meaningless array of fragments, is to risk a kind of madness. The profound sense of the historical void in Naipaul is achieved in a variety of ways. As I suggested in reference to Céline, Naipaul uses an already established Primitivist chronotope to set the postcolonial world in a narrative framework that disavows the developments of historical narrative. He attempts to give a sense of this negativity through particular moments of dissolution and ties these moments to a broader economy of vision. The dissective, the fragmentary, and the atomised are the chief methods within the chronotope of the bush by which Naipaul achieves the idea of the Negative, of the peculiarly Caribbean “sense of the void”.

The “energy of inertia” described by Naipaul in *An Area of Darkness* also “enervates” the world of *Guerrillas*. In his presentation of the “void” of postcolonial societies, Naipaul presents a particular sense of third world “negation” which utterly denies the possibility of forward progression, historical development or any evolution through a dialectic. The island in Naipaul’s text has reached the end of its history and potential, the basis of this historical foreclosure is a static ontology, a denial of the possibility of a dialectical becoming. It is “a place that had exhausted its possibilities.”<sup>102</sup>

This stasis is constructed in a number of ways. Firstly, the text is extremely carefully organised in a circular pattern with a “plot” that begins with the arrival of Jane and ends with her death and the departure of Roche. This implies a forward progression, some change in the state of affairs, yet by a mirroring or duplicating of events and details at the beginning and end of the novel (the green tomatoes

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<sup>102</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 50

beneath the bed of Mannie and the journey to and from the Grange for example), one is made aware of the cyclical nature of Naipaul's reality and the meaningless nature of Jane's death. Along this cycle and enclosed within it there is the evocation of an atrophied timelessness. Roche's efforts, his "work", produced no change, yet he confesses that if the cycle were to begin again, his actions would be no different. The protagonists are trapped in a nightmare world of eternal recurrence in which individual events form part of the postcolonial stasis that defines a non-history.

The island seems petrified in its putrefaction, existing in an ever-present cycle of decline and fall (each morning Jane relives her disjunctive experience of her first morning on the island). Naipaul presents us with a kind of "negative dialectic" (or more exactly a negation of dialectics) in which his evocation of a Primitivist sense of the void serves to trap his creations beyond time and the possibility of change and progression. Naipaul's capability for negation lies in what Marx called, in a different context, "the putrescence of the absolute spirit",<sup>103</sup> in his ability to represent a world in which negation exists as a kind of absolute state.

Naipaul creates a text in *Guerrillas* in which the sense of an unrepresentable negativity, "the area of darkness" of postcolonial existence is the opposite of any kind of dialectical or progressive evocation of negativity or non-meaning. His is a particular form of negation that neither suggests a movement through antithesis to the synthesis of new meanings nor the agenda that might accompany any positive critique.

In understanding this sense of stasis in Naipaul it seems appropriate to bring Hegel,<sup>104</sup> that other nemesis of the postcolonial

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<sup>103</sup> Karl Marx "The German Ideology - Part 1" from *The Marx Engels Reader* ed. Robert Tucker, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1972, p. 111

<sup>104</sup> Hegel's place in thinking on questions of colonialism and Postcolonialism cannot be overstated. The influence of his "Master-Slave" scene of recognition

world, into the question. In Hegel (and in the works of Twentieth century Hegelians such as Kojève) negativity functions in a creative and constructive logic of dialectical synthesis. Hegel speaks of "the portentous power of the negatives" in bringing newness into the world. I have no apologies for resorting to Marie Jaanus Kurrick's glossing of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* to elucidate the Hegelian notion of negativity:

Negation splits, doubles, divides, differentiates and distances; it discovers a break, gap, or suspension in thought itself... Negation discovers or uncovers the disconnectedness, disjunction, separability, dispersability of splitability at the heart of things.<sup>105</sup>

Clearly, Naipaul is a master of the art of negative differentiation, division and disconnectedness. What his work *never* offers is a passage through the negative towards any new forms of knowledge, vision or inscription. We never reach towards an identity (be it linguistic, social, existential or political) or "the moment in which this antithesis is removed and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it."<sup>106</sup> In the splitting of an object from itself comes the basis for a dialectical ontology, the possibility of things *changing*. In Naipaul we have neither the celebration of difference nor the consolation of identity only the endless sundering of borrowed identities. A great deal of theoretical energy has been expended in the poststructuralist debunking of Hegelian notions of identity and of

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on Fanon and Sartre is well documented; in this context, however, I am interested in the congruence between Hegel's and Naipaul's perception of the historical process. Hegel, one must remember, was enormously influential in excluding non-Western society from the historical process "at this point we leave Africa not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit". G.W. F. Hegel *The Philosophy of History* (trans. J. Sibree) London: The Colonial Press, 1899, p. 99

<sup>105</sup> Marie Jaanus Kurrick *Literature and Negation* New York: Columbia University Press, 1979, pp. 62 - 64

<sup>106</sup> G.W.F. Hegel *The Phenomenology of Mind*. (trans. J. B. Baillie) New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 175.

history<sup>107</sup> yet, in Naipaul, we seem to have a kind of Hegelianism without reserve, a dialectician who denies the possibility of dialect, dialogue or synthesis. In Naipaul the fragmented remains alienated from a possible return to "itself". Jimmy's encounter with the "void" does not provide him with an otherness or an idea of "not self" to verify, mirror or confirm his own identity but instead threatens, like the bush, to "swamp" him. It is a kind of epiphanic moment that engulfs and destroys its subject. Yet the central feature of the aesthetics of the sublime is the security of the subject in his or her exposure to the sublime experience, in Naipaul the epiphanic moment "dissolves" its subject. Even Roche, the most solidly "present" of the characters in *Guerillas* experiences:

A great exhausted melancholy..... the sense of the end of the day, a feeling of futility of being physically lost in an immense world.<sup>108</sup>

His experience of this dissolution is an awareness of the negative within himself. The view from the Ridge evokes in him only a sense of his own "failure". Moreover, the image of Jane in fragments fails to restore or reconstruct an idea of Jane as complete, her violent end does not serve to restore her flesh into any "common creatureliness"<sup>109</sup> but leaves it beyond the circulation of meaning. Even in suffering she is not restored to any kind of subjectivity and, once she is killed, her documents are destroyed and she is neither mourned or re-membered. The negated fragment (the mouth/vagina/wound) becomes the

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<sup>107</sup> Levinas describes Hegel's philosophy as paradigmatic of Western thought's "allergy" towards the other:

From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other with an insurmountable allergy. Hegel's philosophy represents the logical outcome of this underlying allergy of philosophy.

E. Levinas "The Trace of the Other" *Deconstruction in Context* ed. Mark C. Taylor, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 346 - 7

<sup>108</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 215

<sup>109</sup> Bakhtin's phrase for the importance of the Carnival body. In Bakhtin *Rabelais and his World* p. 12.

perception of the whole. Nothing is more than it appears in its fragment, in its dissected part, nothing (however forensically we rend its surfaces) is anything more than that surface; the island “was no more than it looked.”<sup>110</sup> Hegel described the non dialectical world of being in terms well suited to the “the unstable, dissolving world”<sup>111</sup> of *Guerrillas*:

...no longer essences but moments of self consciousness, i.e. abstractions or distinctions which at the same time have no reality.<sup>112</sup>

Hegel famously placed Africa outside history. Naipaul seems to have taken the lesson to heart and applied it to all the developing world. Change, the negation of one form and its supersession with others was Hegel’s vision of the historical process. Unity must be constantly and inwardly split in order to create new ontologies, newly synthesised forms of life, of political institutions and of subjectivity:

The unity of life is constantly dirempted because only as dirempted can it continue to be a unity. Shapes pass away and are superseded by other shapes.<sup>113</sup>

There is, therefore, a constant tension between the “staleness” and immobility of *Guerrillas* and the dynamic nature of dissective vision illustrated in Jane’s car journeys, between Naipaul’s urge to anatomise and split forms and the sense of circularity and enclosure. Naipaul, so often the parodist of idealism, therefore achieves a kind of “anti-history”. He creates a scopic regime that is defined by movement yet which leads to a vision of stasis. We are presented, therefore, with an *anti-dialectic* of *non-becoming*, a history of nothing happening over

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110 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 215

111 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 178

112 Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 166

113 J. N. Finlay, Gloss. to Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller) London, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 170



and over again. Lacan locates the creation of new meaning and metaphor as "the point where meaning is produced out of non meaning".<sup>114</sup> Yet the possibility for a creative use of negation is foreclosed, the emergence of the new from the negation of the old is denied Naipaul's Island from the core of its being. What is denied, what Naipaul denies himself, is any oppositionality that is creative:

Opposition (or negation contradiction) is responsible for introducing the new into the old. For to negate the given without ending in nothingness, is to produce something that did not exist. Now this is precisely what I call creating. <sup>115</sup>

In Naipaul, negativity seems to have a different role. It moves towards being with threatening and dissective intent. In Hegel, self-consciousness and the possibility of affirmation must firstly win over the negative within:

By superseding this other that presents itself... Certain of this nothingness is for it the truth of the other. .  
Yet, ultimately, It can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself within itself. <sup>116</sup>

Negation is balanced or counterweighted in its relationship to its inverse position in affirmation. The "fragile" identity of things in *Guerrillas* cannot negate the sundering impact of Naipaul's gaze, they can only be overwhelmed by it. Naipaul arrives at this profound sense of negativity by a fracturing practice of seeing and knowing that denies that the object of sense was ever really complete.

Naipaul's "Hegelianism" resides in his presentation of cultures as profoundly consistent and "totalised" in their manifestations. Like

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<sup>114</sup> Vincent Descombes *Modern French Philosophy* (trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 215

<sup>115</sup> Kojève in "Interpreting Hegel" quoted in Descombes *Modern French Philosophy*, p. 33.

<sup>116</sup> Hegel *Phenomenology of the Mind* (trans. J. B. Baillie) pp.174 - 175

Hegel he sees the smallest details and instances of a culture as a manifestation of a unifying and innate truth about that society. Unlike Hegel's explorations of the "cunning of reason" in its historical emergence in the Prussian state, Naipaul finds the smallest detail of the postcolonial redolent of the corruption, stagnancy and decay of the cultural totality. The devil in the detail of Naipaul's fictional world is the circular fragmentation of the postcolonial into meaningless parts.

This pervasive sense of the dead-end of Caribbean history or, more exactly, the absence of historicity in Caribbean life pervades Naipaul's work. In *The Middle Passage* Naipaul writes:

The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation and nothing was created in the West Indies. 117

The Caribbean is, therefore, denied a future because of the absence of a past. The Caribbean is hermetically sealed, its meanings relevant only at the most local level, "unimportant, except to themselves".<sup>118</sup> Moreover, in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, Naipaul writes of "half-made societies of dependent people"<sup>119</sup> in which identity itself is negated by the lack of historical achievement, of "works" in postcolonial Societies:

...they (Caribbeans) will forever consume, they will never create...identity depends in the end on achievement; and achievement here cannot be but small.... 120

One feels that this description is located in the same fictional space as *Guerrillas* in which its figures are "stranded in time, belonging to

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117 V. S. Naipaul *The Middle Passage. Impressions of Five Societies. British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p. 29

118 V.S. Naipaul "The Overcrowded Barracoon" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 p.283

119 Naipaul "The Overcrowded Barracoon" p. 271

120 Naipaul "Power?" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* pp. 271 - 272

another era, an era that contained no possibility of a future.”<sup>121</sup> Naipaul’s self sufficient and consistent construction of the Third World points to a vision that pervades all his work, dependent as it is upon, by now, well tried formulas and a comfortably detached and forensic persona. In *Guerrillas*, we are perhaps made aware of what Foucault calls the “inevitable void throughout history, before history”,<sup>122</sup> of a world excluded from the referential language of historical consciousness. We are reminded of Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which there is a concern for a non-dialectical notion of history:

The great work of history is inescapably accompanied by an absence of work, renewed at every moment but running on unaltered in its inevitable void..... it is already there in primitive decision and after it again, since it will triumph with the last word that history pronounces. <sup>123</sup>

Yet this link with Foucault is also, and more importantly, a convergence of opposites. Foucault outlines the excluding practices by which reason, “the work of history” and the writing of history define themselves against the excluded worlds of non-meaning. *Guerrillas* by its association of repugnance and decay, with “non meaning” perhaps serves within these dividing practices, in delineating a postcolonial “meaningless” that defines Western “achievement”. Foucault’s oeuvre shows a genuine concern in getting “outside Hegel” and writing these difficult histories of non-meaning, Naipaul seems content to “show” a world non-meaning and to define the a-historical nature of the postcolonial. The island becomes a kind of paradigmatic location in which to consign the irrational and insane. Someone says of the island “madness keeps the place going”. <sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 235

<sup>122</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p. 26

<sup>123</sup> M. Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p. 27

<sup>124</sup> Naipaul *Guerrillas* p. 157

Naipaul is bound by a conception of the historical that precludes the postcolonial world from an entrance into meaning. His sense of history is characteristically defined “negatively” by the consistent analysis of the non-historical nature of postcolonial societies. History, for Naipaul, is the record and the dynamic of “achievement” and by the “great men” who accomplish them. In *A Bend in the River* Indar the deracinated East African Asian sees, on the Embankment in London, a vision of the pervasive detail of Western history as manifested in the ornate dolphins and camels adorning London’s lamp-posts. These ornaments reveal a cultural creativity that reaches the smallest detail the London of the Imperial period.<sup>125</sup> It is in the lack of “good works” in postcolonial societies that their exclusion from Western historiography is defined:

History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.<sup>126</sup>

This “lack of achievement” is understood through a gaze that excludes the “waste phenomena” of the societies he examines. Therefore, the worlds of Caribbean popular culture, the creativity of Calypso and Reggae are excluded into the invisible “void of non-achievement”. Naipaul, ever the good empiricist, undertakes a way of seeing and knowing that divides his experience of the postcolonial world in an attempt to find evidence of historical failure. Naipaul has reversed the traditional poles of the taxonomic gaze of the empirical tradition. He identifies phenomena that are *meaningless* to the exclusion of the *meaningful* alternative histories and phenomenon.

In a related act of exclusion, the lack of historical achievement denies the tenuous foundations of identity and personhood. Naipaul prefaces his first major work of “travel writing”, *The Middle Passage*

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<sup>125</sup> V.S. Naipaul *A Bend in the River* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, p. 157

<sup>126</sup> Naipaul *The Middle Passage* p. 29

with an approving quote from James Anthony Froude's *The English in the West Indies* (1887):

The natural graces of life do not show themselves under such conditions. There has been no saint in the West Indies since Las Casas, no hero unless philonegro enthusiasm can make one out of Toussaint. There are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own.<sup>127</sup>

It is more than tempting to merely refute Naipaul's lack of vision yet his blinkered view of the postcolonial, nevertheless, points towards the broader questions and possibilities of writing a non-Hegelian history, of a history defined by something other than the Western structure of events. Yet Naipaul's historicism puts the postcolonial subject beyond the category of the human. Marx wrote of "The entire so-called history of the world [as] nothing but the creation of man through human labour".<sup>128</sup> In Naipaul, we have postcolonial subjects excluded from the category of man through a perceived lack of works and labours. Naipaul adopts a bizarre, though sadly familiar, bourgeois attitude to the working body. As an individual whose life's labour has been with a pen, he is strangely blind to the subjectivity of those "unproductive" individuals whose labours have been devoted to the unspectacular process of subsistence.<sup>129</sup>

The representation of this absence is necessarily a challenge to the representative tropes of realist fiction. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida examines the fundamental link between writing and the possibility of history, of the bonds between "the metaphysics of

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<sup>127</sup> Naipaul *The Middle Passage* p. 7

<sup>128</sup> Karl Marx "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844" in Marx and Engels *Works* Vol. 3, (trans. Clemens Dutt) London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975, p. 350

<sup>129</sup> I am indebted to the work of my fellow Postgraduate, Tim Burke, on the traditions of bourgeois representation of work, for help in clarifying my ideas on *homo fabricans* and for referring me to John Barrell's excellent *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, which examines the fraught history of the representations of labour.

presence” to which writing always strives and the notion of history as a meaningful narrative of *events* :

Historicity itself is tied to the possibility of writing . . . Before being the object of a history, of an historical science - writing opens the field of history - of historical becoming. <sup>130</sup>

The writing of history, the entry of experience into the realm of the book is central to Naipaul’s understanding of the non-historical nature of the postcolonial world. In the essay “Jasmine” in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* Naipaul explores the foundational disparity between literature, writing and his lived experience. He notes the moment when the word “Jasmine” first makes a connection with the flower he encountered in his daily experience in Trinidad. This meditation leads him to his sense of the intangibility of the unwritten world he experiences:

If landscapes do not start to be real until after they have been interpreted by an artist, so, until they have been written about, societies appear to be without shape and *embarrassing* . <sup>131</sup>

Naipaul’s vision of history and the epistemological paradigm he creates for the perception of the postcolonial world demands a form of writing that seeks to represent the absence of achievement, personality and identity. Naipaul is, therefore, led into a fissured and deracinated aesthetic of the sublime, of a travesty of the pastoral and a perverse recreation of the gothic. His vision of the postcolonial cannot shift the paradigms for historical achievement and cannot restore the fractured world of the scent of jasmine and its literary inscription; Naipaul cannot recover postcolonial experience from the void of non-meaning but can only exploit a genius for evoking the negation of

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<sup>130</sup> Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 27

<sup>131</sup> Naipaul “Jasmine” in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* p.26

history and a primitive world of decay and corruption. Naipaul's remarkable explorations in sense and non-sense remind one of the Manifesto condemning that other great watcher, Zola for whom "a corner of nature seen through a temperament" had become transformed into "a corner of nature seen through a morbid sensory apparatus."<sup>132</sup> Naipaul's eye, likewise, condemns him to a morbid and moribund perception of a corner of nature that remains his eternal "heart of darkness".

### The Devil in the Detail:

Naipaul's "dissective" vision reaches paradoxical and unexpected conclusions. Naipaul elevates visual perception into his pre-eminent textual apparatus and exploits (particularly in his travel writing) the authority of the eye. Yet the scopic regime acts upon an experience which is represented as unstable, elusive and unknowable and the viewing eyes/I's of *Guerrillas* observe a divided world which is the objective correlative to their sense of self-division. Naipaul is, therefore, attempting to span the gap between an ocularcentric tradition that rends the world into knowable parts and his wish to represent the postcolonial world in terms of miasmic, corrupt and meaningless fragments. His work is both a confirmation and a subversion of "the simple straight gaze of the West" and it is through this sense of the interplay between form and formlessness, vision and division that his work helps us understand the paradox of the Imperial gaze. His work demands that we re-examine concepts like "participant observation" as a means of knowing the other; Naipaul presents an exotopic or a non-participant observation that serves to question the

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<sup>132</sup> "Manifesto of the Five Against *La Terre*" in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. George J. Becker, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 349

intellectual neutrality and the conditions of possibility of anthropological knowledge. Naipaul celebrates his position “outside” postcolonial cultures and assumes, through his adoption of the status of “exile” in the West, a neutrality in regard to what he views. This is a position that is fundamentally different to the ethnological practice of participation and immersion in a culture - the difference and the similarities between these positions is crucial in understanding the paradox of Naipaul’s eye.

The deep rooted logic of anthropological vision is the penetration of a culture by the gaze of ethnographic knowledge.<sup>133</sup> The cultural knowledges produced by traditional ethnology are formed through a kind of observational empiricism that is not entirely different from Naipaul’s dissective vision. James Clifford has outlined the observational, visual paradigm for ethnographic fieldwork:

the new ethnography [based on fieldwork] was marked by an increased emphasis on the power of observation. Culture was construed as an ensemble of characteristic behaviours, ceremonies and gestures susceptible to recording and explanation by a trained onlooker. <sup>134</sup>

It operates by the anatomisation of the plenitude of social experience into meaningful representative parts. The ethnographic fragment must stand in a representative (even symbolic) relation to the cultural whole. Geertz’s Balinese cock fighter, Radcliff-Brown’s models of social relations, must “stand for” and represent the cultural constitution from which they spring. This is the most fundamental assumption of a

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<sup>133</sup> In a slightly different context, Johannes Fabian has outlined the dominant “Visualism” of ethnographic knowledge. In a compelling chapter entitled “The Other and the Eye: Time and the Rhetoric of Vision” in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Fabian is primarily concerned with the tendency of ethnographic fieldwork to create schematic and spatial representations of complex human behaviour such as kinship and religious symbolism. I am trying to suggest a parallel politics of the gaze in ethnography that serves to fragment experience in a reductive and violent dynamic of division.

<sup>134</sup> James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture* p.31



massive range of intellectual endeavour, a physicist does not after all look for non-meaningful phenomena and the traditional historian does not seek to record meaningless events. Yet the effect of cultural difference on the practice of an ethnological knowledge is that the assumption of representational status for the artefact, the ritual or the social relation of another culture is no longer automatic. Even in synthesising, non-culture specific works such as Frazer's *The Golden Bough* or Boas' *Primitive Art* it is a given that the exemplar used have a paradigmatic resonance; it is this paradigmatic status that allows their vast syntagmatic syntheses across cultures. The constitution of the ethnographic text requires both the fragmenting of observed experience and the assumption of *meaningfulness*. This is what Clifford has called the "fundamentally synecdochic stance of the new ethnography, parts were assumed to represent wholes".<sup>135</sup> The logic of the ethnographic gaze has been to split experience into fragments, its treachery has been to hold this debris up as the "truth about the other".

Naipaul's experience of other cultures, as represented in his travel writing and refracted in his fiction has certain affinities with ethnographic field work. Naipaul's eye looks for the part which might represent the whole but his exotopic and marginal relation to cultures produces a form of knowledge which is defined by an assumption of the *meaningless* nature of the fragments his eye both creates and retrieves. Naipaul eschews the cultural involvement of *participant* observation and the search for the meaningful fragment of the cultural terrain he views. He practices a kind of negative fieldwork or a negative ethnography in which he assumes a mandate to explain the non meaning of postcolonial cultures. Naipaul has all the coldness of the anatomical clinician but finds beneath the flayed surface of the

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<sup>135</sup> James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture* p. 31

postcolonial world, not the mechanistic and rational orders of a coherent body of meaning but a bloody mass of meaningless suffering.

### The Word Made Flesh: Neil Bissoondath and the Construction of the Postcolonial Body.

The world is silent, and I no longer resonate with its presence. I am like an open cut, like a broken musical instrument. I feel that nothing can touch me anymore. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* <sup>136</sup>

The affinities between Bissoondath's and Naipaul's fictional worlds are plentiful and almost immediately apparent. Bissoondath's obsession with the representation of the body (in all three of his published works of fiction) and, in particular, the flayed and fissured body, the body always *in extremis*, marks him as an author whose work almost begins where the violence of Naipaul's dissective vision ends. Yet the temptations of a kind of dynastic criticism (based on the fuller sense of their *relation*) needs, surely, to be resisted. It is almost too simple to examine Bissoondath as a literary heir to Naipaul and such a criticism would have to base its methods on rather imponderable questions of influence, affiliation and inheritance. Yet the relationship between their fictions are still evident in their work, in their treatment of the postcolonial world and, in the broadest sense, the postcolonial body. There is a common obsession with sight and the nature of perception and a common sense of Primitivist space and time. They share a territory.

What I hope to explore is the way in which Bissoondath permits a broader understanding of the nature of categories such as the postcolonial, the way in which his fiction's obsession with *flesh* reveals something of the representability of the body in fiction and the impact

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<sup>136</sup> Cheikh Hamidou Kane *Ambiguous Adventure* (trans. Katherine Woods) London: Heinemann International, 1972, p.150

that these questions have upon each other. In a sense then I will reverse the genealogy of influence of Bissoondath and Naipaul and will use the nephew's work to better understand both Naipaul's work and the broader question of the postcolonial representation of the body.

And yet it would be inappropriate not to outline some of the continuities between Naipaul's and Bissoondath's works. Most important of these affinities is the use of Primitivist space. Bissoondath's description of tropical space are from the same chronotopic tradition as Naipaul's (and indeed Céline's and many others). In his novel *A Casual Brutality* Bissoondath finds the space for his most involved representation of tropical landscape. After my discussion of Naipaul and Céline there is something very familiar in descriptions such as the following:

It was the kind of vegetation, deceptive in its beauty, that could swallow you whole, a vision of green annihilation into which a man could, unnoticed, disappear without a trace.<sup>137</sup>

Similarly, the control of this vegetation becomes imbued with a kind of ethics of the frontier, with cultivation once again equated with civility. The narrator's grandfather keeps a garden (with the hired labour of Wayne) which comes to symbolise his antique sense of dignity in a "place going wrong":<sup>138</sup>

There was something in this act - an act, it seemed to me, of holding off jungle, of beating back an insistent interloper - that I envied.<sup>139</sup>

Bissoondath shares, therefore, in the tradition of the Primitivist representation of space. Like Naipaul but even more like Céline, he is obsessed with the quality of tropical light, with the annihilating and

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<sup>137</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 141

<sup>138</sup> Neil Bissoondath "Digging Up the Mountains" in *Digging Up the Mountains* pp.1 - 21, p. 20

<sup>139</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 64

disintegrative force of the meridian sun and heat. Hari Beharry, the protagonist of "Digging Up the Mountains" feels, in a landscape transformed by the threat of violence, an exposure which seemed "to strip him, the heat became tangible, held menace, was suggestive of physical threat".<sup>140</sup> Bissoondath is interested in the geometric sharpness of light, of the ability of its very brilliance to both expose, to divide and dissect the perceived world. His work is full of characters acutely sensitive to the changing visual world around them, to the violence of perception in Primitivist space. Maria, the narrator of "In the Kingdom of the Golden Dust",<sup>141</sup> becomes a hypersensitive membrane upon which the effects of "Payol" light register their intensities. In "An Arrangement of Shadows"<sup>142</sup> Miss Jackson, the stranded English teacher and water-colourist, feels her own isolation and failure almost as acutely as she does the sculptural and dissective light around her:

The generic harshness of the light, that poured through the doors tightened, sharpened its edges, became geometric...  
Through the door there now streamed a solid beam of yellow, harsh, lacerating, causing insubstantial diamonds to float before her.<sup>143</sup>

Miss Jackson is exquisitely sensitive to the changes in the light and to the power of these changes to effect her sense of landscape. Evening dulled the violence of meridian light and allowed a brief flirtation with the picturesque:

Through the door ahead of her the hills, their ugliness bared that morning by brilliance like disease by a scalpel, were caught in a softer light. Angles were dulled, rust could have been shadow, and the shanty took on an aspect of homeliness. It was a view she enjoyed, but rejected at the same time. It

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<sup>140</sup> Bissoondath "Digging Up the Mountains" p. 14

<sup>141</sup> Bissoondath *Digging Up the Mountains* pp. 98 - 108

<sup>142</sup> Bissoondath "An Arrangement of Shadows" in *Digging Up the Mountains* pp. 108 - 142

<sup>143</sup> Bissoondath "An Arrangement of Shadows" p. 114

was a watercolour she could have done, and would have ripped up upon completion.<sup>144</sup>

Bissoondath is, then, at least as concerned as Naipaul in the representation of a dissective vision of a world in harshly outlined fragments, a world cut by a scalpel of perception. But what the above quotation suggests is that Bissoondath is acutely aware of the representative problems of capturing postcolonial landscape within Western traditions of representation. Miss Jackson is no more able to apply “the simple straight vision of the West” than she would be to translate the island into painterly representation. Unlike Okri’s artist Omovo, she is unable to find the forms of representation that might give voice to her sense of personal and cultural collapse.

