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THE AFRICAN WRITER'S EXPERIENCE OF EUROPEAN LITERATURE

D. MARECHERA

My first contact with English Literature was at school, and later at university. I enjoyed it but detested having to work at it. The choice of texts — ranging from Chaucer to D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce — was unimaginative, especially to a student who was inclined to disagree with everything and everybody. I would, with Jorge Louis Borges, have written a dissertation on the refutation of Time itself. I wrote my essays and tried to insult (privately) English Literature by crossing the Channel on a translation ferry to continental Europe.

Translators have served me well. I refer to such as Christopher Middleton who did a good translation of Hölderlin; to Kenneth Northcott who translated Gotthold Lessing's *Von Barnhelm*; to P. K. Stone who rendered Lacos into English; to H. Sloman who did Guy de Maupassant; to J. M. Cohen who did Rabelais; to Stephen Heath at Cambridge who has done singular service to Roland Barthes. This is to name only a few of those translators I have had to depend on. Though I was taught French and Latin at school, I have been anglicized enough to stubbornly insist that a foreigner is somebody who does not know English and whose language is not worth knowing.

From early in my life I have viewed literature as a unique universe that has no internal divisions. I do not pigeon-hole it by race or language or nation. It is an ideal cosmos co-existing with this crude one. I had a rather grim upbringing in the ghetto and have ever since tried to deny the painful reality of concrete history. If, as it is said, we all have something to hide, then my whole life has been an attempt to make myself the skeleton in my own cupboard. If brightness can fall from the air, then, as with Heinrich Heine, poetry is the art of making invisibility visible. Translating the literary imagination into fact may perhaps make writers acknowledged legislators. It becomes a question of perspective, almost of optics. If I am looking at something, and I am conscious of myself looking, does that affect what I see? Can I learn to experience the world from that quality in us which is the source of dreams?

It is Pirandello whose plays torture out of us the shadowline between illusion and reality, in particular his *Henry IV* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Eugene Ionesco, especially in his play *Rhinoceros*, sets himself the same task. He goes beyond Pirandello in that for him internal corruption leads to actual physical transformation. Here we are in Ovid's territory of 'metamorphosis', which centuries later Franz Kafka was to depict as a literal fact. Such transformations occur again and again in the work of the Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, whose

Palmwine Drinkard the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, quite justly acclaimed as a masterpiece. To see takes time; and within time are countless transmutations. Therefore, the evidence of our own eyes is always provisional; therefore, the element of fantasy, in terms of metamorphosis, becomes the only fact we are truly capable of. To know that one can be anything at any instant is to liberate oneself. Motive no longer matters; the only thing is to be or not to be. Hamlet's dilemma becomes existential. It leads to Albert Camus's rediscovery of Sisyphus, to Samuel Becket's two tramps waiting for Godot. But in the meantime something has changed metamorphosis as myth into metamorphosis as a historical nightmare. We are caught in the very act of changing into some other form; we are frozen in that monstrous midway, as in the film *The Fly*, when an experiment goes wrong and the scientist is changed into a grotesque shape that is neither fly nor human being but something in between. The Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, tackles this theme in his novel *The Interpreters*. Albert Camus, very conscious of the drastic transformation of Europe under the Nazi machine, had attempted such a task in his novel *The Plague*. Ngugi wa Thiongo, in his *A Grain of Wheat*, struggles with the same beast. Though the heat may differ in temperature, the heat is everywhere the same. The degree of pain may differ but the torturer's technique is the same. We are not at the beginning, we are not at the end — we are at the mid-point of the scream, the eye of the storm. That, for me, is the unifying factor in the scenario of contemporary literature in Europe and in Africa.