In Bissoondath’s postcolonial world, landscape is a mutable object of representation, the “familiar of the outside world”<sup>145</sup> is always open to the transformations of political circumstance and the inflections of the emotional condition of the viewer. Yet Bissoondath goes much further than merely making his landscapes “sympathetic” to the turbulent and violent worlds of his narratives, he outlines the essential disparity between the traditional tropes of landscape representation and the phenomena of the postcolonial world. Miss Jackson formulates this aesthetic crisis that permeates all of Bissoondath’s representation of “landscapes overturned”:<sup>146</sup>

She had lost her sense of the picturesque. Despite herself, she had learnt quickly that the picturesque existed not by itself but in a quiet self-delusion, in that warping of observation which convinced the mind that in poverty was beauty, in atrophy quaintness, in the hovel a hut. She had long stopped seeing with the tourist’s eye and had come to share the island’s distaste for those whose only interest was to use it.<sup>147</sup>

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144 Bissoondath “An Arrangement of Shadows” pp. 116 - 117

145 Bissoondath “Digging Up the Mountains” p.15

146 Bissoondath “Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery” in *Digging Up the Mountains* p. 177

147 Bissoondath “An Arrangement of Shadows” p. 112

What Miss Jackson expresses is not just her own inabilities to bring her experience into representation, but the impropriety of imported perspectives and aesthetics. It is a “problem” that pervades Bissoondath’s work. In *A Casual Brutality*, Raj Ramsingh is at a loss when his Canadian wife, Jan, employs the category of “the country” in a Casquemadan context. Like Miss Jackson, he realises that the values attached to terms like “landscape” or “country” are peculiarly out of place:

Jan asked for a drive in ‘the country’, I didn’t quite know how to respond. There were beaches, there were underdeveloped resort areas, there were sugar cane fields and banana plantations. But there was no ‘country’ as opposed to ‘city’. The island was too small, too meagre, to accommodate the concept as it existed in other, larger places.<sup>148</sup>

A clue to the answer Bissoondath finds to this problem can be found in the anatomical images and the references to scalpel and to dissection in some of the above quotations. In Bissoondath vision, light and landscape are all figured and resolved in images of the human body.

### Body Matters: Bissoondath’s “Two Bodies”

The sight of our internal organs is denied us. To how many men is it given to look upon their own spleens, their hearts and live? The hidden geography of the body is a Medusa’s head one glimpse of which will render blind the presumptions eye. Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons Confessions of a Knife: Meditations on the Art of Surgery*.<sup>149</sup>

Bissoondath’s work constitutes a kind of phenomenology of perception; his fiction exhaustively invents and inventories the nature of the perceived world. Yet this inventory returns, again and again, to

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<sup>148</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p.36

<sup>149</sup> Richard Selzer *Mortal Lessons: Confessions of a Knife: Meditations on the Art of Surgery* London: Triad, 1982, p. 16

the perception and representation of the human body. As I suggested earlier, Bissoondath's fiction is a veritable anatomy of bodily representation. These representations of the body are realised in at least two ways: Firstly, and most obviously, there is the unerring fixation on the phenomenology and the pathology of physical violence, on the holes an AK47 makes in the body, the "little roses with centres of black".<sup>150</sup> In "Counting the Wind"<sup>151</sup> the cemetery keeper and main protagonist recollects the murder of his grandfather in graphic detail, "a robber's knife opening his back like a melon split for eating" with the memory of "the pungency of freshly cut meat"<sup>152</sup> burnt forever into his consciousness. His fiction returns, again and again, to the minutia of the effects of the bullet and the club upon the human body. Joaquin, the refugee haunted by the unbidden memories of torture, in "On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows"<sup>153</sup> is advised by his lawyer to represent the most visceral and vivid effects of his suffering to the panel that must decide on his eligibility for asylum: "Make them feel the bite of sharpened pliers".<sup>154</sup> This almost becomes the credo of Bissoondath's textual practice, his work spares no detail in the representation of the body abused and suffering. Bissoondath shows a more than Apollonian curiosity at the sight of the insides of the body, in its surface pierced and seeping. *Veins Visible* explores this sense of the body as flesh, the body as meat. Vernon, another of Bissoondath's deracinated postcolonials, is faced with the spectacle of his friend and partner reduced to "meat" by a traffic accident:

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150 Bissoondath "In the Kingdom of the Golden Dust" in *Digging Up the Mountains* p. 106

151 □ Bissoondath "Counting the Wind" in *Digging Up the Mountains* pp. 224 - 247

152 Bissoondath "Counting the Wind" p. 225

153 Bissoondath "On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows" in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* pp. 1 - 27

154 Bissoondath "On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows" p. 10

'There's nothing to do. I saw him. He's flesh. His skin was stripped away - It wasn't neat. You could see his veins.'  
 'Did you talk to him?'  
 'You can't talk to meat.' he said with an unexpected vehemence.'<sup>155</sup>

Yet what is even more remarkable in Bissoondath's work, is the tendency to use anatomical, brutal, and "Marsyan" images of the flesh in descriptive passages that are not explicitly concerned with violent acts. The body in Bissoondath is consistently exposed to a dissective gaze that seeks out the biological and the physiological features beneath the surfaces of the body. The dissective gaze discovers the anatomy beneath the skin. Father Gries, in "An Arrangement of Shadows", is viewed in a penetrative "X Ray" of light and vision:

The dense light from the window reflected off the white of his gown onto his face: She could see his skull sheathed in spotted skin.<sup>156</sup>

Bissoondath's representation of "the intimate, subtle and brutal ways of the body"<sup>157</sup> resolves to understand and articulate the materiality of corporeal substance. The exploration of the envelope of flesh pervades and defines his fiction, the dissective gaze *inside* flesh, is not confined to the depiction of bodies flayed and displayed by torture and murder, but is common to much of his somatic symbolism. Ramsingh, in *A Casual Brutality*, observes his grandmother attempt a smile "a ribbon of a smile, lips tautening into compressed strips of flesh".<sup>158</sup> Bissoondath's attempt to speak of "meat" leads to a traversing of the human body in the dispassionate vocabularies of medical discourse. Again, in *A Casual Brutality*, the Toronto Sex Club, the "Riviera", offers "anatomical action" for the "clamouring gaze of

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155 Bissoondath "Veins Visible" in *Digging Up the Mountains* p. 217

156 Bissoondath "An Arrangement of Shadows" p.119

157 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 269

158 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 339



visual philanderers".<sup>159</sup> The pornographic body is brought into the same fragmentary and dissective logic as every other body reduced to flesh. Jan, Ramsingh's wife, is an interesting figure in this regard. Like Jane of Naipaul's *Guerrillas*, she is a sacrificial female "outsider" upon whose body the violent potentialities of Caribbean life must be enacted. Yet she is reduced to flesh long before her murder. Under the gaze of her future husband, she is ruthlessly reduced to a few graceless bodily signs:

her body, of average height but large-boned, showed evidence through her black tights of negligence and a fondness for carbohydrates.<sup>160</sup>

Ramsingh, her husband and Casquemadan doctor, is obsessed with both the nature and the limits of the medico-anatomical knowledge of the body. Ramsingh, despite defining himself as "a mechanic of the human body"<sup>161</sup> is, nevertheless, haunted by recurrent dreams of the body eluding both his knowledge and his reach, the mysteries of the flesh "mocking the knowledge [he] was acquiring"<sup>162</sup> at Medical School. Bissoondath, like Foucault, complicates and destabilises the referential certainty of medical discourse. His is a fiction, that while adopting the Marsyan features of anatomical knowledge and citing the bio-mechanic certainties of medical discourse, is fascinated with the elusive qualities of mute flesh. Foucault remarked on Nineteenth-Century medicine which was haunted by the paradox of an "absolute eye that cadaverizes .. and rediscovers in the corpse the frail, broken nervure of life"<sup>163</sup>, producing a knowledge of life based on death and by an anatomical system reduced to flesh.

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<sup>159</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 287

<sup>160</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 279

<sup>161</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 187

<sup>162</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 269

<sup>163</sup> M. Foucault *The Birth of the Clinic*. p. 166

The second, though a less obvious, mode of bodily representation in Bissoondath is his polyvalent tendency to use images and metaphors of the body to figure landscape, migration and the broader features of his fictional environments. The human body, its physiognomy and bio-mechanics becomes Bissoondath's first and his pre-eminent resource in metaphorical description. It is the font of Bissoondath's symbolism and the anchor for his creation of a postcolonial fictional world. The body and the world are placed in a constant dialogic interaction, the condensation on a window becomes like a human skin, "thickening the light of the street lamps and lavishing it over the surface like another skin", <sup>164</sup> a winding Casquemadan track becomes "an intestinal road" <sup>165</sup> and Ramsingh's maps of the world are woven with the "arterial mazes" <sup>166</sup> of rivers, roads, and his own family's migrations. Likewise, the refugees of "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery" are "driven by spasm beyond human control like a piece of meat moving through intestine". <sup>167</sup> Bissoondath is obsessed, not only with the world of the flesh but also, to borrow Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phrase, "the flesh of the world". <sup>168</sup> These two bodies, the world of the body and the body of the world are placed in constant and intimate intercourse.

The world's body is, as one might expect, also a body flayed and fissured, also a body displaying the dissective violence of Bissoondath's severative universe. In "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery" the unnamed protagonist (another of Bissoondath's doctors) remembers the moment "when the guns caused their town to split in two, spilling its guts like an overripe corpse, he fled with his daughter following the tide".<sup>169</sup> The flayed body is a motif that cannot be laid to rest

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<sup>164</sup> Bissoondath "Veins Visible" p. 221

<sup>165</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 141

<sup>166</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 357

<sup>167</sup> Bissoondath "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery" p. 178

<sup>168</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* ed. Claude Lefort, (trans. Alphonso Lingis) Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, *passim*.

<sup>169</sup> Bissoondath "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery" p. 177

anywhere in Bissoondath's work. In "Kira and Anya",<sup>170</sup> Seepercad, an exiled Third World Dictator, houses a scrapped car in his Toronto garage. The car's "bodywork" perfectly delineates the ubiquity of Bissoondath's corporeal and severative imagery:

The light blue leatherette seats have been scoured and ripped into bales of flayed skin the exposed stuffing bubbling past rusted springs like suppurating guts. The dashboard, the radio slot a toothless mouth, has been reduced to a string of smashed dials on a battered field, ends of wires hanging folornly from empty sockets.<sup>171</sup>

This is a world in which the most mundane of domestic acts becomes inflected with dissective violence. Seepercad prunes his roses with the nonchalance of the experienced torturer:

he turned his back on the wound of severed stalks and petals and sauntered into the house, the machete swinging loosely from his hand.<sup>172</sup>

In *A Casual Brutality*, the intercourse between Bissoondath's two bodies is at its most explicit. Medical discourses of the body become an invasive presence in discussions of the "social health" of Casquemadan society. Grappler, the honest broker of Casquemadan politics, comes to demand "payol" or South American solutions to the island's political problems. The following exchange between Grappler and his nephew, Raj, outlines the perceived need for surgical politics of death squads :

'You're a doctor, you know sometimes you have no choice, you have to cut out the cancer.'  
'I also know that sometimes you have to cut out healthy tissue too.'  
'...sometimes the only choice is full of risks. You can't do nothing.'  
'Even if the life you save ends up crippled? Men who can't get erections? Women with mutilated chests? People with bags attached to them?'<sup>173</sup>

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170 Bissoondath "Kira and Anya" in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* pp.27 - 59

171 Bissoondath "Kira and Anya" p. 28

172 Bissoondath "Kira and Anya" p. 47

173 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 211

The body of Casquemadan society can be and is explained in terms of the poisoned inheritance of colonialism but, at the most immediate level, the symptomatology of violent acts can be neither predicted nor prevented. Raj's family are struck by the "lightening" of the militia men without warning and without remedy.

I introduced my discussion of Bissoondath's use of bodily images by suggesting that his work presented a crisis in the representation of Caribbean landscape. I would suggest that his repertoire of bodily motifs and images offers a way to bring these landscapes back into representation. Bissoondath presents a kind of corporeal geography that serves to consolidate a fictional vision of a world established less through the usual description of topographic features and more through the common thread of Marsyan images of the world as body.

I have termed Bissoondath's textual practice in terms of the "two bodies" that are incorporated in his fiction and, in doing so, have reproduced the anthropologist Mary Douglas' theorisation of bodily symbolism in works such as *Natural Symbols*.<sup>174</sup> Douglas' theory of bodily symbolism suggests that the body provides a basic and originary theme for *all* symbols. She outlines a universal practice of using bodily experience in metaphorical and symbolic production. The body is a "natural" symbol, "just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolises everything else".<sup>175</sup> In the essay "Two Bodies" she refines this somewhat generalised position. Douglas' "two bodies" are the social body and the physical body. The social body describes both the social and historical understanding of the lived physical body and represents the tendency to conceive society itself as a "body":

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<sup>174</sup> Mary Douglas "Two Bodies" in *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, pp.93 - 113, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973

<sup>175</sup> Mary Douglas *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 122

The social body contains the way the physical body is perceived. The Physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society..... The two bodies are the self and society: Sometimes they are so near as to be almost merged; sometimes they are far apart. the tension between them allows the elaboration of meaning.<sup>176</sup>

Douglas' thought on bodily symbolism is an extremely neat way of conceptualising the polarities of Bissoondath's textuality. What is less straightforward is the application of this schemata in a more particular cultural context. Douglas uses her theory of bodily symbolism to construct broadly Durkheimian (and non-too convincing) arguments on the social foundations of different symbolic systems.<sup>177</sup>

Nevertheless, her arguments present intriguing questions. She suggests a kind of hermeneutic of "bodily styles" and the possibility of reading both the social body through, after Mauss, the "technologies" of the physical body<sup>178</sup> and, inversely, to read the physical body via the social body:

The human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not at the same time (postulate) a social dimension. Interest in its apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions. If there was no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries. The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy.<sup>179</sup>

In the light of this fascinating speculation, what are we to make of Bissoondath's bleeding and fissured postcolonial Leviathan? Constructed across all his fictions we are presented with a physical and

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<sup>176</sup> Mary Douglas "Two Bodies" p. 93

<sup>177</sup> In the "Two Bodies" essay, Douglas collates cohesive and integrated social structures with concomitantly greater bodily disciplines. Her arguments concerning, for example, the bodily practices of West Indians in London are rather unhistorical and shallow.

<sup>178</sup> In the "Two Bodies" essay, Douglas cites Marcel Mauss' 1936 work "Technologies of the Body" as an inspiration for her own studies.

<sup>179</sup> Douglas "Two Bodies" pp.98 - 99

social body that is certainly characterised by apertures and holes. By Douglas' logic, this would be consistent with a fiction that constantly concerns itself with the plight of the refugee and the exile. Characters forced, indeed, to be concerned with "social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions". Yet the "holes" and apertures in Bissoondath are not the natural openings of the body to the world, they are the result of violence and the transgression of the boundaries of the flesh. The echoes and the interplay between these two bodies, the world of the flesh and the flesh of the world, generates an appalling severative universe that oscillates through a meaning born out of suffering and meaninglessness. The body, both social and physical is, in Bissoondath's fiction, defined by "more rips than pores"<sup>180</sup> and by the invasive effects of a dissective gaze and the puncturing force of a thousand brutalities. This violence in Bissoondath's bodily representation presents an extra burden of explanation, in that the "social body" of his narratives is a transcultural, postcolonial, corpus of referents and that his depictions of the physical body are always the body *in extremis*. It is not the "natural" body of reproduction, excretion, growth and decay but a body "transformed" by the violent political contexts.

Despite the violence that has been enacted upon it, Bissoondath's "bodyscape",<sup>181</sup> nevertheless, functions to provide a paradoxical linkage between and across his fictions. The postcolonial body (in the broadest sense) functions by bringing the extreme plurality of voice and setting in Bissoondath's work into a connected and integrated corpus of meanings. What I mean to suggest is that it is in or through bodily symbolism that this variety is organised and made tenable. The

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<sup>180</sup> Bissoondath "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery" p. 176

<sup>181</sup> Mary Louise Pratt's phrase from "Scratches on the Face of the Landscape; or What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen" in *'Race', Writing and Difference* ed. Henry Louis Gates Junior, London: University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 138 - 162, p. 138

Caribbean, South America, Canada and South East Asia are all referents and settings in Bissoondath's fictions of displacement and disfigurement.<sup>182</sup> In a sense, Bissoondath's fiction is legitimised by a transcultural sense of the postcolonial as a corpus of common images and narratives. Yet unlike, for example, the equally transcultural postcolonialism of Fanon's conception of the shared interests of "the wretched of the earth" (linking the world in an emancipatory struggle), both Bissoondath and Naipaul present a postcolonial world linked by the nightmarish potential for violence. The postcolonial terrain of his fiction is characterised by loss, violence and exile in a recurrent pattern across the putatively different contexts of his narratives. It is foundational that these many settings are related and are connected in a bounded pattern of significance. Mary Douglas has attempted to explain the ubiquity of the body as a metaphor for *bodies* (i.e. organisations, systems etc.):

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.<sup>183</sup>

In the case of Bissoondath, the body serves precisely this function, it is an anchor to the variety and complexity of the cultures he writes about, it is the matter out of which this particular kind of Cosmopolitan, transhistorical postcolonialism is formed. And yet Bissoondath's body is not, strictly speaking, a "bounded" body, it is a

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<sup>182</sup> Bissoondath's work is not exclusively concerned with Postcolonial contexts. Some of his fiction has a European setting and a small minority of his short fiction is not specifically concerned with his usual themes of exile and loss. Pieces like "Things best Forgotten" and "Goodnight Mr. Slade" in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* are interesting in that their concern with the Spanish Civil War and the Holocaust represent the eruption of the violence and loss of Bissoondath's Postcolonial fictions in European settings. It seems that Bissoondath is interested in Europe when, under the stresses of political upheaval, it resembles his Postcolonial world.

<sup>183</sup> Douglas *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* p. 115

fractured and pierced body. It is a body which is supremely “open” to the world. In a sense this is a logical necessity of the kind of unifying function that the body serves in Bissoondath’s fiction. The social and the physical body in his work are meaningful but meaningless. They are, of necessity, a system of open-ended meanings in which any culture (under the appropriate conditions of upheaval and collapse) can be implanted. Bissoondath’s fiction requires a pattern of symbols that can admit and organise *any-body*.

Body symbolism, particularly the characteristically Bissoondathian body *in extremis* functions, therefore, in two potentially contradictory ways: On the one hand, it serves as a call to “common creatureliness”, it is an elision of the specifics of culture and history, a disrobing to reveal our common, natural and suffering bodies. On the other hand, it is a ready-made, “at hand” system of symbols to embody a particular bounded corpus of meanings, a body of relations, in the case of Bissoondath the intercontinental, transcultural, postcolonial world. If Naipaul establishes the postcolonial as a fictional terrain through a travelling persona and a common scopic and aesthetic regime, Bissoondath’s far more plural use of narrative voices (and the fact, perhaps, that he doesn’t write travel narrative) demands that other methods are required to establish the boundaries of his fictional territory. What Bissoondath’s fiction teaches us is the *unnatural* nature of this kind of postcolonialism, the fact that this kind of polymorphous collation of cultures is something that a textuality has to achieve. It is this achievement in Bissoondath that helps us to better understand the postcolonialism of an author like Naipaul and, indeed, the category of the transcultural “postcolonial” itself.

Yet the theoretical requirements of a legitimising “postcolonial body” do not give a full account of the transgressive and dramatic use of the corporeal in Bissoondath’s fiction. In one sense it is also possible



to place Bissoondath's work within a larger framework of the re-emergence of the body, as a concern in both broader postcolonial and postmodern literatures.

Postcolonial literatures fixation with the body is hardly surprising in that a great deal of diversely configured colonial discourse has concentrated on the knowledge, subjugation, control, even the reverie, of and over the colonised body. This is a rather broad and sweeping statement; it also borders on the inanely self-evident, colonial power was, firstly, a power over bodies. What I mean to suggest is that the "bio-politics"<sup>184</sup> of many divergent colonial relations all tended to be extremely explicit in their focus upon the body as something to be marked with biological and racial difference (what in an African context Fanon called the "fact of blackness",<sup>185</sup>) in the need to subjugate the bodies of the colonised in both the crudest and most brutal sense (by violence, privation, and imprisonment) and through the ideological reformation of the mores, customs and bodily practices of the colonised. Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggests, in reference to Gauguin's representations of the colonised Tahitian body, that the body is ubiquitous in the colonial encounter:

On one level, what is enacted (in the colonial encounter) is a violent history of colonial possession and cultural dispossession - real power over real bodies. On another level, this encounter will be endlessly elaborated within a shadow world of representations - a question of imaginary power over imaginary bodies.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> While many divergent bodies of critical opinion would have one "forget Foucault" and, in particular, his theories of power, I have no apologies for using so explicitly a Foucauldian term as "bio-politics". Foucault is still perhaps the most useful thinker in the Critical cannon in highlighting the micro-politics of power over bodies.

<sup>185</sup> Frantz Fanon *Black Skin - White Masks* (trans. C.L. Markmann) London: Pluto Press, 1986, pp. 109 - 141

<sup>186</sup> Abigail Solomon Godeau "Going Native", *Art in America* Vol. 77, No. 7 July 1989, pp. 123 - 124

As Fanon's, Bhabha's and Said's oeuvres have all explored, respectively, many "colonialisms" manifested themselves in the domains of *desire*, in the psycho-sexuality of alterity and domination. There is a truly massive literature on this subject. For my purposes. I wish only to suggest that any postcolonial literature that understands itself as an evolution, reaction, or resistance to this history (and in this category one would certainly include all the authors, bar Tutuola, named in this thesis) must necessarily deal with the "bio-politics" of the colonial and postcolonial relations, it must be a writing that concerns itself with the body.

Yet Bissoondath's work suggests issues which are not concerned with only the postcolonial representation of the body. The interpretation of Bissoondath's "bodily style" demands a more complex meditation upon the relationship between the social and the physical body and the more general question of the representability of the body in literary form, with the possibility of making the word carry the representative burden of the flesh.

What is foundational to understanding the bodily styles in Bissoondath, is the more general problem of evoking flesh through texts, of the essential disparity between the disembodied world of the linguistic signifier and the absent world of the somatic signified. Bodily representation, therefore, stages the problem of referential slippage and the non-presence of meaning in language in an extremely explicit form. Peter Brooks in his excellent *Body Work; Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* <sup>187</sup> expresses this best:

Representation of the body in signs endeavours to make the body present, but always within the context of its absence, since use of the linguistic sign implies the absence of the thing for which it stands. The body appears alien to the very constructs derived from it..... It is perhaps most of all this sense of the body's otherness that leads to the endeavour to bring the body

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<sup>187</sup> Peter Brooks *Body Work; Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993

into language, to represent it, so that it becomes part of the human semiotic and semantic project, a body endowed with meaning. <sup>188</sup>

Brooks suggests another dualistic scheme for bodily representation, his work is interested both in the body as a source of meanings and metaphor and in a parallel tradition of writing *on* the body in which the body becomes “a place on which messages are written”. <sup>189</sup> The body becomes a source for textuality and a kind of text in itself, a medium for the inscription of meaning . Like Douglas, Brooks suggests the possibility (though not a methodology) of a “narrative aesthetics of embodiment” to read this bodily writing.<sup>190</sup>

What Brook’s work suggests for Bissoondath’s corpus of somatic meanings is that his representations of the body form part of a more general tradition of bodily representation in narrative fiction. As part of this tradition, Bissoondath shares in the problems of bringing the body into meaning. Brooks suggests that there is a tendency in a great deal of Western narrative to present the body in fragmentary and partial forms. This reflects a very real problem for language in describing the phenomenology of the body in either its holistic entirety or in its fecund plurality. Bodily representation in the novelistic tradition tends (with notable exceptions) to proceed through an indexical and synecdochic logic of bodily parts used individually (in the more fetishistic instance) and in concatenated chains to represent *bodies*. The metonymic logic of descriptive prose recreates, therefore, the synecdochic patterns of ethnographic description I outlined in my examination of Naipaul. Bissoondath presents, nevertheless, a profound transgression of this discursive pattern. Bissoondath, it is worth repeating, offers a brutal and dissective gaze *into* the body, a body disintegrating. He does not, however, offer a glimpse of either the

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<sup>188</sup> Brooks *Body Work* p. 200

<sup>189</sup> Brooks *Body Work* p. 202

<sup>190</sup> Brooks *Body Work* p. 202

inner structure of this body (both social and physical) or present use with any paradigmatic fragment. Bissoondath both exploits and subverts this tradition. His fiction, unlike Naipaul's, never tries to hide the brutal slight of hand that holds the part up as representative of the whole. Bissoondath demonstrates and exposes the casual brutality in synecdochic and metonymic prose. His fiction presents a kind of Medusan gaze into the body, like Vernon in "Veins Visible" or, indeed, Marsyas in his death throes, Bissoondath presents us with a curiously meaningless body glimpsed in a grizzly snap-shot that offers neither explanation nor apology.

Bissoondath's fiction shows a consistent obsession with the nature of the fragment, of the isolated particle of experience or the human body and the relationship of this fragment to the "whole" from which it has been ripped. The problems of Casquemadan politics in *A Casual Brutality* are described as a result of its fragmentary constitution and its failure to cohere into a nation:

..in politics, it failed to solidify into a recognisable entity. We were formed of too many bits and pieces. There were too many things that we were not, too few things that we were. <sup>191</sup>

Bissoondath's exploration of the violence of the fragment has definitive consequences for the structure of his narratives. Bissoondath's fiction is defined by a kind of causal brutality in which the hyper-real representations of carnage do not and cannot cohere into a sequential narrative form, they are instead "images that formed no whole."<sup>192</sup> Instead, Bissoondath presents "visions fraught with the insubstantial, footnotes forming of themselves no whole, offering but image and sensation as recompense for endless motion."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 314

<sup>192</sup> Bissoondath "Man as Plaything, Life as Mockery" p. 176

<sup>193</sup> Bissoondath "Continental Drift" in *Digging Up the Mountains* p. 146

Bissoondath's denies the possibility of cause and effect, or rather, he fragments and shuffles causality into a hallucinatory world in which each narrative event is "like a catalyst, yet also like a consequence".<sup>194</sup> His fiction veers between images frozen into awful clarity and a world of fluidity and flux, a world of "running water, turbulent and beyond control".<sup>195</sup> Bissoondath's world alternates between the fluidity of emotions perceived in flux and the awful frozen temporality of the memory/snap-shot of carnage. His characteristic use of "images frozen, without context, without energy, without a connecting theme"<sup>196</sup> reflects an attempt to find a form that represents a postcolonial world that is itself conceived as fragmentary, a-causal and piecemeal, "places of limited scope, of brutal past, hesitant and uncertain future".<sup>197</sup> In *Casquemada*:

A was followed not by B, but more usually X or W or T and getting back to B required time. patience, obsequiousness and - the key this - a touch of the underhanded.<sup>198</sup>

The geometric and photographic world of violence remembered cannot proceed into the continuities of "realist" narrative. Caught in stop-start motion, in a fragmentary world of images out of context, the subject of Bissoondath's fiction is caught in a nightmare of eternal recurrence.

Both Naipaul's and Bissoondath's postcolonial worlds are caught within different versions of Zeno's paradox.<sup>199</sup> Naipaul's world is caught in a paradox of matter and Bissoondath's in a paradox of motion. Naipaul's world expresses Zeno's paradox of plurality. For Zeno, as for Naipaul, the characteristic of matter is its divisibility into smaller units, to be indivisible (in Zeno's terms to lack *size*) is to be

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194 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 33

195 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 325

196 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 319

197 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p.142

198 Bissoondath *A Casual Brutality* p. 303

199 See *The Paradoxes of Zeno* (ed. J.A. Farris) London: Avebury, 1996

nothing. For both explore the paradox of infinite divisibility, both explore the paradox of what, if anything, remains of matter after infinite, atomic, division.

Bissoondath's world evokes Zeno's more famous paradox of the arrow in flight which argues that an arrow in motion occupies a definite position at any one given moment and since between two moments there is nothing but other moments, the arrow can only be *in* positions and can never *move* from one to the other. Bissoondath's severative world of kaleidoscopic fragments can never run together into a continuous narrative. Time's arrow is caught in dazzling, halting, images of violence and despair.

Collectively, Naipaul and Bissoondath's work tells us something significant about the analytical concept of the "postcolonial" as it is applied to literary production. Their fiction is, quite literally, a world away from the textual practice of an author such as Tutuola. Through the establishment of an area of competence and authority, their work establishes a form of postcolonialism that is both a fictional terrain and as a way of looking at the world. Through the *perceived* affinities between many divergent cultural and historical situations, they are able to establish careers that represent this world within common textual practices. Once again, the sublime is central to the aesthetic of this form of postcolonial representation; yet unlike the work of Okri and of Armah, theirs is a sublime that forms but does not inform the subject of their fictions, it is an aesthetic practice that seeks to explore the representability of horror but shows no commitment to transforming or transcending their concatenated spectacles of the horrific.

In "Kira and Anya" the aged politico, Seepercad, watches his favourite painting, a pastoral scene of the Island from which he is exiled, be pierced and ripped open by the sharpened nails of the young

Journalist who has come to interview him. Moments later, losing consciousness and reeling from Kira's fatal blow, he "disappears" into the hole in the painting and passes into an oblivion beyond representation. This is a powerful metaphor through which one might think of both Naipaul's and Bissoondath's textuality. Despite the intensity and the focus of their looking glass, there is never anything beyond their images, the "third dimension" of political or personal transformation is something that their brilliant and spectacular vision cannot or will not capture.

# The Aesthetics of Production:

## Aesthetic Transformations in Contemporary West Africa.

### Text, Context, Metatext: Issues in the Semiotics of Cultural Difference.

In Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road*,<sup>1</sup> Azaro the *abiku* child and mediator of the novel's many transformative representations of urban West Africa has, amongst his many "visions", one that is particularly resonant for the task of inter-cultural criticism. Azaro dreams of a journey into the bush in which he dons a carved ancestral mask. The mask effects an immediate transformation in his perception of the African world of his dream:

When I looked out through the mask I saw a different world. There were beings everywhere in the darkness and the spirits were each of them a sun. They radiated a brilliant copper illumination hard to the eyes. I saw a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws. I saw cats with the legs of women, midgets with bright red bumps on their heads. The trees were houses. There was music everywhere, and dancing and celebration rose from the earth. And then birds with bright yellow and blue feathers, eyes that were like diamonds, and with ugly scavenging faces, flew at me and kept pecking at the mask. I took it off and the world turned and the trees seemed to be falling on me and it took a while before things came back to normal.<sup>2</sup>

The mask transforms the reality Azaro perceives; it grants entry into a marvellous and unknown world of spirits and prodigious, threatening, hybrid forms. In a sense this procedure comes to symbolise the secret aspirations of any inter-cultural critic. The search for a meaningful and responsible interaction with a text from a different culture is the search for the mask that will transform our culture-bound perceptions

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Okri *The Famished Road* London: Vintage Books, 1992

<sup>2</sup> Ben Okri *The Famished Road* p.245



and grant us entry into the world perceived through another's eyes. The search for a mask to unlock the secret worlds of culturally "different" texts is the quest for a kind of meta-text (or, more properly, a *supra*-text) that places the landscape of the other's textuality in sudden clarity. The poignancy of Azaro's parable is that the search for such a mask is an acknowledgement of both the need to cleanse the doors of perception and also of the fabricated, temporary, and extraneous nature of such transformations.

My analysis of Tutuola was precisely such a search. The "mask" that my work sought was formed of the cultural and social contexts that might enable a properly informed and responsible reading of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Yet my analysis of the contextual background of the novel raised many more questions than it answered. Tutuola's remarkable *mélange* of novelistic and oratorical techniques, his position between Yoruba and Western orders of discourse, seemed both to demand and, in a sense, foreclose the excavation of cultural context as a prerequisite for a responsible reading. His work's radically hybrid nature seemed to deny the reader the possibility of discovering any *one* redeeming mask of reading. Furthermore, the practicalities and the difficulties of exploring the complexities of a largely unrecorded African cultural context somewhat vitiated my best efforts to create a reading based on such local cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, what my examination of the history of the critical response to the text clearly demonstrated, was that the failure to attempt a contextually informed reading leaves a hermeneutic vacuum all too readily filled with the distortions of Primitivism and the strictly irrelevant politics of alien traditions (in Tutuola's case those of Western literary modernism). For a European critic, reading Tutuola is to be permanently locked onto the horns of this dilemma, caught between one's lack of ethnographic

knowledge and the text's refusal to supply it, between one's desire for a mask and the novel's unmasking of one's critical prejudice.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows I wish to examine further the uncertain, hesitant, nature of this form of reading through an examination of the work of two contemporary African writers, Ben Okri, the Nigerian poet and novelist, and Ayi Kwei Armah, the Ghanaian novelist. I will also endeavour to explore relevant African scholarship on some of the cultural traditions that inform their writing. I also intend to replicate the pattern of earlier parts of my thesis by using African literary texts to interrogate theorists of cultural difference and, to this end, I will bring their work into dialogue with the work of Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist and cultural critic. Once again, my treatment of these works will be, in Clifford Geertz's term, an "extended acquaintance with extremely small matters."<sup>4</sup> I will focus on a limited number of literary texts, in detail, and discuss the broader implications of these works at some length. What I will attempt to explore is the value of the archive of scholarship on specific African cultural traditions to the reading of certain postcolonial African texts, of the possibilities of reading texts through the "textualized" versions of cultural context.

Firstly, however, I will attempt to give a brief introduction to the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in an attempt to explicate the kind of issues of text and context that will preoccupy my treatment of Okri and Armah.

### **"A Nod's as Good as a Wink": Geertz's Semiotics of Culture.**

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<sup>3</sup> The inspiration for my use of the metaphor of the "mask" as a model for the artificial nature of cultural performance and interpretation comes from David Richards' *Masks of Difference* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 or, more correctly, from the influence of Dr. Richards as supervisor on the overall direction of my research.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in his *The Interpretation of Culture* London: Fontana Press, 1993, pp. 3 - 33, p. 21

Clifford Geertz's brilliant apology for his analytics of culture "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" uses, as one of its many examples of the multiple significations of cultural signs, the hermeneutic dilemma of distinguishing a wink from a blink. A wink, itself a sign with many contradictory yet always *intentioned* significations, is objectively indistinguishable from the non-meaningful and reflex action of one eye blinking.<sup>5</sup> With characteristic wit, Geertz uses this dilemma to point to the manifestly more complex world of cultural signification and, in particular, to the ethnographic task of separating the other's meaningful winks from their unintentioned blinks. Once again, ethnographic description is prefaced by an empirical task of understanding the distinction between productive, produced phenomena and the ticks and blinks of culture's meaningless events. This is a pattern we have seen before (in the work of V.S. Naipaul) yet, for Geertz, (and in this he could not be further from Naipaul) this distinction is a prelude to the process of understanding the winks of different cultures in their contextual plenitude. Once this distinction is clarified, the task of "reading" the multiple meanings of the other's winks can be properly undertaken.

Geertz's proposed solution to understanding the nature of meaningful cultural events is an essentially semiotic process of "thick description", a careful and detailed semiosis of the multiple codes of social meaning. This thesis' attempts to describe the social and literary heteroglossia of Tutuola's Nigeria, though Bakhtinian in method was, in a way, also a form of "thick description". Cultural analysis, for Geertz, is the "sorting out (of) the structures of signification (and of) determining their social ground and import."<sup>6</sup> Ethnography, for

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<sup>5</sup> Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* pp. 6 - 10. Geertz borrows his example from Gilbert Ryle's philosophical work on intentionality. The term "thick description" also comes from Ryle's work.

<sup>6</sup> Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* p. 9

Geertz, is an *act* of writing but it is, first and foremost, a *process* of reading:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read ( in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript - foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, for the elusive winks of culture to be “read” they must first be established as a “text”. Behaviour, from the wink to the Berber sheep raid, to the spectacle of a Balinese cockfight, is understood through a paradigm of “textual” interpretation with each disparate event established as a cultural text. Geertz proposes to open ethnography to the plurality of cultural meaning through treating cultural forms as texts, “as imaginative works built out of social materials”.<sup>8</sup> The aim of ethnographic reading is setting the other “up in a frame of their own banalities” and to dissolve their opacity. <sup>9</sup> Producing “good” interpretations is a task which, like the process of producing a good piece of literary criticism, requires discernment, diligent research and an openness to the plurality of meaning. Indeed, one might go further than Geertz’s stated methodology, and suggest that the “Geertzian” critic of culture requires some of the old belle lettrist qualities of taste, discretion and aesthetic sensitivity. Geertz’s most brilliant analyses, such as his examination of Balinese cockfights do, in fact, read as something akin to a critical *appreciation* of the cultural practises of his subjects.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* p. 10

<sup>8</sup> Geertz “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” in *The Interpretation of Culture* pp. 412 - 455, p.449

<sup>9</sup> Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* p. 14

<sup>10</sup> The much-lauded “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”, for example, focuses on the almost Attic qualities of the cockfight and makes a ready comparison between tragic drama, the still life, string quartets and the Balinese cockfight, all as mediums for the “artistic” exploration of the social self.

Throughout his work, then, Geertz likens the practice of ethnography to that of literary criticism in that both the literary critic and the ethnographer produce interpretations of other people's "texts". Both write contingent, non-definitive and "secondary" expositions of the works of others. Given the history of ethnography's aspirations to scientific and objective authority, Geertz's assertion that ethnography is not "an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of a meaning"<sup>11</sup> is a radical and humane admission. Geertz's relativism, his sense of both the complexities and varieties of cultural practice and the modesty of his ethnographic project seems to offer an attractive model for the inter-cultural reading of postcolonial literary texts. Geertz's "textual" model of culture suggests a mode of relationship to other cultures that can bring the events of indigenous cultural practice into the same order of signification/interpretation as the "proper" texts of literary production. Postcolonial texts and the con-"texts" from which they spring are both things to be read. Culture, all culture, is "textual" and the central problematics of Geertz's work are the heuristic and hermeneutic demands of unravelling these texts. The context of African textuality, the lived experiences, rituals, oratures, beliefs, of different African cultures that inform and form African writing are, in Geertz's semiotic model of culture, an "assemblage of texts"<sup>12</sup> that the diligent and careful critic can learn to read and, as a inter-cultural *literary* critic, place in a dialogic relationship with the act of literary interpretation. What interests me is the possible interplay and dialogue between the process of reading African literary texts and Geertz's "other" reading of the cultural background to these texts (and many issues surrounding the proper relationship between these two forms of reading).

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<sup>11</sup> Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* p. 5

<sup>12</sup> Geertz *The Interpretation of Culture* p. 448

## Riding the *Egungun*: Ben Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge"

Ben Okri's short story "Laughter Beneath the Bridge"<sup>13</sup> is, in many ways, an ideal text for the exploration of these issues. Set in the Civil War (1967-1970), it recounts the violent and catastrophic intersection of Nigerian politics, Yoruba ritual, and mass genocide. It is, therefore, a text informed by very specific cultural and historical contexts. It is a text that both describes the traditional Yoruba cultural practice of the *Egungun* masquerade and re-inscribes this practice with the violence of Nigeria's postcolonial history. I will use the archive of Nigerian scholarship on *Egungun* rituals to initiate a dialogue between the complexities of this contextual background and the re-articulation of this context in Okri's modern African literary text.<sup>14</sup> In turn, it may be possible to reassess Geertz's semiotic view of culture in the light of the differences between the postcolonial literary text and the text of ethnography which, in the case of "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" and the scholarship of the *Egungun* tradition, inhabit the same space, a difference that can be neatly summarised by the distinction between ethnographic *description* and literary *inscription*, a distinction I will develop and articulate in what follows.

The narrative "bones" of Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" are easily articulated. Like much of Okri's work, the narrator of the story

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" in the collection *Incidents at the Shrine* London: Fontana, 1987, pp. 1 - 22

<sup>14</sup> Once again it is appropriate to acknowledge my debt to the work of my supervisor Dr. Richards. In a sense Dr. Richards interest and excavation of *Egungun* traditions provides the grounds of possibility for my own research. My interest in *egungun* is rather different in emphasis in that I am interested in mask traditions not so much "in themselves" but to the degree to which they provide an archive of scholarship through which I can develop my engagement with the hermeneutic problems of reading Postcolonial texts. My treatment of *egungun* is rather opportunistic in that I "use" primary research on mask traditions to explore a differing heuristic agenda. My reading of Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" owes a great deal, nevertheless, to Dr. Richards' "A History of Interruptions': Dislocated Mimesis in the Writings of Neil Bissoondath and Ben Okri." published in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial* ed. Anna Rutherford Sydney: Dangaroo Press 1992 pp.74-83

is an adolescent Nigerian boy<sup>15</sup> and the narrative is patterned by a physical and "spiritual" journey. Set in an unnamed state at war with itself, at war with the "rebel tribe,"<sup>16</sup> we experience a child's perspective on a nation in turmoil. The boy's narrative begins with his memory of the strangely still and "beautiful time"<sup>17</sup> when, surviving in their abandoned school, the narrator and his friends wait for their families to come and take them to the "safety" of their own villages. Already the narrator's memory is fixated upon an old friend, Monica. Surrounded by bloodthirsty adults and millenarian fanatics, the narrator fondly remembers the outrageous Monica:

After that she took to going around with Egunguns, brandishing a whip, tugging the masked figure, abusing the masquerade for not dancing well enough. That was a time indeed when she broke our sexual taboos and began dancing our street's Egungun round town, fooling all the men. She danced so well that we got coins from the stingiest dressmakers, the meanest pool - shop owners. I remember waking up one night during the holidays to go out and ease myself at the backyard. I saw her bathing near the shrub of hibiscus; and there was a moon out. I dreamed of her new-formed breasts when the lizards chased us from the dormitories, and when the noise of the fighter planes drove us to the forests.<sup>18</sup>

In his recollections of his pre-war home, the memory of Monica and the *Egungun* are intimately entwined and are already established as a confusing image of cultural transgression and sexual awakening. It is a reverie shattered by the child-like fear of lizards and the very real threat of fighter planes overhead.

Finally, rescued by his mother, the narrator undertakes the terrifying odyssey of an internal refugee. In a nightmare journey across the war-torn country the narrator observes, in a disassociated

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15 Ben Okri does not explicitly name the locale of the narrative. The many details that correspond to the Nigeria of the Civil War and the inclusion of specifically Yoruba cultural forms, one can make the fairly certain assumption that the story is set in Nigeria.

16 Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" passim

17 Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 3

18 Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 3

way that becomes typical of his experience, the many horrors of Civil war. At a government checkpoint, the lorry in which the narrator, his mother and many other refugees travel is stopped and searched for members of the "rebel tribe". Government soldiers rip the passengers from the lorry and demand, at gun point, that the occupants speak their native language, recite the paternoster or the Hail Mary in a brutal life or death test of ethnicity and language. Amidst visions of rape and murder, the narrator again dreams of Monica:

Half-screened, a short way up, two soldiers struggled with a light-complexioned woman. The soldiers smoking marijuana asked mother questions and I never heard her answers because I was fascinated with what the soldiers a short way up were doing. The soldiers asked mother where she came from in the country and I thought of Monica as the soldiers, a short way up, struggled with and finally subdued the woman. They shouted to mother to recite the paternoster in the language of the place she claimed to come from: and mother hesitated as the woman's legs were forced apart. Then mother recited the paternoster fluently in father's language. She was of the rebel tribe but father had long ago forced her to master his language. Mother could tell that the interpreter who was supposed to check on the language didn't know it too well; so she extended the prayer, went deeper into idiom abusing their mothers and fathers, cursing the suppurating vaginas that must have shat them out in their wickedness, swearing at the rotten pricks that dug up the maggoty entrails of their mothers - and the soldiers half-screened by the bushes rode the woman furiously till the sun started its slow climb into your eyes, Monica. <sup>19</sup>

The narrator cannot command himself to remember any of his father's language and is on the verge of being murdered in the bush before remembering his first words, "I want to shit."

They eventually return to a village caught in a state of exhausted hysteria. The military occupy the village, mopping up the final stages of what, after Bosnia, we would call an "ethnic cleansing". Monica (a member of the rebel tribe) has lost her family, her brother Ugo murdered by the rampaging townspeople, and is she living rough. The atmosphere of the town is dominated by the rising stench of bloated

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<sup>19</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 7



corpses (including the body of Ugo) blocking the river beneath the bridge. Monica takes the narrator beneath the bridge and guides his eyes into a clearer vision of the obscure shapes before him:

Then something shifted in my eyes. The things on the water suddenly looked different, transformed. The moment I saw them as they were I left her and ran up the bank. The stream was full of corpses that had swollen, huge massive bodies with enormous eyes and bloated cheeks. They were humped along on the top of the water. The bridge was all clogged up underneath with waterweeds and old engines and vegetable waste from the market. <sup>20</sup>

In the midst of these horrors, the story's sense of impending apocalypse is inevitably realised in Monica's leadership of an *Egungun* masquerade. As the town's respected elders, its teachers and civil servants are pressed into clearing the river of its awful blockage, Monica wears or "rides" a wild and terrible *Egungun* in a reckless challenge to the authority of the military. Unmasked she is forced to reveal her ethnic identity:

We ran, screaming, and regrouped outside the market. We went towards the bridge.  
 ....Only our Egungun - an insane laughing mask split in the middle of the face - went on as if nothing had happened. It danced round the stalls, provocatively shaking its buttocks, uttering its possessed language, defying the soldiers. ....Then one of the soldiers stepped forward, tore the mask off the Egungun's face, and slapped Monica so hard that I felt the sound. Then suddenly her eyes grew large as a mango and her eyelids kept twitching.  
 'Speak your language!' the soldier shouted, as her thighs quivered.  
 'Speak your language!' he screamed, as she urinated down her thighs and shivered in her own puddle. She wailed. Then she jabbered in her language. <sup>21</sup>

The story ends with the brutal irony of the narrator's memory of the aphorism "THE YOUNG SHALL GROW" <sup>22</sup> which had been painted onto the body work of the wagon on which he had returned to the village

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<sup>20</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 18

<sup>21</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" pp.20 - 21

<sup>22</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 4 and p. 22

(echoing the ironic slogan on the mammy wagon of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*).

"Laughter Beneath the Bridge" is a devastatingly effective piece of fiction. In a way that will become definitive of his work, Okri creates a fundamental disparity between the emotional tone of his fiction and the content of his representations. Okri's aesthetic is one which creates deliberate confusions between a microscopic vision of brutality and the sensibility of the perceiving subject. So, like both Naipaul and Bissoondath, Okri is concerned with minute and discriminating observation. Okri's eye for the brutalities of postcolonial history is as keen and "dispassionate" as either Naipaul's or Bissoondath's. The narrator, almost clinically, observes the carnage of the war:

The bodies of three grown men lay bundled in the pit. One of them had been shot through the teeth. Another one was punctured with gunshots and his face was so contorted it seemed he had died from too much laughing. <sup>23</sup>

Yet, unlike either Bissoondath and Naipaul, Okri is interested in infusing the impersonal purview of the observing eye with the complexities of the imbricated and involved perceiving consciousness. It is a small but enormously significant difference that Okri's abused body looks, to the young observer, like it had died from too much laughing. Okri's "vision" constantly operates through this kind of complex and oxymoronic emotional paradox. The narrator of "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" is curiously insulated from the trauma of his vision by his adolescent preoccupation with his own emerging sexuality. The horrors of Okri's shattered bodies are perceived with empirical exactness and then deranged by the emotional synaesthesia of an observer who *sees* horrors but is moved by memories of other

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<sup>23</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 5

things and elsewhere times. Okri's depiction of violence is realised through a focus on the hysterical and paradoxical "laughter of war."<sup>24</sup>

Yet, within the agenda I have set myself for this part of my thesis, I am more immediately concerned with the pivotal role of the *Egungun* ritual in the workings of Okri's narrative than with the scopic politics of Okri's textuality. Monica's abortive *Egungun* concludes a pattern in which violence, sexuality, and ritual become dangerously conflated. The import and meaning of the *Egungun* is central to understanding both the pattern of imagery and metaphor in the text and, more directly, in understanding the relationship between the text and its cultural context. Clearly, a scholarly examination of the archive of research on *Egungun* ritual is not strictly necessary for a meaningful or rewarding reading of the text, (there is enough *implicit* ethnographic information to make the story intelligible for the non-Nigerian). Okri's work is more readily summarised in the conventions of synoptic commentary than that of his compatriot Amos Tutuola. Yet, for my purposes, I am interested in beginning my examination of the use of ritual in Okri's writing and, on the other hand, the analysis of the forms of relationship that exist between a diverse and complex cultural tradition and a literary articulation of this background.

### **Mutable Meanings, Plural Performance: *Egungun* in Modern Yoruba Culture.**

The Mask form, common throughout West Africa, constitutes a massively diverse cultural complex in terms of both its social and religious meanings and the nature of its performance. The Masquerade (a term which is a somewhat inadequate translation) serves to demonstrate the complexities of the study of indigenous cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 9

practice in that the very plurality and diversity of its forms defies the synecdochic tools of ethnographic description. I am not suggesting that the mask tradition and the Yoruba *Egungun* are *beyond* interpretation, indeed the invaluable body of Nigerian scholarship on the *Egungun* tradition refutes this; what I am suggesting is that the archive of Nigerian scholarship on the tradition cannot avoid being a kind of "indigenous ethnography" that partakes of the broader problematics of ethnographic description. I will, nevertheless, use this scholarship to construct my own "third-hand" ethnographic text of the *Egungun* tradition.

The *Egungun* mask is a Nigerian and, specifically, a Yoruba part of this broader cultural complex. The Yoruba *Egungun* mask has proved to have been of particular interest to both Academics and creative artists alike.<sup>25</sup> The *Egungun* cult is the most widespread of Yoruba mask traditions, it not only proved a model and inspiration for new synthesis of the dramatic form but a rich, public, socially enacted, and received body of poetic discourse. The *Egungun* mask is at once a civic festival, a sacred evocation of the spirit of the ancestors, a complex form of communal drama, an initiation rite, a test of masculine endurance and a weapon of political and social control. *Egungun* mask festivals may well be a pan-Yoruba cultural form but there is no single structure, function and pattern of performance for the ritual.<sup>26</sup> A

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<sup>25</sup> *Egungun* rituals have proved of particular inspiration to many Nigerian writers, most notably Wole Soyinka, who finds in the rites of *Egungun* a fundamental in his conception of an African theatre of transition. See Soyinka's *Myth Literature and the African World* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976 and *Death and the King's Horseman* London: Eyre Methuen, 1975 and, of course, the work of Ben Okri. Academic references are legion. See S.O. Babayemi *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba* Ibadan: Oyo State Council for Arts and Culture, 1980, and O. Olajuba, "Iwi *Egungun* Chants - an Introduction" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 5, No.1, 1978

<sup>26</sup> Whilst there are many Yoruba rituals and cults devoted to the reverence of ancestors, the *Egungun* rite is the only pan-Yoruba form. See Nwanna Nzewunwa, ed. *The Masquerade in Nigerian History and Culture: Being proceedings of a Workshop Sponsored by the School of Humanities of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, September 7 - 14, 1980*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Publications Committee, 1982 In particular, chapter

generalised description of the role of *Egungun* is somewhat problematic as the ritual is itself more of a diverse cultural complex than a consistent, single, cultural form.

Nevertheless, there are certain common threads running through the diverse articulations of the *Egungun* ritual. The core of *Egungun* is its function as an act of reverence towards ancestral spirits. The *Egungun* does more than *represent* the spirits of a family lineage, it *manifests*, through the masked *Egungun* dancer, the dead ancestor amongst the living. Each lineage group has an *Egungun* that embodies the family ancestors, the *Ara Orun* <sup>27</sup> (Dwellers of Heaven) of that lineage; while other groups such as herbalists and hunters might also have their own specialised *Egungun* as does the local *Oba*

*Egungun* masks are, therefore, a central realisation and celebration of the Yoruba conception of the relationship between the living and the dead. The Nigerian academic, S.O. Babayemi, describes this relationship in some detail:

Egungun is regarded as the collective spirits of the ancestors who occupy a space in heaven, hence they are called *Ara Orun* (Dwellers of heaven). These ancestral spirits are believed to be in constant watch of their survivors on earth. They bless, protect, warn and punish their earthly relatives depending on how their relatives neglect or remember them. The ancestral spirits have collective functions that cut across lineage and family loyalty. They collectively protect the community against evil spirits, epidemics, famine, witchcraft and evil doers, ensuring the well-being, prosperity, and productivity of the whole community generally. <sup>28</sup>

*Egungun* therefore embodies both a spiritual and a social function. The *Egungun* are regarded as dreaded and revered spirits but,

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25. "The Egungun Masquerade Cult and its Role in the Society." by Oladare Olajuba. "Egungun manifests ancestors. Many other societies also manifest ancestors. Oro, Elaka, Agemo, Admima, Orisa. All with own secret societies. Only Egungun is pan-Yoruba." pp. 293 - 294

<sup>27</sup> My quotations of Yoruba consistently omit inflectional punctuation marks not found in the English alphabet. I have done this because my various sources are inconsistent in how they transliterate Yoruba into English. To avoid any confusion, I follow the authors who do *not* use inflectional punctuation marks.