There is a healthy interchange of technique and themes. That Europe had, to say the least, a head start in written literature is an advantage for the African writer: he does not have to solve many problems of structure — they have already been solved. I do not consider influences pernicious: they are a type of apprenticeship. When I started writing, D. H. Lawrence was the skeleton in my cupboard. After that it was James Joyce, Kurt Vonnegut, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Bukowsky, etc., until I began to doubt the existence of any originality in myself. This naturally switched me off writers; I turned to Dr Freud and his counterpart Dr Jung. Some would say the expansion of psychology has had a disastrous effect on twentieth-century literature. I disagree. That part of the European novel which is descended from Petronius's *Satyricon*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, has in fact gained in depth, especially in the novels of John Fowles, Anthony Burgess, and Günter Grass. John Fowles's *The Magus* and Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* are formidable works whose expanse is covered with psychology and the anatomy of violence. Because of the numerous and incredible conflicts of the twentieth century, a knowledge of animal aggression is indispensable. It is in this area that I find African literature rather shallow. How can Africa write as if that Black Frenchman, Franz Fanon, never existed — I refer to the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Mask*.

The critic and lecturer Neil McEwan, in his book *Africa and Novel*, argues that, far from imitating the practice of past generations of European writers, African novelists have extended the possibilities and uses of fiction. He notes that the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin has offered a category of narrative whose unifying factor is a 'carnival' attitude to the world. This category includes writers from different backgrounds. They range from Aristophanes, Lucian and Apuleius (the first African novelist, perhaps) to Dostoevsky by way of Rabelais and Dean Swift. I add John Fowles and Günter Grass, and the Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, in *The Interpreters*. *Don Quixote* is quite at home. The world of such novels, says McEwan, is complex, unstable, comic, satirical, fantastic, poetical and committed to the pursuit of truth. The hero can travel anywhere in this world and beyond. Fantasy and symbolism are combined with low-life naturalism. Odd vantage points offer changes of scale. Heaven and hell are close and may be visited. Madness, dreams and day-dreams, abnormal states of mind and all kinds of erratic inclinations are explored. Scandalous and eccentric behaviour disrupts 'the seemly course of human affairs' and provides a new view of 'the integrity of the world'. Society is unpredictable; roles can quickly change. Current affairs are treated with a satirical, journalistic interest. Genres are mixed. Stories, speeches, dramatic sketches, poetry and parody exist side by side. This category of novel is called the menippean. It is no longer necessary to speak of the African novel or the European novel: there is only the menippean novel. At this point I wish to pay my respect (or silence) to the latest addition to those writers of the menippean novel: John Kennedy Toole, a young United States' citizen who, after obtaining his Master's degree at Columbia University, committed suicide because he could not find a publisher for his only novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. He wrote this book in the early 1960s, the time of 'flower power', the era of psychedelic mysteries, an implosion of brain into soul. But his novel is anything but effete: it is a gigantic 'NO' to everything the twentieth century stands for.

I do not like this century. I do not like any other century, past or future. I do not like to live under the backside of a medieval god or a nuclear bomb, which amounts to the same thing. I am no mystic, yet no materialist either. I believe in nature but refuse to live with it in the same room. What Thoreau and Walt Whitman did for letters in the United States — a stubborn individual sensibility which by its excessiveness actually mirrored a national dilemma — had actually begun much earlier with the German philosopher-writer, Goethe, in his portrayal of what Colin Wilson calls the 'Romantic Outsider' in the *Sorrows of Young Werther*. What Sir John Suckling had earlier derided:

Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?

was transformed into the type of the high, idealistic young poet, pale, but manly. Schiller's *Robbers* and *Don Carlos* followed. Other writers within this particular

tradition are Novalis, Coleridge (in his translation of Schiller), Byron (in 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage') and Shelley. More recently we have Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, Sartre's *Roquentin* and Albert Camus's *Meursault*. I have been an outsider in my own biography, in my country's history, in the world's terrifying possibilities. It is, therefore, quite natural for me to respond with the pleasure of familiar horror to that section of European literature which reflects this. The inquisitor who resides in the human heart and refuses to believe in God on humanitarian grounds is familiar to all who have experienced warfare.