<sup>28</sup> S.O. Babayemi *Egungun Among The Oyo Yoruba* Ibadan: Oyo State Council for Arts and Culture, 1980, p. 1

simultaneously, their ancestral authority is used as a force in the day-to-day social activities of the community. *Egungun* festivals vary in both duration and timing from community to community but many are annual affairs and form a locus for a variety of civic and religious activity. For Babayemi “..*egungun* appearance is a time of rededication and intimate association with the ancestors. It is also a time of festivity and entertainment.”<sup>29</sup>

The “performance” of the *Egungun* involves a dancing, masked, figure (his body completely covered from view) attended in procession by drummers, dancers, and members of the *Egungun* cult. Lineage praise poetry is recited, evoking the glorious deeds of lineage ancestors and the *Egungun* itself speaks in an other-worldly language of the spirits. In the rituals of *Egungun* the vocal element of performance, the poetic form of *Iwi* verse, constitutes a central part of both praise for Ancestors, family lineages and the Gods. This is combined with satirical and parodic verses concerned with more local and immediate matters. The *Egungun* proceed through the town, visiting members of their lineage and receiving sacrifice and conferring benediction. The women of the lineage sweep a path for the approaching, dancing, *Egungun* and the young men of the community test each other's bravery, endurance and strength by violently whipping each other and, in the *Egungun's* punitive aspect, punishing social offenders, witches and criminals.

In addition to this core of ritual functions, the *Egungun* has many more specialised manifestations. *Egungun* may be evoked at time of communal crisis, family misfortune, famine and war. The powerful *Egungun* of the *Oba* often led the forces of the community in war and various “specialist” *Egungun* may be called on to exorcise

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<sup>29</sup> S. O. Babayemi *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba* p. 2

witches, punish criminals and regulate the cohesive operation of the community.

The details of the appearance of *Egungun* is normally a matter for the lineage *Egungun* cult, a secret organisation that orchestrates and arranges the ritual. The cult is usually exclusively male and its knowledge of the inner workings of *Egungun* are a secret of the cult members. Amongst many festivals, however, separate bodies of *Egungun* professionals *Alare* or *Alarinjo* combine with the various "amateur" lineage *Egungun*. Their function is to provide amusing and satiric performances in which parodic verse and comic mimicry provide entertainment and satirical instruction to the community. Babayemi describes their functions thus:

They mimic different types of peoples and objects, hunters, imbeciles, prostitutes, white couples with their pointed noses embracing each other in public, monkeys, boas, the tortoise and the like. They usually expose the bane of the society in drama.<sup>30</sup>

The *Egungun* form is, above all, a malleable cultural practice. Its survival and popularity over centuries and across multiple contexts (*Egungun* rituals are common in Nigeria's great cities and small villages) point to a form of social communication that can and does change to suit the social needs of the local community. It is hardly surprising, then, that the form has achieved the "crossover" into the registers of the Nigerian literary imagination. Okri's use of the *Egungun* as a form that can speak of the horrors of the Nigerian Civil War mark a translation of ritual context into literary text. The nature of this most recent transformation is something I hope to establish in what follows.

### Inscription and Description: Okri's use of *Egungun*

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<sup>30</sup> S. O. Babayemi *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba* p. 40

Okri's text is an awful and profound transformation of the *Egungun* ritual. The form is re-inscribed with the new social truths of genocide and communal collapse. A celebratory rite of social cohesion becomes a terrible test of ethnicity and a sign of transgression and violence. The *Egungun* which, in one Yoruba myth of origin, embody the spirits of *Se Aiye gun* (those who make the earth stable) have become a representation of the collapse of the community.<sup>31</sup> The *Egungun* led by Monica manifest instability, transgression and crisis. Even the traditional martial role of the *Egungun* festival (as the "testing ground" of the community's young men) is perversely transformed into the children's doomed challenge to the modern army. Okri does extreme violence, therefore, to the ethnographic "truths" of the *Egungun* ritual. His use of the *Egungun* does not replicate the "general trends" of *Egungun* performance and tradition as represented in the scholarship on the ritual. In the fictional context of the Nigerian Civil War, the *Egungun* becomes, of necessity, something different to the form it takes in peace time. An ethnographic text of a living and, above all, diverse tradition (such as both the account offered above and the Nigerian texts on which it draws) assumes a degree of minimal stability in the cultural practices under its scrutiny. Okri's Civil War setting throws the surety of this kind of ethnographic reference into chaos. The transgression of the boundaries of community and the individual body that is endemic to the Civil war *requires* an aesthetic transgression of the traditional *Egungun* ritual in Okri's text.

Okri's re-accentuation of the tradition works in many ways. His text takes a practice intimately concerned with traditional concepts of death and makes of it a threnodic investigation of these very concepts in a state of collapse. Central to the Yoruba "practice" of death (of which *Egungun* are a central part) are the rites that transform the

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<sup>31</sup> S. O. Babayemi *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba* p. 10



pestilent flesh of the corpse into the protecting, sacred spirit of an ancestor. Burial ceremonies are necessary in order to change the taboo flesh of the corpse (*oku*) into the spirit of the ancestor. *Oku* is considered harmful to the community and proper burial allows the restless ghosts of the dead to pass on to the realms of the ancestors (or if the dead are children, into the *abiku* cycle of rebirth).<sup>32</sup> *Egungun* and cadaver are intimately linked, representing opposites in a metaphysics of death (the corpse, like the *Egungun*, is always covered from head to foot). Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" takes this connection and relocates it in the context of mass murder. *Egungun* is a ritual of lineage and continuity, it affirms the allegiances of family and community. Civil war makes a mockery of these stabilities. In the soldier's unmasking of the *Egungun*, Okri presents a ritual transgressed and defiled.

The bodies of the dead are no longer part of a process of purification and "transubstantiation" but are, instead, disabused of their ritual clothing and hidden on the fringes of the town, festering and out of view. Their flesh remains putrescently *oku*, a suppurating memory of ethnic violence. The ritual "passage" of the body is transformed into the shameful clearance of the blockage beneath the bridge. These dead are not permitted entry into the realms of the *Ara Orun* and can never be revered as *Egungun*. In a dreadful ethnic irony, the "rebel dead", not part of the Yoruba community of life, are expelled from the Yoruba community of the dead. Perhaps this is why their ghosts so insistently haunt the village, "possessing" the children of the town to build an *Egungun* in defiance of the new rituals of death practised by the military and realised in the pogroms of the dead's sometime neighbours. Monica's *Egungun* is, then, intimately connected

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<sup>32</sup> See Oladare Olajuba "The Egungun Masquerade cult and its role in the society" in *The Masquerade in Nigerian History and Culture*, Chapter 25, p.340

with the stench of the dead and with the fate of the nameless and un-departed ghosts:

On Saturday afternoon I was just strong enough to go and see this new masquerade for myself. The town stank. It was true: the boys had built this wonderful Egungun with a grotesque laughing mask. The mask had been broken - they say Monica's temper was responsible - but it was gummed back together.

.....When we got to the empty market the spirit of Egunguns entered us. As we danced round the stalls, in the mud of rotting vegetables and meat, we were suddenly confronted by a group of big huge spirits. They were tall, their heads reached the top of the zinc roofing. They had long faces and big eyes.

.....We passed the bridge and I saw the great swollen bodies as they flowed reluctantly down the narrow stream. <sup>33</sup>

Monica's unmasking and the demand that she "speak her language" is the terrible conclusion of Okri's transformation of the *Egungun*. The uncovering of the possessor/possessed of the mask is the most dreadful desecration of the sacred status of the *Egungun* as ancestor. It is a cultural taboo that Monica herself makes explicit:

One of the boys tried on the mask and shook around. I tried to snatch it from him and Monica said: 'Don't do that. You know you're not allowed to take off an Egungun's mask. You'll die if you do.' <sup>34</sup>

The masquerader should not be unmasked and a young, female, non-Yoruba<sup>35</sup> should not be beneath the mask. Yet there is an awful pertinence in the "voice" of the Igbo dead beneath the bridge being articulated by Monica's terrified figure. Like the "traditional" *Egungun*

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<sup>33</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 22

<sup>34</sup> Okri "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" p. 14

<sup>35</sup> As all the commentators on Egungun remark, women were normally excluded from the cult of the Egungun and always from the performance of the mask. This reflects a broader sexual politics as ancestors were, according to Oladare Olajuba, "deceased male members alone." Dead female relations were revered but were not Egungun. Olajuba - *The Masquerade in Nigerian History and Culture* p.389. Children's involvement in Egungun festivals was, according to Babayemi, restricted to the non-Egungun (non-ancestral) *Kunduke* and *Tobolo* masks. See Babayemi *Egungun among the Oyo Yoruba*, p. 37.

which speaks the incomprehensible language of the spirits, Monica “jabbers” in her own language of terror and loss.

From the initial scenes of rape and ethnic violence and the first dreams of Monica, Okri entwines the *Egungun* with issues of gender and sexuality, presenting a representation that collates, to borrow a jargon, *eros* with *thanatos*. He presents a textualized version of the *Egungun* that is *unrepresentative* in terms of the ethnicity, age and the gender of his performers. The context of the performance is equally unrepresentative. Yet, for important and unexpected reasons, a work like Okri's shows a less obvious but more profound fidelity to the cultural practice of the *Egungun* than does the synoptic and representative vocabularies of ethnographic description.

Both the ethnographic text and a postcolonial literary text such as “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” transform, in different ways, the local performance of the *Egungun* into a text (to echo Foucault they transform event into text.) What is significant is that the event, performance, ritual was *not* a text before the intervention of the ethnographer or the artist. Okri's 1995 novel, *Astonishing the Gods* is, in part, an extended exploration of the “invisibility” of African culture, of the unrecorded traditions of orally transmitted beliefs. The non-textual nature of African society is both the source of the main character's “invisibility” and the opportunity for Okri's rather abstruse exploration of the “advantages” of invisibility and the “sunlight of unwritten ages”:

It is better to be invisible. His life was better when he was invisible, but he didn't know it at the time.

He was born invisible. His mother was invisible too, that was why she could see him. His people lived contented lives, working on the farms, under the familiar sunlight. Their lives stretched back into the invisible centuries and all that had come down from those differently coloured ages were legends and rich traditions, unwritten and therefore remembered. They were remembered because they were lived. <sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ben Okri *Astonishing the Gods* London: Phoenix House, 1995, p.1

Okri's work is concerned, then, with the deeply paradoxical task of recording the unwritten world of African life, with the "textualization" of invisible and unrecorded traditions. So both Okri's postcolonial literary texts and the ethnographic text perform a kind of "textualization" of cultural performance. The ethnographic text can do this in a number of ways; it can record the details of an individual *Egungun* performance (in the form of "field notes") and offer this "text" as representative of the broader features of the tradition, it might draw more synoptic and generalised conclusions on the dominant trends of the tradition, or it might (like my brief description) be built upon the existing ethnographic texts of others.

As James Clifford points out in his discussion of Geertz's work,<sup>37</sup> the "textualization" of cultural practice is a process that, whilst producing an ethnographic "text" also freezes living traditions into "still lives" that, inevitably, lose much of the performative and contextual circumstances that are fundamental to the immediate meaning of the cultural event. Indeed, the more "thick" the description of the cultural event, the more its fleeting and local nature seems to flee the grip of ethnography's relentlessly descriptive prose. The body of scholarship on the *Egungun* evidences precisely this process. Babayemi's lengthy study *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba* has particular difficulty in making its synoptic prose cope with the diversity and plurality of the lived ritual. The following passage shows Babayemi's difficulties:

An annual egungun festival is usually organised collectively when the spirits of the ancestors share physical fellowship with their relatives on earth. The festival usually lasts seven, fourteen, seventeen or twenty-one days. At the end of the festival, it is believed that all the egungun return to heaven. Their spirits could, however, be called upon from their different *Ojubo* (sacred spots) whenever their relatives on earth needed their divine services. In fact, certain egungun do come out after the annual festival to

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<sup>37</sup> James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture - 20th Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* London: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 38

perform specific functions. These include the *egungun* that carry rituals to sacred spots; those that hunt for witches; those that perform rituals at funerals and other functions. *Egungun Onidan, Alarjo or Agbegijo* who are professional entertainers could also come out all the year round. <sup>38</sup>

Babayemi is, in essence, attempting to answer the question “When and for how long do the Oyo Yoruba perform the *Egungun* ritual?” His prose is disordered by the attempt to *include* the diversity of the practise of *Egungun* within the economies of descriptive language.

Geertz is useful in establishing the nature of the ethnographic “writing” of the cultural event. For Geertz the role of the ethnographer is to “inscribe” the passing events of cultural performance into a form that can be re-examined in a world of permanent texts:

So, there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive, what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse, and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of social discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms. <sup>39</sup>

For reasons that will become clear in what follows, I would take issue with Geertz’s vocabulary but not his basic argument. Ethnographic prose is essentially “descriptive” rather than “inscriptive”. “Laughter Beneath the Bridge”, like an ethnographic text, enacts a *form* of “textualization” of a living, diverse, and complex cultural practice. It takes the various and ephemeral practises of the many “actual” *Egungun* mask traditions and makes a literary text of them. Yet this “textualization” is one that operates in a profoundly different way.

Clearly there is a kind of “violence” in any act of textual interpretation. Something *must* be lost in the passage of event into text as language cannot convey the passing plenitude of lived experience intact. The deliberate violence that Okri does to the

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<sup>38</sup> Babayemi *Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba* pp. 3/4

<sup>39</sup> Geertz “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture” pp. 19 - 20

*Egungun* tradition is one which inscribes the form with new meanings in new contexts (by this I mean both the context of the short story and the Civil War). His deliberate infidelity to the tradition produces a textual *palimpsest* in which the literary text writes over the particularities of the actual cultural tradition. Okri marks the tradition of the *Egungun* with the different meanings of the Civil War and the collapse of community and traditional metaphysics. The "violence" of ethnographic representation comes in the necessary truncation of the plurality of its cultural object, in that which it must exclude and deny in its *descriptive* delineation of living traditions. Ethnography is Procrustean in the ways in which it reduces the performative aspect of cultural events to "perusable" texts. Whereas, a work like "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" (with no mimetic responsibility towards "actual" *Egungun*) can perform more radical transformations of the tradition.

Okri's process of textual inscription, the freedom from slavish ethnographic reference, allows a more profound evocation of the *Egungun's* transformative nature. The difficulties ethnographic description faces in evoking the *Egungun* is not merely the generic problem of all ethnographic description. A descriptive ethnography of an event such as the Catholic Mass would be faced with a different order of exclusion and descriptive travesty, different sins of omission and commission, than a description of the Yoruba *Egungun*. The relative homogeneity of an event such as a Catholic Mass (and the body of Canonical law, theological doxa and established practice governing its "performance") would permit a fairly stable "textualization" of the event. What is most characteristic of the *Egungun* is its variety, plurality and adaptability, in many ways its opposition to the notion of stable social and cultural identities. Okri's text is true to this aspect of *egungun* traditions, it evokes the expressive force of a living practice and is testament to the form's transformational role in Yoruba culture.

Okri's text evokes the "accommodative" nature of the *Egungun* form and finds new ways to make the *Egungun* carry social meanings.

It is worth returning to Geertz to see the distinction with even greater clarity. Geertz describes ethnographic "inscription" as the practice of recording the "said" of cultural discourse in a form that enables the closer semiosis of the structures of its meanings. Geertz's evocation of the "said" of discourse is a term borrowed and "twisted" from the work of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>40</sup> This distinction is one which was central to the philosophy of Ricoeur's contemporary, Emmanuel Levinas, and my own treatment of Tutuola. If ethnographic description is an attempt to give form to the "said" of cultural events, Okri's work can be seen as an evocation of the "saying" of the *Egungun* tradition, of the deeper expressivity of *Egungun*. The evocation of the unspecified saying of traditional Yoruba belief is characteristic of Okri's entire oeuvre. *The Famished Road* is a text that is far more concerned with the metaphoric potential of the *abiku* than the detailed representation of Nigerian belief in the *abiku*. Indeed, Okri's own use of the *abiku* belief in his fiction is not consistent or unitary. In *The Famished Road* and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment*,<sup>41</sup> Azaro, Okri's *abiku* protagonist, is a "character" in the realist sense of the word, yet he is also a device through which Okri can open the "eye" of his text to the weaving, interlaced and multiple realities of his vast narrative aspirations. He is Okri's medium between the various worlds of spirit, historical consciousness, and the hidden wonder of the mundane. Azaro, the *abiku* who wished to break the cycle of death and re-birth, is a figure whose spectral and liminal presence helps Okri explore both the fatal patterns of recurrence in African history and the, as yet, unimagined worlds of future histories. This is almost the inverse of

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<sup>40</sup> Geertz "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture" pp. 18 - 20. Geertz quotes Ricoeur's "The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text" (1971).

<sup>41</sup> Ben Okri *Songs of Enchantment* London: Jonathan Cape, 1993

the *abiku* figure of Okri's 1983 poem "Political Abiku."<sup>42</sup> In this poem the *abiku* is a vengeful, tyrannical figure "with executions on his fingers"<sup>43</sup> wracking the motherland as "another bloody/ Parturition wracked our/ Demented nation."<sup>44</sup> The "Political abiku" of this work is a figure who embodies the tragic history of the Nigerian nation and the repetitious pattern of violence and exploitation recycled from colonial to postcolonial times. What I wish to suggest is that the multiple, performative nature of Yoruba belief offers Okri the freedom to transform his usage of its traditions in a manner that is significantly different from the artist whose cultural traditions are more homogeneous and "textualised".

Similarly, "Incidents at the Shrine",<sup>45</sup> the eponymous story in Okri's first volume of short stories, creates a deliberate distance between the unnamed images and rituals of the narrative and the living traditions upon which they draw. Okri is more concerned with evoking the performativity of the ritual healing of his protagonist than he is in evoking the ethnographic "said" of specific practices upon which they may be based.

This "inscriptive" and transformational methodology also extends to Okri's relationship to the "canon" of Anglophone African writing. Okri's body of work is a complex palimpsest that is constantly evoking other African writers. Examples are legion, Omovo the painter of *The Landscapes Within* begins to name a painting "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" (after Armah) only to change its title to "Related Losses" at the last moment.<sup>46</sup> In his second collection of short stories *Stars of the New Curfew* the final story "What the Tapster Saw" relocates the

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<sup>42</sup> Ben Okri "Political Abiku" from *An African Elegy* London: Jonathan Cape, 1992, pp. 71 - 75

<sup>43</sup> Okri "Political Abiku" p. 71, line 4

<sup>44</sup> Okri "Political Abiku" p. 73, Part 3, lines 6 - 8

<sup>45</sup> Okri "Incidents at the Shrine" in *Incidents at the Shrine* pp. 53 - 66

<sup>46</sup> Ben Okri *The Landscapes Within* Harlow: Longman, 1981, p. 281



fictional world of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in a Niger Delta dominated by ruthless oil companies.<sup>47</sup> Okri's narrative goes beyond allusion and reference and almost rewrites the Tutuolan narrative. Okri's narrative reverses and re-tells the story of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* from the perspective of the dead tapster and his experiences and adventure in the "other world" of the dead.

Nowhere is this process more apparent than in his story "In the City of Red Dust."<sup>48</sup> Like "What the Tapster Saw", this is a story whose relationship to Tutuola is quite explicit. The story is a *palimpsest* that reworks, transforms and writes-over Tutuola's "Red-Bush" section of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

What is important and engaging in his method is not so much the way his textuality realises a sense of an emergent West African literary canon but the ways that Okri takes imagery from Tutuola and, in the act of relocation to contemporary Africa, radically transforms its import and meaning. In the "Red-Bush" episode of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (examined above), Tutuola presents a labyrinthine adventure in which a cursed village must pay tribute to the monstrous red-fish and red-bird who magically turns their world deepest red. In modern Africa, Okri presents us with another red tale but this time it is a narrative of poverty, desperation and military repression. The mood of delirium and unreality is transposed from Tutuola and given new meanings as the two main protagonists, Emokhai and Marjomi (both hucksters down on their luck), are forced to sell their blood, day after day, to the local hospital. Theirs is a blood sacrifice to poverty and unemployment, one which transforms their world into a threatening hallucination. It is as if their blood colours a vampiric city redder and redder with every drop. Weakened by his

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<sup>47</sup> Ben Okri *Stars of the New Curfew* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989, pp. 183 - 194

<sup>48</sup> Okri "In the City of Red Dust" in *Stars of the New Curfew* pp. 37- 79

loss of blood, by hunger and ill-fortune, Marjomi lives in a waking dream, tormented by punishments no less inexplicable and irresistible than those of the drinkard.

Their city, like the bush of the red-people, is dominated by a monstrous figure. The city's military governor is a creature who demands tribute and whose presence dominates the red city no less than the red-bird or the red-fish of Tutuola's narrative. The story is set on the day of the governor's birthday when the city is driven half-mad by the outlandish celebrations prepared by the military. The army stamp and parade the city into a smog of red dust, the atmosphere becomes one vast ochre cloud of arrogance and sweltering pollution. The red dust gets everywhere, it becomes as pervasive as the magical red smoke of Tutuola's narrative. In Okri this does not represent, however, a supernatural curse but comes to signal the superhuman and unreal bombast of one corrupt man. This is central to Okri's technique; he does not simply *naturalise* Tutuola's narrative, making his story's "redness" a function of his characters' dripping blood or the city's powdery streets; he retains a sense of Tutuola's fantastic, the chaos of the red city is deliriously hyper-real. From ground-level the red city is not altogether unlike the world of the drinkard. Ungovernable forces erupt into life, filling the streets, turning the air, the water, the world red. Characters stumble through a world they cannot influence or explain.

"In the City of Red Dust" is a brilliant re-working of Tutuola. With characteristic subtlety we can "see" the world of the drinkard etched beneath the surface of Okri's narration. The complexity of his palimpsest lies in the variety and delicacy of Okri's touch. At times the over-written Tutuolan text shines brightly through the surface of Okri's work, at other times his re-contextualisation of the tradition all but obscures Tutuola's lurking presence. Yet a fundamental difference

between the two works remains, a difference that makes Okri's vision more terrifying and desperate. The drinkard and his wife move through and move on from their red world. The picaresque structure of Tutuola's narrative means that their sojourn can only be temporary. For Dede, Marjomi and Emokhai there is no escape from the city of the red dust; as long as there is blood pumping through their veins, they are caught in a world where "tomorrow never ends".<sup>49</sup>

Okri's work presents, therefore, an extremely explicit form of intertextuality that takes the work of Armah, of Soyinka, of Camus, of Tutuola and "writes over" them.

The import of the distinctions I have drawn between the descriptive, ethnographic "said" and the inscriptive, literary "saying" are both fundamental and potentially banal. Ethnographic texts and postcolonial literary texts (or at least those like Okri's) are different. This is hardly a surprising conclusion. Yet what the journey towards this conclusion has revealed are some important uses for the archive of scholarship on the reading of postcolonial texts. Clearly, my study of the research on *Egungun* traditions has allowed an inter-cultural reading informed by a whole new level of nuance and an awareness of the broader cultural significance of the *Egungun* in Okri's work. What this research did not provide was a "mask" for overcoming the cultural differences between European criticism and the African text. A text such as "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" does not afford a "meta-textual reading" in which a knowledge of *Egungun* traditions unlocks some definitive insight into the text. This is clearly a condition of *all* textuality, not only the postcolonial African text. Yet a work like "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" or *The Famished Road* cannot be read in the same way as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Joyce's *Ulysses* (despite the comparative cultural differences between the modern reader and

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<sup>49</sup> Okri "In the City of Red Dust" p. 72

Milton's text or the prolix complexity of an artist like Joyce). While *Paradise Lost* and *Ulysses* are as manifestly complex as one could imagine, there are certain stable contextual referents that can inform one's exploration of the texts. The King James Bible and the plethora of Puritan pamphlets by Milton and his contemporaries might be open to endless interpretation and re-interpretation but they are, nevertheless, an unchanging body of texts upon which to build a criticism. Similarly, the Homeric mythoi that underpin *Ulysses* are a complex but stable mytho-poetic tradition that, while being an historically massive body of materials, are nevertheless open to a "textualised" exploration in a good public library. It is not only the inter-cultural critic's *distance* from Yoruba ritual that marks his or her critical project as different to the archaeologist of European literary culture. The plurality of a tradition such as the Yoruba *Egungun* mask means that the reader of the text has no absolute reference point for its significance in Okri's or any one else's text, the reader can only partake of this plurality and contingency. The postcolonial African literary text cannot be read as a "straightforward" evocation of cultural context built as it is upon the shifting sands of complex, various, and *living* traditions. What Okri's postcolonial textuality evokes is the "performative" and non-recoverable nature of the cultural practices that it depicts.

Okri's work demonstrates the essential flaw in the Geertzian project, namely, the unimpeachable distance between text and performance, between being winked at and reading an account of a winker. Much as we might wish, as European critics, for the culture of African societies to be *textual* in the Geertzian sense, (as this would provide us with a solid and permanent critical and comparative base), the fictionalised and transforming artistic practice of a writer such as Okri helps us understand that many African cultural practices are nothing of the kind.

Geertz's work, nevertheless, helps us think through the fundamental difference between the "textualising" ethnographer and the inter-cultural literary critic. Geertz describes the *ethnographer's* task with characteristic style:

The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong.<sup>50</sup>

The interpretation of the postcolonial literary text, particularly the inter-cultural reading of such a text, is an even more complex and mediated task. The critic is not peering over the other's shoulder into the plenitude of their cultural practice but is one step further removed and "looks", instead, at the postcolonial artist's transformed vision of their *own* culture. The postcolonial text does not stand in the way of our vision of the other but is, in itself, a complex part of the culture upon which it draws life and sustenance.

The Twilight of the Idols: Ritual Abuse and the Abuse of Ritual in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*.

'Eeeee! Our White man, we saw you wave! We saw you!  
 'The big man has come again.'  
 'Oh, they have made you a white man.'  
 'Complete!  
 'And you have come back to us, your own. Thank God.'  
 'Yes, praise him!  
 ..the fat woman then whirled around, stripping of her large *kente* stole in a movement of unexpected swiftness.. 'Come, my been-to; come, my brother. Walk on the best. Wipe your feet on it. Yes it's *kente*, and it's yours to tread on. Big man, come!  
 Ayi Kwei Armah *Fragments*.<sup>51</sup>

Okri's fiction provides an excellent example of one "aesthetic of transformation" through which indigenous cultural traditions become

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<sup>50</sup> Geertz "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" p. 452

<sup>51</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah *Fragments* London: Heinemann, 1979, pp. 56 and 59

re-inscribed in the postcolonial literary text. His work demonstrates only one mode of such a transformation. The powerful image of the happy been-to, Brempong, treading on the royal *kente* fabric in a perverse parody of traditional greetings, of the modern African literally "treading on the past", points to a transformation of ritual that is subtly different to Okri's use of the *Egungun* and *abiku*.

In the following section I will examine a profoundly different vision of the transformation of African traditions as represented by Ayi Kwei Armah's second novel *Fragments*. As Derek Wright suggests, Armah's first two novels are expressly concerned with the relationship between political Independence and the "residual" values of traditional African society:

The first two novels are, moreover, imbued with a variety of debased rituals, purificatory and sacrificial ceremonial motifs, local mythologies, residual ancestral beliefs and the vestiges of religious practices, all of which have their roots in traditional African society. 52

My own analysis will give considerably greater emphasis to *Fragments*, not only because I intend to write quite extensively on *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in what follows but chiefly because *Fragments* is a work that has a far more explicit and tortured concern with the impact of the colonial encounter (and its postcolonial aftermath) upon Akan traditional practice than the less culturally specific world of the "man" in *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. 53

Armah's second novel is, perhaps, his greatest technical achievement as a novelist. The multi-voiced narrative reconstructs the mental collapse of a young Ghanaian artist, Baako Onipa 54 who,

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52 Derek Wright *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of his Fiction* London: Hanszell Publications, 1989, p. 5

53 Ayi Kwei Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* London: Heinemann, 1989

54 Ken Lipenga in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis *Alienation in the Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* The University of New Brunswick, 1984, points to an unexpected

returning to Ghana after seven years in the United States, suffers an overwhelming sense of anomie and is sent tumbling into a spiral of mental collapse. The novel is an extended exploration of the psychological consequences of cultural alienation and the ideals of a neo-colonial society whose values are portrayed as the diminishing echoes of the Metropolitan centre. Baako, the "been to", is crippled by the weight of his family's expectations and by the impossibility of achieving an emancipatory and emancipating artistic practice. So, like *Why Are We so Blest?*<sup>55</sup> the novel is a tortured, fragmentary, portrait of the emergent African artist, alienated and scarred by the distance between his desires and the expectations of those around him. The novel is dominated by the consciousness of Baako and Juana, his Puerto Rican lover and psychiatrist and framed, at its beginning and its end, by two "interior monologues" by Baako's grandmother Naana. The exotopic perspective of the returned native combines with the "foreign" perceptions of Juana, creating a binocular vision of a nation blind to itself. The half-blind grandmother's sections enclose the fiction in a circular frame of traditional pieties. Within Naana's framing narrative *Fragments* is, like *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a novel punctuated by miasmatic visions of squalor and negation. The novel returns, again and again, to the authority of vision, to an almost Naipaulian economy of blindness and insight. Baako, (the classical seer) who observes too much, wonders if it is he or Brempong who is blind to the life around them:

Maybe the man could see something he was blind to, or maybe he had eyes denied the exhilarated Brempong. At any rate, he would need to be the careful one.<sup>56</sup>

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continuity between *Fragments* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in that Baako's name signifies "the man" in the Ghanaian language *Twi* p. 112

<sup>55</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah *Why Are We So Blest?* Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974

<sup>56</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 62

Similarly Juana, another watcher, comes to see the necessary “narrowing” of Ghanaian’s vision of themselves as an essential survival tactic. Her observations give her a clinical insight into Ghana’s lack of self-apprehension:

A matter of knowing what visions people lead their lives by, or by what visions life leads them. And survival. A manner of adopting a narrower vision every time the full vision threatens danger to the visionary self.<sup>57</sup>

Naana, whose blindness helps her to “see feelingly”, is glad that her disability saves her from seeing too much:

Sometimes I know my blindness was sent to me to save me from the madness that would surely have come with seeing so much that it was not to be understood.<sup>58</sup>

*Fragments* is typical of the enduring concern with sight in Armah’s textuality; from *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to *The Healers*<sup>59</sup> his is a body of work obsessed with the intersection of power, race and the gaze. From the compulsive representation of the physical details of violence and corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?*<sup>60</sup> to the inverted Manichaeism of *Two Thousand Seasons*<sup>61</sup> (with its attempts to reverse the ethics of light and dark, black and white) Armah is obsessively concerned with violence of vision (a concern that stems,

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<sup>57</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 31

<sup>58</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 10

<sup>59</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah *The Healers: An Historical Novel* London: Heinemann, 1979

<sup>60</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* London: Heinemann, 1969, *Why Are We So Blest?* Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974

<sup>61</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah *Two Thousand Seasons* London: Heinemann, 1979



ultimately, from his engagement with Fanon's explorations of the colonial "scene of recognition" in *Black Skin White Masks*).<sup>62</sup>

In the context of my current agenda I wish to concentrate, instead, on Armah's treatment of a neo-colonial society whose cultural life has degenerated into a fragmentary and superficial parody of itself. I am interested not so much in *naming* the cultural practices, traditional beliefs, and Akan customs that inform Armah's writing (indeed, Derek Wright's work *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction*<sup>63</sup> has already attempted this task), but in understanding Armah's twin projects of representing the world of a fallen culture and, conversely, the process of textual transformation by which Armah himself undertakes a re-writing of African traditional belief.

Armah's depiction of Ghanaian cultural life and, in particular, Ghanaian "traditional" culture, focuses on a number of main practices. Firstly, Armah presents the general travesty of the "practices of everyday life". The day-to-day social intercourse of his characters constantly resolves itself into moments in which traditional conceptions of rank and the honorific rituals and titles that accompany it are transformed by the new power structures of the Ghanaian state. In neo-colonial Ghana, conspicuous consumption, prestige, power, and "been-to" status are the new totems. The new Ghanaian elite effortlessly accepts the social prestige formerly the reserve of chiefs, tribal elders, and even the ancestors themselves. Bribery, corruption, and ancient social hierarchies become almost seamlessly conflated.

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<sup>62</sup> Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* (trans. C. L. Markmann) London: Pluto Press, 1986. While *Black Skin, White Masks* is a work shot through with the racial politics of the gaze, the Chapter "The Negro and Recognition", pp. 210 - 222, seems particularly important for understanding the work of Armah.

<sup>63</sup> Derek Wright *Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of his Fiction*. Wright's work has been extremely useful in my own research yet it fails to steer the path between the detailed investigation of cultural specifics such as West African "carrier" customs and the less particular and less impressive contrasts between the "circularity" of African time and the teleological and "linear" nature of Western time. Ironically, Wright is quite critical of Armah's similar homogenisation of African Civilisation into "The Way" in *Two Thousand Seasons*

Powerful been-to's such as Asante-Smith, the head of Ghanavision, have become the new "big men". At the tragic "Outdooring" ceremony, Araba is forced to take over the position of "Master of Ceremonies" from her reluctant brother. The challenging flattery of her guests (to draw larger gifts) collates the vocabularies of wealth with a kind of mythologising of the magic properties of cash. A local "big man" is challenged in terms that would not be inappropriate for a herbalist. "Police Inspector Duncan Afum, your turn now. Show your powers, Inspector".<sup>64</sup> Despite the ostensible socialism of Nkrumah's State, the society of *Fragments* is beset with the hierarchies of class, education, and social position. In a State where the populist leader, Nkrumah, has named himself the mythic "glorious redeemer", the *Osagyefo*, traditional forms have clearly undergone a radical transformation. Similarly, as the frenzied welcome Brempong receives indicates, these new forms of social organisation have not extinguished traditional practices of greeting and personal intercourse but have transformed them through the new intents that occupy their forms. Naana, the novel's often silent, textually marginal, figure is, nevertheless, central in making these transformations clear. In the opening chapter she remembers Baako's departure and the rituals that accompanied it. Baako's uncle Foli draws upon the protection of the ancestors and places the departing traveller in a network of social and cosmic connections:

There are no humans born alone.  
 You are a piece of us,  
 of those gone before  
 and who will come again..  
 .. There are no humans that walk this earth alone.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 186

<sup>65</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 4

Given the subsequent history of Baako's travels these were, as Naana suggests, perfect words, "Nothing was said then that was not to be said, and nothing remained unsaid for which there was a need."<sup>66</sup> Yet the perfectly remembered words and form of the ritual are quickly vitiated by the greed and shallowness that define the rest of its performance. Foli desperately wishes to skimp on the ritual libations offered to the ancestors in order to save as much schnapps as possible for himself :

He had kept the spirits waiting like begging children for the drink of their own libation and, thirsty drunkard that he had always been, even when at last he began to pour it out he only let go a few miserly drops.. Slyly like a thief he was measuring the bottle in his soul. .. And yet this man with his shrivelled soul found all the words to speed Baako into alien worlds and to protect him there. Perfect words, with nothing missing and nothing added that should not have been there. <sup>67</sup>

Baako's tragedy is that neither these nor any other "perfect words" seem able to save him from loneliness and isolation. What Armah presents is not just one isolated moment of greed and hypocrisy but the transcription of alien ideals onto traditional African forms. Foli's eye is not just on the schnapps but on the hoped-for bounty his been-to nephew may bring on his return. Armah does not present us with a society that has had its culture entirely *effaced* (though the Western-educated elite seem to show only a half-knowledge of their own culture), <sup>68</sup> but one in which many traditional pieties have survived colonialism only to be *defaced* by the mimicry and avarice of neo-colonial dependency. While the outward forms of Ghanaian life may have endured, their purposes have not.

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<sup>66</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 3

<sup>67</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 5

<sup>68</sup> Baako, for example, confesses his ignorance of the meaning of the "outdooring" ceremony (See *Fragments* p. 97). Baako, unlike his colleagues at Ghanavision, at least aspires to an understanding of "the illiterate people's images and myths for use in his own work." *Fragments*, p. 153

Yet the ritual centre of Armah's novel is realised in three main textual motifs. Firstly, there is the disastrously premature "outdooring" ceremony of Baako's nephew. This is Armah's most powerful, tragic and, in a sense, straightforward representation of the travesty of tradition. Secondly, the novel is interlaced with the mythology of Mami Wata (Mammy Water), the West African Water spirit. This is a motif realised through the explicit discussion of the myth amongst Armah's characters and its transformation into the risible poetry of Akusua Russell <sup>69</sup> and less explicitly through the mythic transformation of Juana into a kind of Mami Wata figure. Finally there is the "new tradition" of the *been-to* which is the source of Baako's most tortured analysis of his society. The new genus of the *been-to* causes Baako's boldest and most speculative examination of the common links between former colonial cultures in his jottings on the Melanesian Cargo Cult.

The "outdooring" ceremony lies at the heart of the novel and serves to underline the fatal consequence of his family's (and by implication Modern Ghana's) perversion of traditional beliefs and customs. Armah creates an intimate connection between Baako's family and the Ghanaian state. The Onipa family is not so much a microcosm of Ghana but a manifestation of the pervasive truth of almost entirely homogeneous national values. As Baako points out, his family and his society are all but indivisible. Like the aptly-named river town, Bibiani ("This is everywhere") <sup>70</sup> his family are only an example of the "universal" degradation of social values. In a startling optical metaphor, Juana remembers Baako's image of his family's relationship with the broader life of society:

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<sup>69</sup> Armah *Fragments* pp. 113 - 114

<sup>70</sup> Baako translates the awful meaning of the town's name for Juana towards the end of the novel. Armah *Fragments* p. 190

..his family became only a closer, intenser, more intimate reflection of the society itself, a concave mirror, as he called it, and before long she was left in no doubt at all that in many ways he saw more small possibilities of hope in the larger society than in the family around him.<sup>71</sup>

Yet it is in the domestic drama of the Onipa family and, in particular, upon the central event of the outdooring ceremony, that the concave mirror of this relation focuses its most intense image. Likewise, in terms of the structure of Armah's text, the outdooring is the secret disaster "hidden" in the text and recounted in partial fragments on either side of Baako's breakdown.<sup>72</sup>

Araba, Baako's sister had after many miscarriages, given birth to a premature but, thanks to Baako, healthy baby. The new baby and Baako are intimately connected beyond, even the traditional importance of maternal uncles in Ashanti society. The cycle of Araba's miscarriages mirrors the years that Baako had been away and his return is seen as the glad omen that secures the success of this final pregnancy. Naana explains to Baako that his is the ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the child, it is his "blood" that, literally and spiritually, runs through the child's veins:

A father is only a husband, and husbands come and go; they are passing winds bearing seed. They change, they disappear entirely, and they are replaced. An uncle remains. The blood that flows in Araba is yours, Baako, and the child is yours also if it is hers.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the fact that his blood donation saves the infant's life, one feels that the child which was to share his name was, like the elder Baako, to be an unwilling visitor to the hard realities of contemporary Ghana. Naana interprets the many miscarriages suffered before the

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<sup>71</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 102

<sup>72</sup> The ominous prelude to the outdooring ceremony is told in Chapter 4: *Awo* and the pattern of expectations (and Naana's foreboding) already suggests disaster. The events of the day of the ceremony do not come until Chapter 11: *Iwo* which is set in the Acute Ward in which the broken Baako tries to recuperate.

<sup>73</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 98

birth of the baby boy as evidence that the child is "one of the uncertain ones",<sup>74</sup> an *ogbanje* or *abiku* child<sup>75</sup> and, therefore, particularly vulnerable, his grip on life conditional. The metaphoric connection between the "other worldly" Baako and the newly-born and vulnerable child is, therefore, particularly appropriate.

During the preparations for the outdoorings in the *Awo* section of the novel, the ceremony is set up as a combination of the traditional and the sacred with the extremely modern and profane. Araba and Efua (Baako's mother) decide that the outdoorings ceremony must be brought forward from the seventh day after the birth of the child to the fifth. Their motivation is entirely financial; the outdoorings ceremony involves the guests making donations to the parents of the child:

'The Month is almost dead,' Efua said. 'Wednesday... This is such a bad time. But we'll have to think seriously about the outdoorings ceremony.'  
'I thought there were fixed times for these things,' Baako said.  
'An outdoorings ceremony held more than a few days after pay-day is useless,' Efua said.<sup>76</sup>

The ceremony is transformed by the need to perform the ritual at the most advantageous and profitable time of the month. The "updated" ceremony is responding to a modern need through the transformation of the traditional form. This is something that Baako does not fully understand or, more properly, something he chooses to ignore. Baako is under the misapprehension that the outdoorings was a part of the ritual past that, as a Western-educated modern Ghanaian, he has somehow lost. His mother makes it clear to him that the prestige of his been-to status makes him more than equipped to conduct the function

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<sup>74</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 97

<sup>75</sup> Belief in *abiku*, variously called *abiku*, *ogbanje* and *amokmawu* is common throughout West Africa. Armah does not, however, name the child as *abiku* in any African language. See Chinwe Achebe's *The World of Ogbanje* Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986 for a discussion of *ogbanje* in modern Ghana.

<sup>76</sup> Armah *Fragments* pp. 88 - 89

of "Master of Ceremonies." It is the usual bluster and arrogance of the been-to that Efua wishes Baako to bring to the ceremony, not the traditional bond between maternal uncle and child or the proper performance of the ritual.

'Anyway,' she said, 'you know you're the M.C. today.'

'Yes, What do I have to do?'

'I am not the one who has been abroad to university,' his mother said, smiling full into his face.

'What I learnt there was different,' he said.<sup>77</sup>

What Baako fails at first to understand is that the Outdooring is a "new tradition", something emerging in response to the new values of the Ghanaian middle class. The traditional timing of the ceremony (seven days after birth) is replaced by the modern pattern of proximity to pay-day, hence the family been-to is the natural leader of the performance. It is this metamorphic quality of new traditions that allows the traditional function of the ritual, as explicated by Naana, to be replaced by, on the one hand, the extortion of money and, on the part of the guests, the display of power and wealth. The "ritual" dread that surrounds the been-to (as evidenced in the obsequies lavished upon Brempong) place the public display of the family been-to at the heart of the "new" outdooring ceremony. It is this willingness on the part of Baako's family to both "trample on" and to use the past that allows Araba to introduce a startling "innovation" into the ceremony, she calls upon both husband *and* wife to make a contribution to the child.<sup>78</sup> The ceremony *was* a rite of passage between the world of the spirits and the world of flesh. Outdooring *was* almost an extension of the process of birth, marking the arrival of the child amongst the world of the living. To "outdoor" the child prematurely is to desecrate the space between the world of the spirits and the ancestors and the world

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<sup>77</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 98

<sup>78</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 186

of the flesh. Naana expresses this transgression with tremendous expressive dread:

'Five Days. The Child is not yet with us. He is in the keeping of the spirits still, and already they are dragging him out into this world for eyes in heads that have eaten flesh to gape at.'<sup>79</sup>

The traditional meaning of the ritual is, like the baby, the victim of criminal neglect. The baby is "exposed" to the world framed by the new ritual markers of greed and acquisition, a smothering of traditional *kente* never meant for swaddling and blown by the latest consumer durable. As Naana points out, it is the evacuation of meaning from traditional forms that is the real threat to the infant. Baako confesses he does not understand the ceremony. Naana replies:

'Ah that is a shame. The Ceremony you ought to understand, or where do you get the meaning of it, even if it is done right? Don't you see? You know the child is only a traveller between the world of spirits and this one of heavy flesh. His birth can be a good beginning, and he may find his body and the world around him a place where he wants to stay. But for this he must be protected. Or he will run screaming back, fleeing the horrors prepared for him here. How is it that you do not see that?'<sup>80</sup>

Armah represents the modern accommodation of tradition as the perverse and, ultimately, homicidal worship of false idols. In order for the "outdooring" ceremony to carry the new meanings of Independent Ghana, it must become a combination of greedy acquisition and shallow display. Again Naana provides the most exact meta-commentary on the new values possessing the outdooring ritual and the willingness for her own family to find a traditional answer to mitigate modern crimes. In the mesmeric final section of the novel, "Naana", the grandmother's departing spirit ponders the power of the new gods and finds their hidden genesis in the history of colonialism and slavery:

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<sup>79</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 97

<sup>80</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 97



He was not pulled underground by jealous mother spirits, that is only what Efua and her daughter Araba have been saying to hide their crime, after they have smothered another human being in their heavy dream of things... I was powerless before the knowledge that they had come strangers worshipping something new and powerful beyond my understanding... The baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that began the same long destruction of our people when the elders first - may their souls never find forgiveness on this head - split their own seed and raised half against half, part selling part to hard eyed buyers from beyond the horizon, breaking, buying, selling, gaining, spending till the last of our men sells the last woman to any passing white buyer and himself waits to be destroyed by this great haste to consume things we have taken no care or trouble to produce. <sup>81</sup>

The “new” Outdooring is a tradition desecrated yet still expressive of deep cultural truths about the Onipa family and the broader Ghanaian society. This is as much a “transformation” of traditional belief as Okri’s use of *Egungun* and *abiku* yet it is governed by a different order of metamorphosis.

Throughout the text, Armah is concerned in exploring various *ersatz* traditions and the many new systems of belief that are beginning to take the place of traditional systems of thought. Baako encounters a self-professed “nexologist”, an adherent to “nexology”, an entirely invented but somehow resonant belief in the mysteries of fate. Efua is first encountered as a follower of the latest messianic religious leader.<sup>82</sup> Most significant for Baako, however, is the middle class cult of the “been-to”. Armah represents a society where the “been-to” has become the carrier of all social aspiration, an epic hero and cultural representative in a world devoted to acquisition. The been-to becomes a kind of “ghost” amongst the living, divided by the expected heirs he must adopt and the bounty he must bestow from the “other world” of Europe and the United States. Baako comes to see himself as a commodity fetish, a been-to ghost:

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<sup>81</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 199

<sup>82</sup> Armah *Fragments* pp. 32 - 37 and 160 - 161

He is the ghost in person returned to live among men, a powerful ghost understood to the extent that he behaves like a powerful ghost, cargo and all. Meets established, well-known expectations handsomely, *functions* like a ghost (look into Afro-American usage of word spook, also West Indian myth-clusters around the zombie idea), accepts the ghost role and feels perfectly at home in it. In many ways the been-to cum ghost is and has to be a transmission belt for cargo. Not a maker, but an intermediary. Making takes too long, the intermediary brings quick gains. <sup>83</sup>

Armah's protagonist, Baako, collapses under the weight of this cultural expectation. Incapacitated by his insight into Ghanaian society, he, nevertheless, manages to theorise the cult of the "been-to" in a bold, neo-Fanonian synthesis. As the remembered scenes of his departure show, the prospective been-to takes on the material expectations of his people while he is simultaneously laden with an almost supernatural role as intermediary between the "two worlds" of African aspiration and First world plenty. On the edge of nervous collapse, Baako's journals find a trans-global connection between Ghanaian society and the broader world of neo-colonial dependency. This analogy is realised in his comparison of the Ghanaian cult of the been-to with his historical research into Melanesian Cargo Cults. Robert Fraser offers an excellent explanation of the historical background to the cult in Melanesia:

This cult arose out of brief European trading contact with a people who conceived of the spirits of the dead as white. When the source of goods, the white trader ( or in Baako's Ghanaian context the colonial power) withdrew it was identified with the spirit world, and the cargo cult arose. In its best known form it is a millennial cult, and rests on a belief that on some future day the spirits of the dead will return in an aeroplane, bearing wonderful gifts from the spirit world for the living. <sup>84</sup>

Baako sees a common illusory culture of "been-tos" and cultural representatives across the globe. The linkages Armah makes between the deluded aspirations of "the wretched of the earth" shows a clearly

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<sup>83</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 157

<sup>84</sup> Robert Fraser *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* London: Heinemann, 1980, p. 80

Fanonian analysis of neo-colonial relations. The "been-to" cult, as analysed by the fractured Baako, is a trans-national cultural form, it is a debased reflection of the individual culture of dependence. In Ghana it is a pervasive network of expectations and obligations that combine in a parody of traditional belief in parallel and co-existent spirit-worlds. What is significant is the vast difference between Baako's insight into the travesties of traditional life, his ability to theorise and explain the invented traditions of the new Ghana and the blindness of all but the smallest minority of Armah's Ghanaians to the shambolic and desperate state of their cultural lives. Armah presents a society in which the populace *unwittingly* act out the deepest fantasies of the national psyche in rituals of greed and materialism. It is this distinction that makes Armah's transformations of cultural traditions so troubling and problematic. When society re-writes and transforms its traditions they produce a pantomimic travesty of the past, when they "invent" new traditions they are necessarily blind to their own hidden purposes. When Baako attempts the re-writing of his culture (such as his abortive screenplays and his notebooks) he is, on the other hand, able to uncover the inner mechanism of national consciousness.

The politics of this distinction are nowhere more manifest than in the text's treatment of the myth of Mami Wata ( in Armah "Mame Water"). In the figure of Baako's lover, Juana, Armah rewrites and transforms the Mami Wata myth common throughout West Africa. Juana, the first incarnation of Armah's "healers" becomes infused with a mythological status of Mami Wata. She is constantly associated with water, she is depicted walking to the beach, showering, swimming, crossing rivers and the sexual culmination of their relationship takes place in water. Yet Armah stands the traditional figure of Mami Wata on her head in his depiction of the gifted, giving and selfless Juana. Mami Wata is, like so much of African popular culture, an enormously

diverse mythical figure. Mami Wata spans the realms of the sacred and the profane. She is found on advertising Billboards in Zaire, a beautiful Westernised siren whose charms might advertise a face cream or a hairdressing salon and also in sacred water spirit cults in the Niger delta and in many specifically divinatory cults. The first explicit mention of the "myth" comes in the *Osagyefo* section of the novel where the poet, Akusua Russell, transforms the myth into a dismal epic poem about Hydro-electric power, "The Coming of the Brilliant Light of the New Age to Amosema Junction Village."<sup>85</sup> This leads Baako to explain the background to the mythic sub-text to Juana (and making the connection between Mammy Water and Juana ever more explicit to the reader).

Mami Wata is a mytho-sexual type found in a thousand contexts and offering a thousand meanings. Yet common to many of her incarnations across Central and Western Africa is a mythology of sexual entrapment. Many Mami Wata stories tell of a beautiful and mysterious river goddess who takes a lover from amongst mortal men. Sexual congress with Mami Wata grants her lover special powers, sometimes wealth, sometimes knowledge, sometimes a full catch for the fishermen. Yet these benefits come at a price. The lover must keep his liaisons secret and must never give up his devotions. The story most often ends with the downfall of the lover and the collapse of the bounty, magically conferred by Mami Wata. The myth is often one of sexual temptation and punishment, a moralistic tale whose import is that nothing comes without a price.<sup>86</sup> Susan Vogel offers the following account of the myth of Mami Wata:

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<sup>85</sup> Armah *Fragments* pp. 112 - 114

<sup>86</sup> Robin Horton has done important research on West African beliefs in Water Spirits. See R. Horton, "New Year in the Delta" *Nigeria Magazine* 67 (1960) pp. 256 - 274 and R. Horton, "Destiny and the Unconscious in West Africa." *Africa* 31 (2): (1961) pp. 110 - 16. I am rather more interested in the more profane tradition of Mami Wata which is wonderfully demonstrated in the many images of Mami Wata in the Exhibition Catalogue *Africa Explores - Twentieth Century African Art*, ed. Susan Vogel (assisted by Ima Ebong). Catalogue to Exhibition of

The image of Mami Wata ('Mother Water') is found throughout West and Central Africa. In some areas, especially Nigeria, Mami Wata is also a religious cult. The image originated in the Western Icon of the Siren and, at least in Zaire, in the European Medieval tale of the mermaid Meleusine (H.J. Drewal 1988). .. The Mami Wata story mainly addresses male power, including material wealth. An encounter with Mami Wata can give a man sudden access to wealth and power, but there is a price to pay: secrecy, fidelity to Mami Wata and the sacrifice to her of one's family members.<sup>87</sup>

Baako's account of the myth is rather different:

The singer goes to the beach, playing his instrument. These days it's become a guitar. He's lonely, the singer, and he sings of that. So well a woman comes out of the sea, a very beautiful goddess, and they make love. She leaves him to go back to the sea, and they meet at long, fixed intervals only. It takes courage. The goddess is powerful, and the musician is filled with so much love he can't bear the separation. But then it is this separation itself which makes him sing as he has never sung before. Now he knows all there is to know about loneliness, about love, and power, and the fear that one night he'll go to the sea and Mame Water, that's the women's name, will not be coming anymore. The singer is great, but he's also afraid, and after those nights on the shore, when the woman goes, there's no unhappier man on earth.<sup>88</sup>

Baako turns the Mami Wata myth into a poignant and exotic tale of doomed romance and Faustian creativity. Baako and Armah adapt and transform the "myth" in their own artistic practise. It is not, as Baako suggests, the "original" version of the story but one individual tableau from a vastly complex cultural canvass. Indeed in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Maanan is another character inlaid with the mythic proportions of Mami Wata. Yet it is Maanan who, paradoxically, suffers the lover's fate of madness and abandonment. It is an example of a different articulation of the mythic backdrop of Mami Wata beliefs within the body of Armah's own work. Armah's

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the same name, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993. The figure of the water goddess is central to the later poetry of the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. In *Labyrinths*, Okigbo explores the revelation of the Igbo water Goddess *Idoto* and in the "Heavensgate" sections, Okigbo encounters a water maiden who seems to have important connections to the Mami Wata myth complex. See Christopher Okigbo *Collected Poems* London: Heinemann, 1986

<sup>87</sup> Vogel *Africa Explores* p. 133

<sup>88</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 140

exploration of the use of traditional myths in the modern African context is best articulated by Baako. Shocked by the vacuity of Akusua Russell's Mammy Water poem Baako concludes, "The myths here are good,' he said. 'Only their use.' His voice died."<sup>89</sup> Yet what is striking in this conception of the role of myth in modern African society is that Armah and Baako seem to evidence a rather limited and limiting sense of the role of popular myths in oral cultures. What Okri's work so vividly demonstrated is that "myth" in Africa is a somewhat different from the European model. While the interpretation of European myths is as plural an activity as one could name, the myths themselves (be they Graeco/Roman, Celtic or Norse) have long since become a canonical body of narratives. Many readings can be constructed from the Ovidian story of the flaying of Marsyas, for example, yet the deviations in the narrative structure and content of the myth itself are relatively minor.

Armah's work offers, therefore, "textualizations" of cultural practice that manage to evoke important characteristics of the ethnographic text. In order to examine the collapse of cultural life, in order for there to be a world of *Fragments*, Armah needs to evoke the echoing presence of a cultural unity, an original and authentic version of the debased forms found in the fallen world of modern Ghana. This is achieved through the Procustean truncation of cultural practice into distinct and unitary traditions from which the characters of the novel can be seen to deviate. Armah needs a descriptive "textualised" (in the sense of a canonical and definitive) source of traditional wisdom to achieve the satiric and transformative aims of his ostensibly sententious artistic practice. He needs to establish, therefore, a unitary "meta-text" of the tradition, an ethnographic source of fading meanings. This challenge presents certain artistic problems. In a

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<sup>89</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 140

world in which ritual and traditional belief have been transformed beyond recognition, in which the values that informed the tradition are in retreat, Armah needs to find both an ideological and artistic device to present this residual knowledge in the midst of the general medium of dereliction and decay.

This aim is achieved through the figure of Naana. Naana becomes a repository of traditional values, a kind of meta-text of cultural wisdom through which the distance between authentic and inauthentic performance can be judged. Framing a text of multiple fragments, she is a kind of cultural superego, a textualization of Akan theology that serves to establish the necessary point of origin for the younger generation's deviant and deluded transformations of tradition. Naana is the indigenous ethnographic authority who shows the deviancy of the outdooing, explains its traditional form and meaning, hopelessly chides the younger generation for their failures - she is the living credo of the travestied tradition. Hence her two monologues frame the text and her interventions in the ritual heart of the novel gauge the distance between ritual meaning and debased ritual performance. Armah seems to be concerned with tradition conceived as text rather than as shifting elusive performance.

Armah sets up an extremely problematic model of cultural transformation: On the one hand, he presents the isolated artist who, possessing a doomed insight into his culture, can transform its myths into useful fictions and, on the other, the greedy and the helpless people who can only experience their own cultural traditions through the distorting prism of Western values and Western greed. Ghanaian society demonstrates, under the clinical exotopic gaze of Juana, "None of the struggle, none of the fire of defiance, just the living defeat of whole peoples".<sup>90</sup> Okri's protagonists are in no less desperate straits

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<sup>90</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 30

than Armah's, and yet his use of myth and tradition presupposes a popular culture that is more than an echo of the past or an expression of the vacuity of present social values. Monica presents a travesty of the *Egungun* tradition no more extreme than Araba's distortions of the Outdooring, yet her act is more than an unwitting manifestation of social chaos, it is a doomed but meaningful attempt to both communicate and to defy the horrors of her milieu. Monica's broken mask, nevertheless, helps her to "see" the extremity of her situation though its cracked, improper surface. The various social "masks" donned by the greedy and the desperate in Armah serve only to obscure the truths that the clearsighted, exotopic gaze of Juana and Baako cannot fail to see. The "Masquerade" of Armah's social drama comes in the disguises used to *mask* the truths of a debased tradition.

In *The Famished Road* Azaro describes the king of the spirit children, a monarch of transformation whose many avatars secretly pervade the course of history:

Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had a red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred different names. ....If there is anything common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities.<sup>91</sup>

This sovereign of changeability seems to hold court over both Armah's and Okri's work. Yet he is a monarch who takes very different guises in both their bodies of writing. The various transformations of cultural performance in Armah's and Okri's textuality point to the complexity of the relationship between the "lifeworld" of traditional African cultural practice and complexities of postcolonial textuality. His force can also be felt in the radical transformations of aesthetic categories such as the "sublime" and the

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<sup>91</sup> Okri *The Famished Road* pp. 3 - 4



"beautiful" found in Okri and Armah. In what follows I intend to explore further the transformations Armah and Okri perform upon the "aesthetics" of bodily and spatial representation, to offer some account of the recurring images of corruption and decay in their work, and to examine their broader response to the politics of Western models of landscape and space.

### Epiphanies of Squalor and Negation: The Miasmatic Sublime in Armah, Okri and Soyinka.

The world stretched out on every side, brown, limp and arid. Against the landscape rose a single baobab, dry and stunted. Its trunk was broad and even up to a few feet, then it was overtaken by an abnormality or retardation that seemed, from the lumps, swellings and contortions, a blight of human infections - rickets, beri-beri, kwashi-orkor, and a variety of goitres. A distended belly in the middle of the trunk thrust its wrinkled navel at the black horizon. From malformed shoulders balanced on a flat chest writhed an abortion of limbs. Where the head might have been thinner branches hissed skywards, darting forked tongues in a venomous protection of whatever mystery hoard lay within the so-called tree of life.

Wole Soyinka *Seasons of Anomy*<sup>92</sup>

..Koomson's insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder which in its fullness sounded as if it had rolled down all the way from the eating throat thundering through the belly and the guts, to end in further silent pollution of the air already thick with flatulent fear. Ayi Kwei Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*<sup>93</sup>

.....I avoided taking in the eye-sores that were human beings and stuck my gaze to the pavement in front of me. This was highly rewarding for I was entertained with the shapes of dogshit. This is the height of civilization. This is what to look out for when everything else seems a nightmare. Following these patterns, and where they seemed to lead, I came to a park. Ben Okri "Disparities" in *Incidents at the Shrine*<sup>94</sup>

These rather stomach-turning examples from three contemporary West African writers point to a pattern of representation that runs through many African literary texts. Images of physical corruption, corporeal excess, and scatological overflow

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<sup>92</sup> Wole Soyinka *Seasons of Anomy* London: Arrow Books, 1988, p. 212

<sup>93</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 163

<sup>94</sup> Okri "Disparities" in *Incidents at the Shrine* p. 40

mark a recognisable and recurrent trope in modern Anglophone African writing. A concentration on images of squalor and negation, a recurrent return to moments of heightened perception of putrescence and corruption both physical, social, and spiritual, seems to be common to a range of modern African writing from Mongo Beti to Wole Soyinka. I have termed this pattern the "miasmatic sublime" as the recurrence of these images seems to point to definable "aesthetic" running across a variety of artistic practice. What is an unmistakable feature of this literary practice is the minute observation of the visual characteristics of physical corruption, an acutely observed phenomenology of putrescence. The "miasmatic sublime" in Okri Soyinka and Armah is, like the work of Naipaul and Bissoondath, a textuality of *vision*; it is a mode of writing expressly concerned with the evocation of the visual and the visceral experience of corruption.

I nevertheless use the term "aesthetic" to signify a common mode and method of representation in modern West African writing somewhat reservedly. The differences between works makes the analysis of inter-textual and trans-textual features a conditional and provisional exercise. Yet the congruence and insistence of images of physical corruption in this body of work insists on the risks of a comparative approach. These risks are, most obviously, the conflation of different textualities under the rubric of one trans-textual "aesthetic", the neglect of the particularities of individual works and the kind of blindness to context that characterised Primitivist and neo-primitivist readings of African texts. The three examples I have used to introduce my discussion are from profoundly different textualities. The diseased, mutating, baobab tree, a powerful image of corruption in the body politic (and one that echoes Naipaul's image of the erupting bamboo in *Guerrillas*) is one that all but culminates the symbolic heart of Soyinka's novel *Seasons of Anomy*; a complex

mythological re-working of the Orpheus and Eurydice tale in the context of the Nigerian Civil War. Armah's flatulent Ghanaian politician is part of the pattern of ingestion and expulsion central to scatological symbolism in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Okri's lunatic seer wanders the streets of London, finding secret meanings in the detritus of the city and epiphanies in the muck under his heel. The preoccupation with images of excretion, corruption and disease might be common in the variety of these textualities but the context of their articulation are, of course, extremely diverse. What I would wish to avoid is a criticism that spuriously truncates the specific differences of various textualities in order to create a trans-cultural aesthetic across divergent African literatures. This is exactly the kind of Procrustean method of interpretation that was characteristic of ethnographic hermeneutics. Yet, as Césaire suggests in a different context, there is a point at which an obsession with the particular can be as inhibiting as the generalisms of the universal, "There are two ways to lose oneself: by segregation in the particular or by dilution in the universal."<sup>95</sup> I hope, therefore, to steer a path between these twin hazards in the various discussions that follow. I will treat a two texts by Armah and Okri individually and seek to build a picture of the "Miasmatic sublime" from the various *different* visions of corruption and negation.

Clearly, there are important thematic links between my treatment of the body, vision and negation in the work of Naipaul and Bissoondath and the issues presently under discussion. Again, I would wish to make comparisons with this material where appropriate. I intend to begin my examination of these issues through a discussion Ayi Kwei Armah's most celebrated work *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

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<sup>95</sup> Aimé Césaire quoted and trans. Henry L. Miller "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology" ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Race, Writing, and Difference* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 300

Scatology/Eschatology: The Aesthetics of Abjection in  
 Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

No one has clean hands, there are no innocents and no onlookers. We all have dirty hands; we are soiling them in the swamps of our country and in the terrifying emptiness of our brains. Every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor. Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>96</sup>

Every foulness of civilization, fallen into disuse, sinks into the ditch of truth wherein ends the huge social down slide, to be swallowed, but to spread. No false appearances, no white-washing is possible; filth strips off its shirt in utter starkness, all illusions and mirages scattered, nothing left except what is, showing the ugly face of what ends. Victor Hugo *Les Misérables*.<sup>97</sup>

There is a moment in his *Discourse on Colonialism* where Césaire turns his eye upon the Western intellectual and, in particular, upon ethnographers in the mould of Placide Tempels. Césaire is fascinated by the greedy, acquisitive, nature of the Western intellect and its ability to "swallow" and consume the other:

One cannot say that the petty bourgeoisie has never read anything. On the contrary he has read everything, devoured everything. Only his brain functions after the fashion of certain elementary types of digestive system. It filters. And the filter lets through only what can nourish the thick skin of the bourgeois clear conscience.<sup>98</sup>

Césaire's analysis of a knowledge "as slimy and fetid as one could wish"<sup>99</sup> is remarkably apposite as an introduction to Armah's abject sublime in that it presents colonial discourse in terms of metaphors of the human ingestion and through symbols of insatiable appetite. The over-stuffed maw of colonial scholarship becomes, by the time of

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<sup>96</sup> Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. C. Farrington) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p. 161

<sup>97</sup> Victor Hugo *Les Misérables* quoted in Stallybrass and White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* London: Methuen, 1986, p. 141

<sup>98</sup> Aimé Césaire *Discourse on Colonialism* (trans. Joan Pinkham) New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972. p. 53

<sup>99</sup> Césaire *Discourse on Colonialism* p. 54

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, another, no less demanding and greedy, mouth and gut. The neo-colonial culture of consumption is configured, for Armah, as a vast digestive tract that, like Césaire's mouth, "devours everything".

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is, therefore, a novel that does more than use the human body as a source for "natural symbols", it is a work whose very structure and narrative sequence is defined in terms of a passage through the interior of the body. Patterns of ingestion and expulsion create a narratology that is, in every respect, defined by these somatic rhythms of digestion and excretion. It is in this passage through the mazes of the body that any criticism of the novel must start.

If, for Naipaul and Bissoondath, the body in the text and the body of the text emerges as something to be anatomised, fractured and dissected, the body in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is defined, primarily, through images of consumption and expulsion. In Naipaul and Bissoondath, the body is anatomised, in Armah, somatic meanings come from the hidden internal organs and their ineluctable systems of digestion and waste, in the body understood as an excreting mechanism. The differences between these two "aesthetics of embodiment" are rather significant. For Naipaul and Bissoondath, the external physiognomy of the body and, most often, the dissection and destruction of that physiognomy comes to symbolise their conception of a pervasive postcolonial condition of cultural fragmentation. The body in parts is a body out of time, preserved in the anatomy room's formaldehyde. What Armah's intestinal aesthetics of the body seem to suggest is an interest in using the body as a complex symbol of temporality, of transformation of matter into waste and the putrefaction of flesh into carrion. It is a body defined by its processes not by its anatomised parts. Naipaul and Bissoondath are interested in

the body as a "bounded system" that their text can disrupt. Armah is concerned with the apertures and orifices of that system. It is also a way to represent the body in a form other than the fragmented snapshot of metonymic prose. It is, I will argue, a representation of the bodily in its historical abjection.

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a novel that charts the appalled progress of an unnamed hero, "the man" through a society in which physical corruption and its moral and political counterpart have become all but indivisible. Defecation and defalcation become more than symbolically linked, they become positively synonymous. The "two bodies" of Mary Douglas have become so close as to be inseparable, the social and the physical body are now in an indexical rather than a symbolic relationship to one another. Consumption and evacuation govern both the physical body and the larger life of society including that of the Ghanaian government. Indeed, power itself is something that is both consumed and expended, Ghana's first postcolonial rulers are described as those who "come like men already grown fat and cynical with the eating of centuries of power."<sup>100</sup> The Senior Service official, straining to sound English, recalls, instead, the various sounds "of a constipated man, straining in his first minute on top of a lavatory seat."<sup>101</sup> The narrative is punctuated by the visceral experience of pollution, a governing physical miasma that leads the characters of the novel to experience their own bodies as rotting flesh. Rama Krishna, the novel's isolated ascetic, tries through self denial and a diet of honey and vinegar, to avoid the pervasive social corruption only to end up rotten inside. The man speculates on Ghana's ability to leave him with a bad taste in the mouth:

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<sup>100</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 81

<sup>101</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 125

Sometimes it is understandable that people spit so much, when all around decaying things push inward and mix all the body's juices with the taste of rot.<sup>102</sup>

This is an image prototypical of Armah's bodily symbolism. The boundaries of the body are transgressed in both directions, the spitting figures both pollute and are polluted by their environment as outward corruption "pushes in" and mixes with the body's juices. The body's excreted fluids permeate the text from the dribbling sputum of the novel's opening scenes to the final motions through the sewers, the imagery of the body is relentlessly one of orifices and their discharge. The protagonist's famous epiphany of physical corruption on the stairway (a moment to which I will return) brings together food, piss and shit in an unholy trinity of the bodies polluting and polluted presence. The wood of the banister is corrupted by time and decay and the microscopic contagion of human contact:

Apart from the wood itself there were, of course, people themselves, just so many hands and fingers bringing help to the wood in its course toward putrefaction. Left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a nasty anus sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip from the lavatory downstairs to the offices above. Right-hand fingers still dripping with the after-piss and the stale sweat from fat crotches. The callused palms of messengers after they had blown their clogged noses reaching for a convenient place to leave the well-rubbed moisture. Afternoon hands not entirely licked clean of palm soup and remnants of *kenkey*.<sup>103</sup>

The body in Armah is often little more than a moving mouth and gut, a contagion defined only in its consuming/polluting materiality. In *Fragments*, Naana denuded by her family of her proper status, realises she has become only a mouth and anus:

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<sup>102</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 40

<sup>103</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* pp. 12 - 13

I am a mouth that continues to eat pepper and taste salt. I am such a mouth, joined to an end that runs with waste, spending others' love that has long since disappeared. <sup>104</sup>

Similarly, the ticket attendant of the novel's opening chapter, consumed by the paranoia of the man's "scrutiny", considers his options:

Was it not likely, most probably, indeed, quite certain, that the watcher was himself also a man of skin and fat, with a stomach and a throat which needed to be served? <sup>105</sup>

The novel's scatological imagery extends, therefore, beyond the more obvious examples of flatulent politicians and the Swiftian inversion of the bodily hierarchies of "high" and "low". The ageless logic that ties human waste to spiritual and political waste, the associations of excretion with pollution becomes more than a pattern of images, it becomes Armah's model for the workings of "plot" itself. The narrative is driven by the spasms of remorse and shame that lead the "man" to become involved in a cheap scam with his brother-in-law, Koomson, a local Party Official. The narrative reaches its conclusion in the final filthy expulsion of Koomson (with the man's assistance) through the intestinal channels of the sewers during the coup that topples his Party. This is both an excretion and a re-birth, the end of one digestive cycle and the beginning of another. It marks the end of one consuming regime, and, as the man observes, the same corruption under the new regime, the beginning of another passage through the intestines of African history.

The body is the ultimate source of the novel's obsession with pollution and waste, the miasma of the man's environment stems from the abuses of the physical body and the social body. The text returns

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<sup>104</sup> Armah *Fragments* p. 2

<sup>105</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 5



again and again to the consuming and excreting orifices of the body for its symbolism. It is a vision of abjection with its own perverse logic, it presents a horror at the sheer presence of corrupt humanity that creates its own remarkable and appalling "aesthetic of abjection".

I term this aesthetic "abject" in order to evoke both the common meaning of abjection as something base, corrupt- outcast and the more specialised conception of abjection proposed by Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.<sup>106</sup> Kristeva's text helps one work through the fascination and revulsion of Armah's powerful symbolism towards an understanding of the nature of the visceral horror at work in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

Kristeva's work is a fascinating, bizarre and not entirely successful melange of literary criticism, psychology, cultural criticism and polemic. It combines an examination of the relationship of literary modernism to scatology (with particular reference to the work of Lautréamont, Bataille and Céline) with a massively ambitious re-writing of Freudian and Lacanian theories of subject-object relations. Using Kristeva in a criticism of African literature brings us back, once again, to the issues of cultural pertinence that thread through the entirety of this thesis. One of the critical debates around Armah's early work is the degree to which its formal structures and imagery are in the tradition of European modernism (including authors such as Lautréamont), as against his debt to African oral traditions.<sup>107</sup> What my analysis of *Laughter Beneath the Bridge* and *Fragments* hoped to demonstrate was that one cannot approach African literatures with a "tick-list" of sources for any one cultural context. The inter-cultural nature of these texts makes this kind of approach less than useful. It

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<sup>106</sup> Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans. Len S. Roudiez) New York: Columbia University Press, 1982

<sup>107</sup> See, for example of Derek Wright *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* Chapter V. "Senseless Cycles: Time and Ritual in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*." pp. 81 - 137 which suggests that Armah's scatology is influenced more by the African griot tradition than European Modernism.

is possible, even probable, that the sources of Armah's narrative technique are Lautréamont, *and* African orature, Camus *and* the griot. It is also possible, I would suggest, to take what is useful from Kristeva without necessarily upholding the Universalist aspirations of her more psychologising moments.

Kristeva's work is profoundly difficult to paraphrase but it seems that her text uses the scatology of modernist literature to postulate a third category of things, neither subject nor object but "abject". The abject is something neither self nor other, the abject could be excretion, menstrual blood, all species of human waste. The abject is all that is neither self nor other. The abject is located at the boundaries of the body, in the pre-oedipal stage of psychological development, the mother's breast is the first abject as it is experienced as both inside and outside the emerging subject. The abject is, therefore, a precondition of subjectivity, it is the outcast half subject/ half object that shadows subjectivity as the endlessly excluded and outcast object of pollution. The cultural taboo surrounding the abject lies in its radical "in-betweenness". Excrement, for example, is both self and not self, both polluting matter and a by-product of a fundamental life process. The abject does not, like the object, consolidate the subject in a stable identity, it signals that which threatens the subject, it is that which the subject tries, unsuccessfully, to expel as not-self, as "pure" object. Kristeva writes:

The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine..... What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Kristeva *Powers of Horror* p.2

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a text that attempts to give shape to the abject, to the "wondering and the shaking and the vomiting horror"<sup>109</sup> of the man's environment. The scatological imagery is an evocation of various borderline objects that are at the edge of self and other. At times the text even makes an assault upon the "Pre-Oedipal" and originary sense of the abject:

Why do we waste so much time with sorrow and pity for ourselves? It is true now that we are men, but not so long ago we were helpless messes of soft flesh and unformed bone squeezing through bursting motherholes, trailing dung and exhausted blood. <sup>110</sup>

Armah's concentration of the abject, on tracing the passage of spit across a cracked leather seat, on the phenomenology of corrupt and over-stuffed flatulence is mirrored by the man's "borderline" personality. He hovers over the miasma of his experience, recording the atoms as they fall, without either committing or fully distancing himself from his relationship to the pervasive corruption all about him.

It is this "liminality" in regard to social corruption that allows the man an appalled insight into the sublime force of the abject. His awareness of corruption and the world of half-matter it produces exposes him to an epiphany of the abject and excremental. Kristeva describes the force of the abject as follows:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. <sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 62

<sup>110</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 62

<sup>111</sup> Kristeva *Powers of Horror* p. 2

The abject is sublime to the degree that its liminality presents an excessive "object" of sense that, in the classically Kantian sense, "does violence" to the mind's powers of apprehension. The abject is something which "does not respect borders, positions, rules...(it is) the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>112</sup>

This aesthetic is no more forcefully realised than in the "banister scene" of the opening chapter. The man's first journey to his place of work is itself an extended and remarkable journey into the heart of Armah's abject. Every detail of the journey resonates with the force of the abject sublime. The dream-like expansion of time, the immersion in the minute phenomenology of perception marks the beginning of the man's visionary consciousness of pollution and is a trope that spans Armah's entire career. In *Fragments* Juana watches a group of men kill a mad dog with precisely the kind of detached and saturated concentration of detail that renders the man's immersion in the miasma of his work place. Similarly, in *Why Are We so Blest?* Modin's murder and perverse fellatio are presented in *all* their awful visual details. It is worthwhile, then, to look at Armah's opening chapter in a similar mode of exacting scrutiny.

The man approaches his workplace the "Railway and Harbour Administration Block" (where he is a minor clerk). It is the scene of his daily trials against the minor corruptions of the haulage industry, a location imbued with temptation, shame and disappointment. The building is itself a kind of abject. Grand when viewed from a distance, at closer inspection it becomes something between bricks and mortar and organic matter. Years of inadequate repair and endless imperfect renderings of its surface open the gaze to an architecture of abjection:

Every new coating, then, was received as just another inevitable accretion in a continuing story whose beginnings were now lost and whose end no one was likely to bother about. The spaces between the bricks were still there,

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<sup>112</sup> Kristeva *Powers of Horror* p. 4

but from most points they seemed about to get lost in a kind of waxen fusion.  
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The “waxen fusion” of the building’s interspaces represents the horror of the transitional state of matter that is either solid nor liquid, brick or mortar, absence or presence. Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*<sup>114</sup> (a text that is vital to understanding the genealogy of Kristeva’s abject) suggests that the “danger” of polluting matter lies, often, in precisely this transitional state of being:

Danger lies in transitional states; simply because transition is neither one state or the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one state to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.<sup>115</sup>

The man’s daily routine involves passing between the cracks of the building’s indistinct matter into the fetid heart of its polluting presence. On the stairwell he recoils in horror from the touch of an ancient, crumbling banister yet, in its sticky caress, he experiences a telling epiphany into the building’s accumulated abjection:

He moved absently to the left of the staircase and reached for the support of the banister, but immediately after contact his hand recoiled in an instinctive gesture of withdrawal. The touch of the banister on the balls of his fingertips had something uncomfortably organic about it. A weak bulb hung over the whole staircase suspended on some thin, invisible thread. By its light it was barely possible to see the banister, and the sight was like that of a very long piece of diseased skin. The banister had originally been a wooden one, and to this time it was still possible to see, in the deepest of the cracks between the swellings of other matter, a dubious piece of deeply aged brown wood. And there were many cracks, though most of them did not reach all the way down to the wood underneath. They were no longer sharp, the cracks, but all rounded out and smoothed, consumed by some soft, gentle process of decay. In places the wood seemed to have been painted over, but that must have been long ago indeed. For a long time only polish, different kinds of wood and floor polish, had been used. It would be impossible to calculate how much polish on how many rags the wood on the stair banister

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<sup>113</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 11

<sup>114</sup> Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* New York: Pantheon Books, 1966

<sup>115</sup> Douglas *Purity and Danger* p. 161

had seen, but there was certainly enough Ronuk and Mansion splashed there to give the place its now indelible reek of putrid turpentine. What had been going on there and was going on now and would go on and on through all the years ahead was a species of war carried on in the silence of long ages, a struggle in which only the keen, uncanny eyes and ears of lunatic seers could detect the deceiving, easy breathing of the strugglers.<sup>116</sup>

The man's epiphany of corruption has all the qualities of the traditional sublime, everything is merged and indistinct, from the half light of the stairwell to the indistinct cracks and grooves of the wood itself. It is a forceful and overpowering experience, epiphanic and arresting in its power. It is, then, an excessive mode of expression that attempts to tell the "disturbing, violent truth"<sup>117</sup> of corruption in Ghanaian society. It is, however, an *abject* sublime in that the banister represents a liminal and "dubious" species of matter. It is neither wood, rot or polish but somehow all and none of these things. Its touch confuses the boundary of self and object, its surface "skin" merges with the skin of the man's fingertips, sending abjection shuddering through his being. This "in-betweenness" of this sublime, the inexact differentiation between matter, always holds the threat of madness and the destruction of the subject. Maanan, the man's erstwhile lover, descends into a madness actuated by the collapse of her political aspirations and her ability to hold reality in a grid of meaningful distinctions. After the coup she wanders the coast muttering, "They have mixed it all together! Everything! They have mixed everything. And how can I find it when they have mixed it all with so many things?"<sup>118</sup>

Armah's sublime is, then, a sublime of the abject and the liminal. His representations of corruption work through a representation of the "in-betweenness" of corrupt matter. These images are then placed in a

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<sup>116</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 11

<sup>117</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 76

<sup>118</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 180

complex relationship with both the individual and the social corpus. Armah's is a violent sublimity of corporeal horror, his epiphanies are into the nature of postcolonial corruption. Armah's sublime, like Naipaul's, works from an observation of the minute detail of corruption outwards, it is founded upon microscopic observation of the miasmatic spores of political and spiritual excess.

It is a vision of African culture that has attracted a level of condemnation that closely mirrors that awarded Naipaul's representations of postcolonial horror. Ama Ata Aidoo, for example, wrote of finding "it difficult to accept, in physical terms, the necessity for hammering on every page the shit and stink from the people and the environment."<sup>119</sup> Others have commented on the perversity of a vision of Ghana that sees only the filth and waste of the culture. Indeed, Achebe suggests that the "aesthetic" of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as that of "some white District Officer"<sup>120</sup> appalled by the mire of African life. While Armah is certainly an author whose eye resolves itself upon images of defilement and corruption, I would suggest that his work offers a vision of negation and corruption that is different in important and irrefutable respects from an author such as Naipaul. This difference lies in the inseparability of eschatology from the relentless scatology of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The novel's abject epiphanies are moments that are as much an evocation of a historical consciousness, albeit a rather particular and apocalyptic historicism, as they are an expression of pollution and miasma. Naipaul's "double negative", his denial of any form of postcolonial history, is a very different expression of a noumenical putrescence. To return again to the "Railway and Harbour Administration Block"; the man's experience involves an insight into the generations of corruption

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<sup>119</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, "Introduction" to the American Edition of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* New York: Collier Macmillan, 1969, p. xii

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Bernth Lindfors *Popular Literatures in Africa* Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991, p. 3

adhering to the banister's putrescence. The "species of war" between the wood and the polish is perceived through "uncanny eyes" as an endless cycle that reflects a conception of African history as an ongoing cycle of exploitation and corruption:

The wood underneath would win and win till the end of time. Of that there was no doubt possible, only the pain of hope perennially doomed to disappointment. It was so clear. Of course it was in the nature of the wood to rot with age. The polish, it was supposed, would catch the rot. But, of course, in the end it was the rot which imprisoned everything in its effortless embrace. It did not really have to fight. Being was enough. In the natural course of things it would always take the newness of the different kinds of polish and the vaunted cleaning power of the chemicals in them, and it would convert all to victorious filth, awaiting yet more polish again and again and again. And the wood was not alone. <sup>121</sup>

Derek Wright in his *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* <sup>122</sup> writes extremely convincingly on the historical complexities of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Wright outlines the relationship between the pattern of ingestion-evacuation and the accelerated cycles of birth and decline in Ghanaian politics, the frenzied consumption and discharge of the Ghanaian elite is linked to the accelerated life-cycle of the "progeric" child, a "freak" presented by a character called "Aboliga the Frog":

Aboliga the Frog one day brought us a book of freaks and oddities, and showed us his favourite among the weird lot. It was a picture of something the caption called an old manchild. It had been born with all the features of a human baby, but within seven years it had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity and old age, and in its seventh year it had died a natural death. <sup>123</sup>

The pattern of the "old manchild" is reflected in the seven-year birth and decline of Nkrumah's regime. The abjection of Armah's epiphanies

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<sup>121</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 12

<sup>122</sup> See in particular pages 55 - 75 of Derek Wright's *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* "The Ritual Background to the Novels".

<sup>123</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 63



are, therefore, intimately connected to the sickening speed of the repetitions of African history:

And yet the wondering and the shaking and the vomiting horror is not all from the inward sickness of the individual soul. Here we have had a kind of movement that should make even good stomachs go sick. What is painful to the thinking mind is not the movement itself, but the dizzying speed of it. It is that which has been horrible. <sup>124</sup>

In this accelerated world newness and age become dangerously conflated. In the opening scenes the bus conductor sniffs a new bank note and is taken aback by the antique pleasures of its aroma:

Fascinated, he breathed it slowly into his lungs. It was a most unexpected smell for something so new to have; it was a very old smell, very strong, and so very rotten that the stench itself of it came with a curious, satisfying pleasure. <sup>125</sup>

Ghanaian society is, for Armah, the victim of too much rather than too little history or, rather, too much *history* and not enough *change*. The repeating patterns of exploitation that span the eras of colonialism and Independence create a reality layered in corrupt accretion, a condition revealed only in the aesthetics of the abject. The abject symbolism of the text, in particular the patterns of consumption and excretion serves to underline the unproductive nature of African independence, its failure to liberate the continent from its accumulated corruption.<sup>126</sup> This is not, as Derek Wright suggests with a rather inexact grasp on biology,<sup>127</sup> a properly cyclical pattern, ingestion-evacuation is a sequence of ever-repeated teleologies which, like the nation's

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<sup>124</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 62

<sup>125</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 3

<sup>126</sup> Neil Lazarus' work *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, is particularly useful in explaining the enormity of the perceived "failure" of Independence upon intellectuals of Armah's generation. Lazarus traces Armah's career in terms of the catastrophe of the failed African revolution and the Fanonian analysis of Neo-Colonialism.

<sup>127</sup> See in particular pages 81 - 137 "Senseless Cycles: Time and Ritual in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*."

successive political regimes, call for an eschatological purgation that will finally wash clean the pollution of colonial history. Derek Wright proposes that the man should be viewed in terms of the "carrier", a Pan-African figure whose role is to purge the community of its accreted pollutions. Wright suggests the scatology of the novel;

probably has something to do with the annual West African purification rite of the carrier, who cleanses the community by carrying its sins and subsequent misfortunes into the wilderness in the form of a miniature wooden boat.<sup>128</sup>

This is a suggestive model through which one might think of Armah himself. Armah is a scatologist in the truest sense of the word, his obsessive ruminations in the waste of Ghanaian history is always an investigation into the poisoned diet of a colonial inheritance.

Armah's aesthetic differs from the "pure negation" of Naipaul in other important respects. Armah's examination of the abject is always in counterpoint to an as yet uncreated "beauty." In a pained dialogue with "The Teacher" on the decomposition of hope, the man speculates on the possibility of a final flowering in the socius, a beauty that might not pass over into filth:

Yet out of the decay and the dung there is always a new flowering. Perhaps it helps to know that. Perhaps it clears the suffering brain, though down in the heart and within the guts below, the ache and the sinking fear are never soothed. The promise was so beautiful... The beauty was in the waking of the powerless. It is always to be true that it is impossible to have things strong and at the same time beautiful?<sup>129</sup>

This is the central, almost structural, irony of the text. In the world of corruption the representation of beauty is always deferred and excluded. The pervasive abjection of the novel cannot admit an antithetical model of social or aesthetic life, such moments remain half imagined in the private reveries of the man's experience of hashish

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<sup>128</sup> Wright *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* p. 74

<sup>129</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 85

and pushed to the fringes of the text itself. The novel's final scene holds up the ironic hope of the redeeming future time of the "beautiful ones". On a mammy wagon the man sees the legend:

THE BEAUTYFUL ONES  
ARE NOT YET BORN.

In the centre of the oval was a single flower, solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful. <sup>130</sup>

And yet the "unexplainable" beauty of the passing image anchors the novel's scatology in its own negative, the necessarily unrepresentable transformation of the many epiphanies of squalor and negation into a beauty strong enough to survive the violence of history. Armah's concentration on pollution and corruption, the "unnecessary heaviness and ugliness"<sup>131</sup> of his textual practice, works through both fulfilling and confounding our conception of the "dirty" and the unclean. Mary Douglas suggests that the presence of dirt, pollution, waste is usually the sign, not only of what is "in-between", but of an underlying system of classification that divides matter into categories of the clean and the unclean:

We are left with the very old definition of dirt as matter out of place... Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is a product of the systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements...shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table... In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. <sup>132</sup>

Armah's work both corresponds and contradicts this thesis. Corruption in high office is "dirty" because, in a system of probity and responsibility, it is "out of place". Yet Armah presents a world of

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<sup>130</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 183

<sup>131</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 117

<sup>132</sup> Douglas *Purity and Danger* p. 48

abjection in which the debased and degraded is in no antithetical relation to representations of the "clean and proper". The effect of the unrepresented world of the "beautiful" within this structure is the creation of what Macherey calls a "determining absent presence".<sup>133</sup> Armah's insistent and universal representation of matter out of place inevitably echoes the uncreated social order from which the world of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* "deviates". The unnamed, unrepresented "otherness" of abjection, needless to say, has *nothing* to do with Europe. The abject serves as a kind of spur to the political imagination, its corrupt insistence on the inadequacy of the world suggests but does not name "the future happiness"<sup>134</sup> that might redeem the fallen world of the novel. It points, obliquely, to what Fanon (another whose revolutionary politics could verge on the eschatological) calls the "naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born".<sup>135</sup>

### The Painter of Modern Life: Ben Okri's *The Landscapes Within*.

Ben Okri's *The Landscapes Within*<sup>136</sup> is a novel intimately concerned with the possibilities of Art in the context of the violent and unpredictable social environment of modern Lagos. Like Armah's *Fragments*, it is a novel that traces the emergence of an individual African artist and, like Armah's work, it also explores the broader conditions of possibility for modern African art. Okri's young artist is a painter, Omovo, a young Nigerian very much in the mould of Armah's early protagonists. Indeed, the pattern of Omovo's relationships

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<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Stallybrass and White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* p.105

<sup>134</sup> Armah *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* p. 160

<sup>135</sup> Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* p. 10

<sup>136</sup> Ben Okri *The Landscapes Within* Harlow: Longman, 1981

closely echo those of the "man" and Baako in Armah's early work.<sup>137</sup> Okri's pattern of inter-textual reference creates a text that is both a meditation upon the role of the artist and a complex dialogue with the emerging tradition of Anglophone African writing. Before examining the particular features of "the miasmatic sublime" central to the artistic practice of Okri's young artist, I would wish to explore the central problematic of Okri's "portrait of the artist", namely, the novel's complex self-reflexivity, its representation of the act of representation, a work that differs and diverts its "image" of Nigerian life through the prism of a fictional visual artist.

The text immediately complicates its range of cultural reference in the polarity generated by the dual prefacing of the novel by quotations from Achebe and Joyce. Significantly, Joyce the European "modernist as exile" is placed alongside, in Achebe, one of contemporary Africa's leading "historical" novelists. The text demands, therefore, a sensitivity to issues of both time and place and suggests a reading that articulates and investigates the *inter-cultural* system of address created in the spaces between Joyce and Achebe.

*The Landscapes Within* is a novel that is positively "Joycean" in its immersion in the detail of Omovo's consciousness. The text sets up a constant interplay between Omovo's attempt to represent the world around him and the force of the "internal" landscapes of both his own inner emotional life and the unimagined spaces presented by his imagination. The tension between landscapes "within" and "without", between the force of the actual and the possible, frames a text that, although largely without "plot" is, nevertheless, driven by the problems of bringing modern urban Africa into representation.

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<sup>137</sup> Omovo's meditations upon his own vocation are undertaken in dialogue with a teacher and predecessor, a pattern that closely replicates the pattern first seen in *Fragments* and, in a different form, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

Yet the novel, although concerned with the individual artist and with the possibility of art itself, is nevertheless filled with examples of half-completed, abandoned, ignored, and un-attempted works. Omovo is an artist who, like Baako in *Fragments*, is denied the comforts of vocation, Okri's artist is someone who constantly trembles before the veil of creativity, The persistent "failure" of the artist to begin, pursue and most often to finish works, points to a particular concern with the relationship of artistic process and environment, with the simultaneous inspiration and vitiation of place upon the possibility of postcolonial African Art. In dealing primarily with non-linguistic art, with the visual, *The Landscapes Within* actuates a certain rift between Okri's representation of the artist and Omovo's "own" representations of Lagos life. Where Armah, in *Fragments*, can "quote" from the screenplays Baako proposes for Ghanavision, Okri can offer only a linguistic *reproduction* of his artist's work. We are, in fact, presented with a representation of representation or, more accurately, a representation of the *act* of representation. Okri is concerned with both the complexities of representing African life and the textual problems in presenting an artist's vision in language. He offers, therefore, a complex mediation upon the dynamics of transformation operating between linguistic and visual orders of representation.

The novel immediately establishes, therefore, a "dual agenda" in which "painterly" concerns are placed in an explicit, deterministic relationship with novelistic discourse. Indeed, this interplay of the visual and the linguistic is emphatically "spelt out" as Omovo's most effortlessly achieved work, *Go Slow*, is literally "spoken" into life:

As he worked soundless chants escape from his lips, quiet supplications, as though whatever it was he said in some ways guided his fingers. <sup>138</sup>

This is, however, far from typical of the relationship between the visual and the linguistic in the text. The novel establishes and exploits an inner aporia, a significant "lack" that is the absolute *non* presence of the visual work at the core of the text. The central paradox of Okri's work is the mute fact that, for all its concern with visual representation, with the painting of modern African life, *there is nothing to see*. The visual (Omovo's sketches and paintings) is not reproduced but its process represented. Okri's ongoing concern with the "Saying" of cultural address is manifested in *The Landscapes Within's* presentation of a necessarily "absent" visual representation of Nigerian life. Okri sets up an ironic dialectic of invisibility that serves to cast a paradoxical shadow upon the "aesthetics" of Omovo's painting. This becomes significant in the *functioning* of this aporia throughout the text, the dominant and recurring articulation of the absence of Omovo's work. The text evidences the irretrievable non-presence of the visual artwork in the linguistic text, the fact that painting is so evidently *not there* establishes an "imaginative geography" of chasms, voids, absences, and hollows, from the fractured coral to Omovo's visions of fissured faces and "the hollowness underneath" Lagos experience. Indeed, Okur (Omovo's chief confidant) characterises this experience by a striking analogy. Lagos life is itself "hollow":

Look at this onion. I will peel off its layers, one by one. You know, one would think that because this onion has so many there is something central hidden within it. There is nothing. Only a pulp - and you can still go on peeling off its layers. There is *nothing*. You see. <sup>139</sup>

This disjunction between the linguistic and the visual, the articulated absence of works within the novel serves to create a number of productive paradoxes. Omovo's paintings and drawings are

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<sup>139</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 251.

forever receding from the text (stolen, confiscated, even eaten). They have life only in language. Yet the transition *between* these two orders of representation becomes one of the chief obstacles in Omovo's artistic project, whether in finding a visual "language" that captures the "miasma" of his conscious experience or, conversely, when his images move "back" into the spoken word, inciting a husband's jealousy or in their interpretation as works which "speak" in the language of satire and social commentary. Omovo's "scumscape" *Drift* is confiscated by the "authorities" precisely because of a highly deterministic reading that makes the text necessarily "of" society, makes it "speak" in a simplistic reference to the state of the nation. Omovo himself finds the same painting opaque to his attempts to bring its meanings back into a recognisable social discourse "He tried to read life through it but his mind seldom got beyond the images."<sup>140</sup> The "linguistic" text, therefore, both surrounds and penetrates the action of *The Landscapes Within*, framing, defining and encompassing the fragmented and incomplete painterly text.

*The Landscapes Within* presents a complex mediation on the relationship between linguistic and visual orders of representation. It presents an artwork "framed" by novelistic discourse. The novel unexpectedly duplicates, therefore, the dynamic of the relationship between "frame" and "work" outlined by Derrida<sup>141</sup> as fundamental to Kantian philosophical aesthetics.

Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* presents a challenging re-examination of the relationship between artworks and the discourse of Philosophical aesthetics, in particular, with Kantian aesthetics. It looks at the way a body of discourse frames, influences and defines the status and interpretation of painting. It examines aesthetics as

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<sup>140</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 39

<sup>141</sup> Jacques Derrida *The Truth in Painting* (trans. G. Bennington & I. McLeod) London: University of Chicago Press, 1987



something more than a secondary body of materials endlessly commentating on originary and primary "works". In Derrida's work aesthetics become a framing and defining boundary to the artwork, it serves to establish the grounds of possibility for the artefact, it is the system for the admission of artefacts into the world of "Art". Art is, therefore, impossible without aesthetics, (like Foucault's analysis of the archive), aesthetics is the system of transformation that turns "things" into "art". Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* is a text of particular interest to the study of Okri's *The Landscapes Within* in that both works set up a complex relationship between "inner" and "outer" orders of meaning, between the "invisible" world of discourse and its government of the world of the visual. In Derrida's discussion of Kant this division is between the *ergon* (the artwork itself) and the *parergon* (the outer-work or frame).

Derrida's analysis of Kant's *Third Critique* centres on the status of the artwork as it is established by the supervising "framing" functioning of the "parergon". In the *Third Critique*, the *parergon*, the peripheral elements of the artwork (such as the clothes on classical statuary or the *physical* frame of a painting) becomes, in Derrida's analysis of Kant, subtly integral to the *ergon*, the work itself.

The *parergon*, acting as boundary, as periphery, fulfils a central, originary lack in the *ergon* and, as boundary, performs a role both "inside" and "outside" the artefact. The "frame" is more than a carved boundary around a painting, it comes to represent the government of the distinction between the artwork and its immediate context. The *parergon* is, for Derrida, a kind of supplement to the artwork but, significantly, a supplement that originates the possibility of the *ergon* itself. "Parergonic Logic" becomes, for Derrida, central to the entire discourse of the aesthetic. European philosophical aesthetics becomes a discourse of the frame, policing the boundaries of admissible "art

objects", establishing the "ontological" line between novel and laundry list, between the priceless Benin bronze and the "worthless" tourist trinket.

The linkages with Okri's work are clear. The "status" of Omovo's visual text is made possible only through its *parergon*, the "outer work" of novelistic discourse in which these "images" are embedded. The "novelistic" vista operates both around and within, both immanent and transcendent of Omovo's artistic concerns. Okri's novel is, quite obviously, the grounds of possibility for Omovo's representations of modern Lagos. This relationship, however, is not necessarily a simple hierarchy in which the linguistic establishes a ready dominance over the fractured "inexpressive" visual text, or one in which the linguistic "swamps" and entirely encloses the possibility of a non-discursive communication. The novel is, in its representation of an absent visual world, concerned with the examination of the challenge of this absent presence to the referential certainties of novelistic discourse, with escaping the closures of linguistic referentiality. The text invites and performs transgression over the boundary of the linguistic frame, actuates the full complexity of rival orders of signification. The hallowed presence of Omovo's paintings puncture the linguistic surface of the text and present the reader with a "glimpse" of a hollowness beneath signification.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in *Discours, figure* <sup>142</sup> provides a philosophical framework that might clarify something more of the interplay between the linguistic and the visual in *The Landscapes Within*. "Parergonic logic" as outlined in Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* is a dynamic that does not necessarily assist an analysis of this "ergonic" resistance to the parergon's discursive hegemony. Okri's text may frame the conditions of Omovo's artistic project but it does

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<sup>142</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard *Discours, figure* Paris: éditions Klincksieck, 1978

not, despite the persistent "failure" of the painterly text, use this strategy to establish linguistic signification as "the final word". If Okri's transformations of the ritual background of Yoruba culture presented a challenge to the hegemony of ethnographic description, *The Landscapes Within* offers a no less radical challenge to the authority of metonymic prose. Lyotard is of interest because, contra Derrida, he sets up an opposition between "Discourse" (all and any signification governed by "readable" meanings, by the word) and "Figure", a complex concept that, while retaining something of the traditional idea of the "figurative" as non-standard, as ornamental, is chiefly concerned with the non-linguistic, the immutably physical order and aspect of communication. The figural represents the physical material and visual aspect of communication and is, ultimately, beyond language. The figural is, therefore, "any exteriority that it (language) cannot interiorise through the process of signification." 143

Omovo's visual texts, while certainly "interiorised", entirely and necessarily enframed by language, nevertheless serve to question the boundaries of linguistic signification, language's inadequacies in "giving account" of the immediacy and sensuous possibilities of lived experience. The following account of one of Omovo's major works presents the challenge of the visual to the descriptive compass of novelistic discourse:

He begins to paint. There is nothing now. He is on the edge of an inner thrill. A Stygian night. A single shrivelled leafless tree: its branches amputated. Strangulated spaces. Strips of water streaked with moonbeams. Scattered smudges of several predatory birds emerging from the grey-black sky. A phantom figure broods over the body, over the waste: the figure of ancestors or of unborn generations - vague and futile and shapeless. Then the girl: looming in the foreground and dominating the painting. Mutilated. Bloodied. Torn dress. Shredded area of her upper thighs. Her dangling chain with its glimmering cross, ticks with the soulful flickers of the brush - with the annihilation of emptiness. A dimension: A return to something

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143 Jean Francois Lyotard *Discours, figure* p.13

primeval: an existential night. Then he stops. He draws back and when he looks at the unfinished work a stark terror twists within him. The girl is without a face. He wrote out in pencil: The Beautiful Ones He wanted to complete the sentence and remembered something else and could not find the words. Then he erased it and after a moment wrote, Related Losses.<sup>144</sup>

Okri's language palpably struggles to re-present the "annihilation of emptiness" evoked in the faceless vision on his canvas, language becomes a staccato series of brush strokes that cannot give a synoptic title (even with recourse beyond the text to the world of Armah) to the half-finished work before him. The half-formed figural "text", though encompassed, produced and represented by language, terrifies Omovo in its summation of all the inarticulate terrors of his recent experience. It provides a fractured yet evocative absence in the text, an absence that is made, in the end, to carry the burden of the novel's main re-creation of African life.

This figural interrogation of discursive meaning is, nevertheless, always interfused with the sheer irony of its location *within* the novel. *The Landscapes Within* presents conflicting orders of signification without offering any easy resolution of the distances between them. While Omovo's work is grounded in the framing possibilities of novelistic discourse, the works themselves are never fully "translated" into an encompassing descriptive prose. The seeming contradiction, even impossibility, of this agenda illustrates *The Landscapes Within's* initiation of what Lyotard calls a "differend." The differend was, of course, a concept central to my attempt to understand the radical hybridity of Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Okri's real debt to Tutuola lies, not necessarily in the detail of plot or in narrative structure, but in the possibility of leaving the oil and water of differing orders of signification in a kind of *emulsion*, in a willingness to present a textuality of deliberate and productive incompatibility. The

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<sup>144</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 281

differend is a concept that tries to theorise a similar sense of the incommensurable coexistence of difference. It is worth re-establishing the details of Lyotard's concept. Bill Readings glosses the term as follows:

A point of difference where the sides speak radically different or heterogeneous languages, where the dispute cannot be phrased in either language without, by its very phrasing, prejudging the issue for that side being unjust.. The differend marks a point where existing representational frameworks are unable to deal with difference without repressing or reducing it.<sup>145</sup>

*The Landscapes Within* is agent of an irreconcilable co-presence of disparate orders of meaning, it exploits both the identity and difference of word and image. *The Landscapes Within* can, therefore, be understood as a text that shows a particular concern for its own constitution, with the paradoxical, even circular, complexities involved in producing art about art. The text exploits the non-identity of differing languages and systems of representation, creating its effects in the spaces in between these systems. Indeed, Okri refers to the novel as; "a double mirror. It could reflect back and forth, for infinity."<sup>146</sup> The concave mirror through which Armah attacked the perversity of Nkrumah's Ghana in *Fragments* has been overtaken by a more complex and heterogeneous hall of mirrors in which the "object" of representation becomes lost in repeating and receding reflections of social reality.

The text is, nevertheless, more than a "self-reflexive" metafictional investigation into the "parergonic logic" of the frame, more than an analysis of the incommensurable "differend" actuated by the meeting of visual and linguistic orders of signification. Okri's text

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<sup>145</sup> Bill Readings *Introducing Lyotard, Art and Politics* Glossary p. xxx. London: Routledge, 1991

<sup>146</sup> Jane Wilkinson *Talking with African Writers - Interviews with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists* London: James Currey, 1992, p. 80

goes beyond these concerns in a number of important respects. The "frame" for Omovo's artistic project is investigated in a wider, more explicit, historical and cultural context. His novel is an exploration of the determining influence of the social and political conditions of possibility for the African artist. Okri's exploration of the limits of linguistic signification extends beyond the formalistic incommensurability of image and text and looks to the impact of colonialism upon the possibilities of self-expression in the language of the coloniser.

Omovo's circle discuss the erosion and the loss of a whole array of indigenous cultural coordinates and, most tellingly, the alienation, the rupture effected by the imposition of an alien language, a language that fails to carry meaning:

It was very dark. Meaning seemed stripped from everything. There seemed no relationship between him and the figures in the darkness - the chairs and walls, the bed and ceiling. It is as a dream. He hears sounds -but there is no sense. Everything is alien and nauseating. The English language leaves him empty and deeply tainted: He cannot think freely. The moment passes and another replaces it. There is a vast celluloid crowd. They are all talking endlessly but no sounds issue from their mouths. The common language, in its profound betrayal, stings, coils, means nothing. Meaning and language clamour in the voids of several layers of alienation. There is high energy and there is subliminal suicide. And all seemed to Omovo - in that vast amount of darkness - trapped and lost. Unreality passes with the moments and sleep descends.<sup>147</sup>

The erasure of meaning, the hollowed interiority of the text is established by the concrete historical inheritance of colonialism as much as by the collision of rival orders of signification. The linguistic frame around the incomplete visual text is, in itself, fissured and evacuated by this inheritance of colonialism. The production of art, perhaps even the most everyday "reading" of daily experience in *The Landscapes Within*, faces what Bhabha calls "that Postcolonial silence

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<sup>147</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 261

which cannot be overwhelmed by interpretation." 148 The text evokes, both what Bhabha calls "the 'foreignness' of language...the nucleus of the untranslatable that goes beyond the transparency of subject matter" 149 *and* a far more local linguistic and representational crisis that is specifically African in its features. Okri's work can be explicated but not explained by the poststructuralist models culled from Lyotard or Derrida. The analytical efficacy of the Lyotardian "Differend" and the Derridian logic of the *parergon* are necessarily complicated by the novel's postcolonial setting. When words themselves become "walls of entrapment", 150 the "framing" function of novelistic discourse is recast as a historically- defined prison cell. Lyotard's binary of "Discourse" and "Figure" is also complicated in that "discourse" cannot be posited as signification governed by "readable meanings". The non-identity of language and social reality is presented as a historical consequence of colonialism. The "taint" of colonial history radically recasts, therefore, these interpretative models, the text's signifying structures become the *mise en scene* that reveals the historical contextuality of both Omovo's and Okri's work.

What is required is a fuller exploration of the relationship between the social setting of the novel and the formalistic and textual devices Okri uses to evoke this setting. Both the immediate textual framing of Omovo's painting and the broader framing of the work in postcolonial Nigeria need to be brought together in the reading process. Perhaps it is necessary to return to Derrida's analysis of the *parergon* and *ergon* to see something of the manner in which the novel "works" the formalist concept of the frame:

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148 H. K. Bhabha "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" pp. 291 - 323, in *Nation and Narration* London: Routledge, 1990 p. 315

149 Bhabha *Nation and Narration* p. 313

150 Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 72.

Take away from a painting all representation, significance, theme, text as intended meaning, take away also all the material (canvas,-coloured paint) which for Kant cannot be beautiful in itself, rub out any drawing oriented towards a determinable end, take away its *background and social, historical, political and economic support* and what's left? The frame, the framing, a play of forms which are structurally homogeneous with the structure of the frame. [My emphasis]<sup>151</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu, in his article "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic"<sup>152</sup> which addresses the Derridian analysis of Kant, questions whether the "background...social, historical, political and economic support" mentioned in Derrida can justifiably be relegated along with such details as canvas and paint. His analysis of the aesthetic, in fact, raises these areas to the chief "conditions of possibility" for the artwork. His analysis gives far greater emphasis to the many ways in which the artefact is "framed" by its wider socio-discursive environment, by the institutions and ideologies around the work, by what we might call (in a Bakhtinian vocabulary) the context of the artefact's *heteroglossia*.

*The Landscapes Within* similarly examines the larger ramifications of this "background", outlines the "environmental" component of the frame around the artwork. In the polyglot multi-ethnic city, Omovo's role, the "artistic function" he might perform, is ambiguously and loosely defined. Okhara, the autodidact precursor to Omovo, moves between art gallery and the shop hoarding and is at home in neither. In the gallery scenes artistic institutions are revealed to be in the service of a European-educated elite, removed from a city indifferent to its "photographed terracotta" and didactic images of social and tribal harmony. *The Landscapes Within* presents an artist at work in an institutional setting for the artwork that is undergoing a profound transformation. The process of this emergence is marked not

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<sup>151</sup> Derrida *The Truth in Painting* pp. 74 - 76

<sup>152</sup> Pierre Bourdieu "The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.46, Summer 1987, pp. 201-210



only by the dependent and derivative aesthetics of the Nigerian elite, but by the search for a new context for these artistic productions. The confiscation of his work "Drift" makes Omovo's only image in public circulation a stolen sketch, eventually appropriated by European publishers. The ideology governing the institutional apparatus for visual arts is shown to be irretrievably marred by both its negritudinist nostalgia and, conversely, by an audience whose aesthetic criteria comes from elsewhere. A young Nigerian connoisseur remarks:

..... we have no Van Goghs, no Picassos, no Monets, no Goyas, no Salvador Dalis, no Sisleys. Our real lives and confusions and losses have not been painted enough. You cannot describe a place of setting or character by any reference to an African painter - because there are truly none! We have no visual scales of reference. You cannot say that a palm wine bar is straight out of a painting by .... dash, dash, dash; you cannot say a tribal meetings reminds one of a painting by .. dash, dash, dash,..... There are no quintessentials, nothing. It's all arid. Why?..<sup>153</sup>

Within the compound, even within the family, Omovo's "arting" makes him an oddity; the ambiguous social licensing of his art marks him as peripheral in a way that is significantly different from the "artist/visionary" of the European avant-gardist model. His position as "outsider" seems less an act of social or self-exclusion and more the result of the indifference and incomprehension of those around him.

Omovo, given his problems over audience, economic position and the art establishment, is faced with an unusual kind of problem in that his work is forced to establish (like, in a different context, the work of Tutuola) its own conditions of possibility. It is faced with the tortuous task of enacting or *enframing* its own potentiality, with creating its own audience.

The text seems to paint an extremely bleak picture of the postcolonial artist and the framing possibilities of postcolonial artistic production. The persistent emphasis on failure, alienation, the

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<sup>153</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 49

crippling environment of the artist and the pernicious inheritance of colonialism is not to be dismissed lightly. Nevertheless, a reading which focuses entirely on the incommensurable and the voidant is belied, in the novel, by the simplicity and, even the grace, of small acts of communication. Omovo's sketch of a neighbour's daughter seems to provide a simple and worthwhile counterpoint to the "failures" of his more ambitious projects. Okri's formal disruption of the referentiality of novelistic discourse, his evocation of a purely "rhetorical" interplay of incommensurable systems of signification is an important prelude to the *visual aesthetic* of the sublime embodied in the paintings themselves. The "differend" actuated by the co-presence of novelistic and painterly meanings forms a kind of textual sublime, a formal collision of irreconcilable orders of meaning. This interplay between a fissured textual surface and the absent presence of Omovo's paintings nevertheless paves the way for the novel's complex and epiphanic representation of the city.

*The Landscapes Within* cannot, therefore, be justifiably analysed as a testament of artistic failure chiefly because of the huge sweep of its epiphanic moments, through the expressive use made of the fissures gaps and losses that riddle the text. The Miasmatic sublime that underpins the many half-complete works serves to transform the whole direction of one's reading of the text, returning one to the other side of Okri's related losses, namely that which remains despite the ravages of history. Our passage through Omovo's consciousness involves an engagement with the text's moments of unfettered, boundless, knowledge, to the "sudden wordless, visionless awareness of the underlying unity of all things".<sup>154</sup> The text shames us into looking for an explanation, rather than a reconciliation of the disjunction between its voidant rendering of empty spaces, stuttering

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<sup>154</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 265

failed acts of human bonding and the intoxication and excess of its epiphanic moments, between its dreams and its nightmares. The aesthetics of the sublime govern both Omovo's painting and the many moments of heightened consciousness that punctuate his experience of the city. The nature of these epiphanies is best demonstrated in depth:

The moment. Every moment fissioned into its endless possibilities of life. A million suspended fragments revolving on the crack of every crest. Deep shivers of love. The seized sense of an unfinishable and terrifying portrait of humanity. Quintessential helplessness. Engrams of futility. Subverted vision of wrecked hope. Uncharted, psychic caverns of corruption. Desperate prayers uttered unheard. A broken word, a decision, a transfiguration, a step upon the broken bridge; an emotion, an intuition; a child weeping its life away, a destruction, a death, a waste, a soul losing itself, a scratch of insanity, a wilderness of endless wandering; an array of generations and generations of losses; a lifetime shattered by anything. The ugly webs of manipulated history, before and after; clarity and chaos; points of ever-moving motionless life; soul-clogs of useless knowledge; condensed and indeterminate terror lives lived and unlived; mutations of cruelty; interslices and clamours; initiations into lostness. The moment. A lie, an unreality, a deception multiplied by education, a charade called independence, a history internationalised, a point of light forever vanishing. A dim, incomplete painful beatific vision. Everything.<sup>155</sup>

The epiphany in *The Landscapes Within* seems, above all, to be defined by the profoundly oxymoronic conflation of opposites, of the meeting of "clarity and chaos" or, elsewhere, of a reality both "sharp and distinct" and "merged and unreal",<sup>156</sup> of a *particular* generality that brings together at one point the personal and the national, the here and the everywhere, the beautiful and the terrible. Okri presents a species of the sublime that is a radical transformation of the aesthetic. It is, therefore, an appropriately paradoxical mode of representation. The epiphany becomes less a moment redeemed from decay than a moment established *within* decay, "of", but not identical with, the erosions of history and meaning. It is a mode that seems to span impossible aesthetic contradictions. This co-presence of

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155 Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 272

156 Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 194

mutability and permanence seems to place a near-impossible stress upon the epiphany. The overpowering complexity of the epiphanic mode seems, above all, to place antagonistic aesthetic modes into the same representational space.

The epiphanic mode demonstrates, in the vast scope and clarity of the momentary comprehension of experience, the form of synchronisation, the harmony of sense and sensation that is pivotal to the ideology of the beautiful. Terry Eagleton expresses the way the experience of beauty (in the Post-Kantian tradition of European aesthetics) foregrounds the "fittingness" of our faculties to the world, "In the presence of beauty, we experience an exquisite sense of adaptation of the mind to reality."<sup>157</sup> The beautiful is a discourse of harmony between sensation and sense, between one's faculties and the world.

The experience of beauty demands full apprehension of the "object" of beauty, the intelligibility of the harmony of its forms and patterns. Its pleasures are those through which the subject finds its world intelligible, graspable; it serves to "relieve a want" in the Kantian subject. The epiphany in Okri seems to demonstrate this concordance between faculty and experience and yet the content and the consequences of its experience are not quite the disinterested, self-consolidating, pleasures of the beautiful. The Okrian epiphany offers an apprehension of the structure of excess, an excessiveness that takes the *moment* into the realm of the sublime.

If we focus upon the content, rather than the form of the epiphany, one can see that the "harmony" established is in fact with dissonance, with the incomplete and partially formed (inadmissible in the Kantian object of beauty). Omovo's terror is the "beatific" harmony he finds between his own riven subjectivity and the dissonant

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<sup>157</sup> Terry Eagleton *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 90

“unformed objects” and “broken words” of his experience. He finds himself partaking in a kind of glissando of many excessive, formless, “objects”.

The proliferation, the excess of the epiphany, clearly has the overpowering colossal aspect of the aesthetics of the sublime. The structure of its excess seems to threaten Omovo's sanity, instigating the pleasure/pain of the sublime. In Kant

That is sublime which pleases immediately by its opposition (*widerstand*) to the interests of the senses.<sup>158</sup>

The violence of the sublime disrupts the complete and the identical, it is “an excess, a super abundance which opens an abyss”.<sup>159</sup> The Okrian epiphany shares this “abysmal” apprehension of the colossal, partly perceived “object” and the violent movement of sublime knowledge towards the incomprehensible. We are presented, therefore, with an “impossible” *beatific sublime* that strives for a full and unclouded knowledge of form of the shape of the unrepresentable.

The *moment* is, therefore, much more an epiphany of the socius, a complex mode of aesthetic knowledge that is aimed towards the structure, perhaps even the quiddity of a given society. As such, it is finely attuned to the complexities and contradictions of the society to which it is oriented. Lagos life is consistently portrayed as inscrutable, opaque to the individual's attempts to understand its deeper operations. Okur remarks in desolation:

Life has no pattern. Life is not a series of threads. It's futile trying to weave something through this whole maze. <sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> From Immanuel Kant - *The Critique of Judgement* quoted in Derrida - *The Truth in Painting* p. 131

<sup>159</sup> Immanuel Kant - *The Critique of Judgement* quoted in Derrida - *The Truth in Painting* p. 131

<sup>160</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 69

At other moments, the forces moving reality seem too colossal to be perceived, they seem to rumble onwards behind or beneath the textures of daily experience.

The landscape of losses had engulfed them all. The losses were too abstracted and infinitely distributed. <sup>161</sup>

Through the paradoxes and aesthetic admixture of the epiphany, Omovo is able to grasp something of the nature of this determined indeterminacy, of the corruption and dereliction of the present and its relation to a poisoned historical inheritance which, whilst everywhere present and active, remains difficult or impossible to grasp in its immensity. This becomes the matter and material of a complex, paradoxical aesthetic. The epiphany provides insight into that which structures its own excess, back into the generations and generation of loss, a view of the internal dynamics of the present moment of experience in the "miasma" of Lagos life. The "aesthetic" becomes, in *The Landscapes Within*, an epistemological tool in the apprehension of postcolonial reality. The violence of the epiphany stands in a kind of metonymic relation to Nigerian "reality". Okri, in an interview with Jane Wilkinson states:

You can't write about Nigeria truthfully without a sense of violence. To be serene is to lie. Relations in Nigeria are violent relations. <sup>162</sup>

Okri, therefore, acts upon the boundaries of aesthetic modes, disrupting and conflating the edges of the hitherto "distinct" typologies of the sublime and the beautiful. The ephiphanic mode instigates clarity of apprehension, definition and minute discrimination into the sublime, bringing the "self apprehension" of the perception of beauty

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<sup>161</sup> Okri *The Landscapes Within* p. 99

<sup>162</sup> Jane Wilkinson *Talking with African Writers* p. 81

within its colossal aegis. This effects a radical shift in the "politics" of postcolonial representation. The sublime, a discourse of the obscure, of the incomprehensible, places a whole zone of experience beyond the knowing subject and is potentially suspect in a culture "othered" in colonialist discourse as simultaneously opaque and mysteriously fecund. Similarly, the terror of the "pure" sublime hints at what Kant deems "the species of mutual compliance"<sup>163</sup> accomplished by the sublime, the potential prostration of the subject before a reality too immense to be entirely known or conceivably changed.

The beautiful alone offers a rapprochement of sense and sensation but one that, by its nature, leaves the world intact. The harmonies and identities of the beautiful would be rather ill fitting given the profundity of the "layers of alienation" at work in the text. The paradoxes of the frame aren't resolved in the epiphany, the heightened apprehension of Lagos reality experienced by Omovo in his private moments is not carried over into any public artistic works. There is, therefore, still the enormous task of "translation" to be performed between the interior moment and the framed space of artistic signification.

*The Landscapes Within*, nevertheless, articulates an aesthetics of place and of time that shares and expresses the complexity of postcolonial reality. The above analysis of the epiphany, in terms loosely culled from European philosophical aesthetics, does not and should not suggest that the text is entirely or solely re-active to this one tradition but is used to point to a text structured by an "aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles .... of paradoxes", an aesthetic bound surely to place and yet "who knows where they originate anyway." <sup>164</sup> This is a moot though disingenuous point. Okri's work

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<sup>163</sup> Immanuel Kant - *The Critique of Judgement* - quoted in Derrida - *The Truth in Painting* p.133

<sup>164</sup> Jane Wilkinson *Talking with African Writers* p. 88

brilliantly transforms and travesties both African and Western aesthetic traditions, he *creates* a genuinely labyrinthine textuality in which it is impossible and inappropriate to "solve" the complex aesthetic riddles of the inter-cultural text.



## **Inconclusion: A World Without Difference?**

My journey through the diverse textualities of Armah, Tutuola, Okri, Bissoondath and Naipaul evolved into an extremely plural and eclectic discussion of aesthetic and hermeneutic issues. I do not intend, by way of conclusion, to *resolve* or recapitulate my arguments in a synoptic form. I will, instead, attempt to find a new perspective on these issues through an engagement with the comic vision of a contemporary British writer.

My thesis began with an exploration of the differing responses of Picasso, Sartre and a range of British and African critics to a number of African "texts". My thesis has realised, paragraph by paragraph, page by page, the productive force of cultural difference in driving the wheels of critical practice. Cultural difference at the end of the millennium, no less than in it was for Picasso in 1907, is supremely "creative" in its interaction with Western cultural models.

In "Understanding the Ur-Bororo"<sup>1</sup> Will Self, the *bête noir* of Metropolitan British letters, stands this tradition on its head. Cultural difference, the culturally "other", becomes, in Self, a fantastic comic vision where all that is exotic, all that is *different*, is transformed into a universe where the banality of the home counties laps into every corner of the planet. "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" narrates the ethnographic adventures of a young anthropologist, Janner, amongst a group of natives who are ultimately indistinguishable from the middling middle-classes of the Thames estuary. Janner's career is driven, almost by the forces of destiny, to an encounter with the "mysterious" Ur-Bororo in the Amazon Basin. The Ur-Bororo, a tribal

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<sup>1</sup> Will Self "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" in *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994, pp. 69 - 94

group who call themselves “The People Who You Wouldn't Like to be Cornered by at a Party”<sup>2</sup> are a people without qualities, a group whose lack of difference is the heart of darkness in Janner’s ethnographic “rite of passage”.

Self is clearly an initiate in the history of twentieth-century anthropology. As David Richards points out in *Masks of Difference*,<sup>3</sup> “understanding the *Bororo*” is one of the great and recurring *leitmotifs* of twentieth-century anthropology. The *Bororo*, an “actual” tribe of the Amazon basin, have been the source for an ongoing debate in twentieth-century thought, their recurrence in the work of Lévy-Bruhl, T.S. Eliot and Lévi-Strauss makes them almost quintessentially, definitively *other*. Other with a capital “O”. They are, as David Richards points out, a touchstone through which many different writers have conceived the extremity and profundity of difference. Self’s lampoon of a people “Ur” or before the *Bororo* reads, then, like a piece of ethnographic-science fiction. In Self’s world without difference the failed and appalled ethnologist has no recourse but to abandon the task of ethnographic writing (the Ur-Bororo are too relentlessly dull to generate interpretation) and take to writing footnotes to albums of *Some Chants from Failed Cultures*.<sup>4</sup> Janner travels to the corners of the earth to find a group of people who are “objectively boring”,<sup>5</sup> whose tepid and half-formed commitment to their cultural beliefs and practices is pure middle England. The tribal Witchdoctor explains, through a kind of deracinated Anglicanism, that their deepest cultural beliefs are not “really” held to be true or important. They are, rather, “metaphors”. When questioned about their beliefs in the spirit world the Witchdoctor replies:

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2 Self “Understanding the Ur-Bororo” p. 83

3 David Richards *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature, Anthropology and Art* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 pp. 200 -217

4 Self “Understanding the Ur-Bororo” p. 75

5 Self “Understanding the Ur-Bororo” p. 82

'Well, we don't really believe in them in quite that way you know. We believe in their validity as er....examples, metaphors if you will, of the way that things are, but we don't actually believe in tree spirits, good Lord no!'<sup>6</sup>

Janner eventually marries one of the Ur-Bororo, Jane, and returning to Purley, Janner, his featureless wife and her tedious brother David settle seamlessly into domestic routine. Janner's Ur-Bororo brother-in-law becomes a successful librarian, his cultural experience in the Amazon fuelling his "passion" for the Dewey system of decimal classification. Self's comic invention works in a way that is more than a perverse transposition of suburban life to the Amazon and Amazonian life to the suburbs. It points to the relationship between difference and writing, the way in which the non-identity of cultures is a secret cog in the production of discourse. Without difference, writing the Ur-Bororo becomes an impossible project. After devoting his life to the quest for the Ur-Bororo, Janner declares:

Of course I could publish if I wanted to, but for some reason the whole subject of the Ur-Bororo leaves me cold, I just can't get worked up about it. I don't think the world would be any the wiser for my insights.<sup>7</sup>

This is, of course, quite the most appalling admission for an academic to make. Yet the comedy and the fantasy of "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" lies in both the satire on "New Age" philosophies of difference (beneath it all we are all rather tedious, or as the Ur-Bororo say, "wherever you go in the world you occupy the same volume of space"<sup>8</sup>) and the fact that Self's world without difference is definitively not the world we experience. To anyone familiar with his work, "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" appears to be a typically crazed product of Self's imagination. It presents an entirely consistent world in

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<sup>6</sup> Self "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" p. 89

<sup>7</sup> Self "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" p. 93

<sup>8</sup> Self "Understanding the Ur-Bororo" p. 84

microcosm whose aim, in part, is the deconstruction and ruthless parody of Western academic discourse on the other. Self's humour is built upon the parody and denial of cultural difference. In his world we are *all* equally banal, we all have nothing to say. "Ethical dialogue" with the other is reduced to an experience akin to being cornered by an insurance salesman. Self's vision is, in many ways, inimical to my own. Self's wonderfully perverse logic nevertheless foregrounds, by negation, some of the issues of cultural difference and interpretation that have spanned this thesis.

Cultural difference is the source for Self's satire because of its enduring force in our lives. The globalisation of culture notwithstanding, the enduring pertinence of cultural difference still drives many forms of cultural production. Cultural difference, the variety and plurality of cultural forms does not, as Clifford Geertz suggests, seem to be a "wasting resource" for critical discourse.<sup>9</sup> Cultural difference is and remains to be an issue in literary critical practice. We all, in our inner selves, might be banal and tedious but, as my thesis has proved, we are banal in a rainbow of *different* ways! My research has shown that postcolonial literary texts, despite the fact they share a language, do not necessarily share a world with either each other or with the critic. Self's comic negation of cultural difference is almost a negation of culture *per se*. In a world without difference, in a world in which we are all caught in one long suburban cocktail party, there is no need for criticism, no need for literature, no need for Self.

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<sup>9</sup> In "Thick Description-Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" Clifford Geertz states "The great and natural variation of cultural forms is, of course, not only anthropology's great (and wasting) resource, but the ground of its deepest theoretical dilemma" (p. 22) in *The Interpretation of Cultures* London: Fontana Press, 1993, pp. 3 - 33

This study has been built from the dialogic interaction of differing orders of meaning and signification. I have used such disparate texts as Herder and Tutuola, Wordsworth and Naipaul, Kristeva and Armah to create a work which explores the distance between these texts in a productive and illuminating way. I have used the non-identity of aesthetics, postcolonialism and literary texts to produce a body of interpretation that achieves a form of dialogue between these different worlds. I aimed to stage this dialogue in a way that did not collapse difference into any seamless identity between critical models and postcolonial textuality, or conversely, to hold “difference” up as an unimpeachable, semi-mystical concept of radical alterity. The originary motivations of my research were a dissatisfaction with many of the current critical models through which postcolonial textualities were conceived. My research has hoped to examine cultural difference as a practical consequence of reading culturally different texts (as evidenced by my attenuated treatment of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*) rather than an innate or pre-existing category in cultural interpretation. Cultural difference is something that *happens* in the heat of dialogic interaction. I have achieved a critical practice that has neither spoken with the other’s voice or placed the other in an unimpeachable and silent cage of alterity.

My examination of Primitivism demonstrated that one of the key ways in which Western discourse has figured otherness was through a kind of affective aesthetic of the sublime. The primitive sublime figured the African text, in particular, as something beyond interpretation, something that was an uncanny antithesis of the Western text. This is a strategy that seems to have endured, in a transmuted form, in some contemporary forms of postcolonial criticism. In this criticism postcolonial cultural difference becomes the

source of a later-day textual sublime, a mediation on differing forms of unreadability.

The many reading strategies that figure cultural difference in an aesthetics of the sublime are an understandable reaction to the problems of cultural competence and translation outlined in the body of my thesis. The sublime is a ready-made strategy for the interpretation of texts which defy our efforts at critical interpretation, texts which, by their differing aesthetic and textual values, “violate purpose in respect to judgement.”<sup>10</sup> Yet my analysis of Tutuola hoped to demonstrate that, for a reader unfamiliar with the particulars of his context, this “indeterminacy” is a phenomena produced as much by the practicalities of reading outside of one’s area of immediate cultural competence as it was by any “innate” characteristic of the text. An aesthetics of alterity that views cultural difference as a kind of irreducible absolute is, then, an understandable strategy for Western criticism. It is, however, a kind of abnegation of dialogic responsibility. When one wishes to communicate with a stranger one has the responsibility, first, to learn their language. The epiphany of difference before the face of the other (to echo Levinas once again) cannot begin this process.

My thesis was intended as an essay upon what Bhabha calls “that post-colonial silence which cannot be overwhelmed by interpretation.”<sup>11</sup> My aim was a negotiation between a critical practice which seeks to “overcome” cultural differences in an appropriative and inclusive embrace and a criticism which holds difference at a safe distance. Where an archive of scholarship enables a more informed and determined understanding of culturally different texts, such as in

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant *The Critique of Judgement* (trans. J. H. Barnard) New York: Hafner, 1951, Section 25, p. 91

<sup>11</sup> Homi Bhabha “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” in Homi Bhabha ed. *Nation and Narration* London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 291 - 320, p.315

my reading of *Fragments* and Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge", I have attempted to use conventional research procedures to inform my reading. When such scholarship does not exist (such as in my work on Tutuola), the most ethical solution seems to be a criticism that resists critical closure and explores the ramifications of its own condition. Cultural difference is neither a problem to be solved or an ethical imperative that negates the risky work of dialogue and interpretation. As I have hoped to demonstrate, cultural difference is a plural and *situational* phenomenon. It is "produced" in the interactions of the many postcolonialisms of the differing textualities under discussion with the equally diverse critical models I have brought to bear upon them. Postcolonial cultural difference is something that cannot be "solved" or concluded in a finalised model of an ethical literary critical practice.

Above all I have tried to conceive of cultural difference as a kind of invitation to renewed archival and critical labours. Indeed the course of my research has led me to conceive of "difference" in terms of a metaphor from the world of mechanics. The distance between cultural significations can be conceived of in terms of a "differential" relationship between societies and cultures. A "differential" is a gearing mechanism that allows the differing ratios of a transmission to engage with each other. This seems to be a productive metaphor to conceive of cultural difference. My text has explored a number of strategies for allowing widely spaced "cogs" of cultural production to engage and produce a drive towards new meaning.

### Split Differentials

My research is almost by definition "inconclusive" in that the issues that frame my research were explicitly open ended. My overall

aim was the exploration of the possibilities of an “ethical dialogue” with postcolonial literary texts. This could not, by definition, involve the evolution of any *one* set of reading strategies, research procedures or methodologies. What my research “demonstrated” was the enormous plurality of postcolonial literary practice. It also suggested that the practice of a deracinated and purely archival method of research cannot be an entirely successful way to interrogate some postcolonial literatures. The institutional and practical boundaries to my research meant that my “dialogue” with African literatures was, in particular, limited by both my own limitations as a critic and by the boundaries and limitations of the existing archive of scholarship. What may be required for a truly “dialogic” form of literary scholarship is a more literal “face-to-face” encounter with the cultures from which postcolonial literatures “originate”. What may be necessary, therefore, is a form of research that might seem rather anachronistic in our supposedly postmodern moment. What might be needed is a form of dialogue between cultures that not only brings cultural texts together but also enacts a “real” moment of cultural contact and exchange, a more explicitly “dialogic” interaction between postcolonial and Western scholarship. The critic must, therefore, involve himself in primary research in an encounter literally “face to face”. If the gaps and fissures in the critical archive vitiates one’s ability to produce informed readings, a truly dialogic criticism might attempt to begin the process of reconstructing such knowledges. My research has opened up a range of research possibilities not least of which are the possibilities of collaborative research projects and the pursuit and creation of a more elaborate and informative archive of scholarship on the specifics of different postcolonial cultures.

My thesis has been an exploration in the related worlds of a critical triumvirate, namely, the aesthetics of reception, production and



embodiment. My analysis of Naipaul and Bissoondath demonstrated that the body, although central to the discourse of the aesthetic, is not a category that can biologically by-pass issues of cultural difference. The body is both a culturally *productive* and a culturally *produced site*. The greater part of my research has been a search for a way to bring the aesthetics of production and reception into dialogic interaction, to find a way of reading that is better attuned to the cultural specifics of postcolonial texts. I have not, it bears repeating, evolved any one set of reading protocols or procedures that will give unmediated access to the aesthetics of production governing postcolonial inscription. There is no one way of “receiving” texts that will grant unmediated insight into the world of someone else’s aesthetic and artistic categories. Yet in my analysis of the aesthetics of reception I have managed, nevertheless, to outline some of the more obvious historical failings of Western readers. Questions of audience remain central to the practice of inter-cultural criticism. Only through a careful examination of one’s own critical procedures, their history and their limitations, can the task of evolving new ways of reading begin. My examination of writers such as Jauss and Bakhtin aimed to bring questions of audience into the study of postcolonial criticism. More research needs to be done on, for example, the ways in which the politics of audience have impacted on the formation of a canon of postcolonial literatures.

Yet the greatest challenges facing inter-cultural criticism surely lie within “the aesthetics of production”. My research has shown both the need for, and the problems arising from, a ground level examination of the differing aesthetics of the postcolonial world. Given the limitations of the ethnographic tradition, how does one build a meaningful picture of the cultural and social contexts of postcolonial literatures? Once again, there are no easy answers. In part, one must

trust to traditional archival methods of scholarship. Yet for a truly ethical dialogue to take place in literary criticism, some of the gaps and distortions of the archive need to be addressed by the kind of first-hand engagement with other cultures I have suggested above. In an academic environment in which literary critical research into postcolonial literatures is too easily and carelessly universal in its methods, the critic may have to give up some of the grandeur and sweep of "postcolonial criticism" for a more local and specific form of writing and research. The enormous challenge of this method lies in how one becomes culturally competent without assuming cultural authority, how to be diligent and responsible to one's sources without an ineluctable and unwanted transmogrification into a kind of literary anthropologist.

While Will Self's vision of a world without difference remains a fantasy, its humour serves to occlude the very real politics of oppression and cultural difference in the Amazon and elsewhere. A responsible criticism cannot rest in its exploration of forms of critical inscription that reflect and realise the increasing diversity of cultural life. My research aims, therefore, to initiate a critical practice in which the power structures of the last century no longer hamstring the critical aspirations of the century to come. For all the difficulties of an inter-cultural criticism, it is in the spaces between cultures, nations and histories that the differential work of ethical dialogue must take place.

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