To quote Albert Camus from his book, *The Rebel*: 'On the day when crime puts on the apparel of innocence, through a curious reversal peculiar to our age, it is innocence that is called on to justify itself.' In Holland, the novelist Harry Mulisch in his recent book, *The Assault*, tears off post-war scar tissue protecting his society: the story begins with the assassination of a Nazi collaborator in 1945. In Holland, also, there was recently discovered *The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-43*; a young Jewish woman whose resilience, until she is taken to Auschwitz, shines because of her 'thinking heart'. The concept of the thinking heart is close to T. S. Eliot's idea of thought at the tips of the senses. It is not a giant step from these writers to the world of another writer in Holland, Cees Nooteboom, in his novel *Rituals* where he explores different styles of living in today's world surrounded by the loose trapdoors of the hideous past. We are refugees fleeing from the excesses of our parents. I have no respect for those who presume to be parents. Tradition, on closer examination, always reveals secrets we prefer to flush down the toilet. As taxpayers to the imagination, we expect the City Council to quietly get rid of the shit. In this sense, the German novelist Heinrich Böll psychoanalyses the sanity out of the insanity of the Nazi and post-Nazi era. We have become ruthless enough to judge while cynically knowing that judgement is useless, beside the point. The judge and the accused know that both of them are guilty and the trial a farce. This is the world not of Simone de Beauvoir, but of Celini and Jean Genet.

With Genet, I find myself next door to the *House of Hunger*, my *doppelgänger*, in fact the ghost which, until the Kenyan novelist Meja Mwangi arrived, African literature had refused to greet: the life of blind poverty, blind impulse. It is not far from the material of the Argentinian novelist, Marta Traba — she was killed at Madrid airport in 1983 — in her book *Mothers and Shadows*, on the plight of people who are now called 'the disappeared'. This is the realm in which the South African novelist Alex La Guma takes *A Walk in the Night*. He died on 11 October 1985, in Havana, Cuba. The inquisitor in the mind controls the sources of the imagination: the imagination is seated within a body which an assassin can destroy at any moment. In other words, eternity contained within the finite, the permanent within the temporal. We are provisional yet have the seeds of limitlessness. Which is more glorious: to live in minute detail, or to live within a

timeless design? The Booker Prize winner, Thomas Keneally, in his book *Schindler's Ark*, provides us with perhaps an answer. Human life may be just a minor detail, but it is all we have, and therefore all means are permissible to save it. His book is about a German industrialist who used cunning, deceit and bribery to save the lives of thousands of Jews during the Nazi era.

Typically, the English have failed to produce a great novel based on the events of the Second World War. But let's touch on the Norwegian novelist, Knut Hamsun: his books, especially *Hunger*, are remarkable. The commitment to nature as opposed to sophistication is abundantly clear, disturbing, mindboggling, especially in *Hunger* where he explores the connection between extreme physical starvation and reverie. Like the American, Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun was a Nazi collaborator and his own country still does not know what to do with him. He is at one with Celini. The behaviour of writers in times of conflict will always be dubious.

This was the case with the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, who fought and died for secessionist Biafra. Okigbo's poetry is unique in African literature. What the Soviet writer Andrei Sinyavsky said of Yevtushenko, I think applies to Okigbo:

For all his proneness to self display, he lacks the stamp of an exclusive personality, the idea of a vocation, or of a great and terrible fate which would allow him to develop his own biography like a legend, in which personal life is raised to the level of a unique saga, half real, half invented, and created day by day before an astonished public.

This is part of the Russian tradition, the nineteenth-century greats like Nikolai Gogol, Turgenev, Pushkin, Goncharov, Lermontov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and those of this century like Mayakovsky, Yessenin and Tsvetaeva.

Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer's task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it. La Guma's walk into the night becomes a jump into the unknown. Sinyavsky, forced into exile by his own need to write, exclaims: 'A writer's life is a journey, it *has* to be a journey, it has a fate.' The writer is no longer a person: he has to die in order to become a writer. People never find their appearance quite convincing — they are constantly amazed at their own ghastly reflection in the mirror. For the writer, looking at himself in the mirror, the most important thing is his writing; he looks down from above at his own person and despises it. His whole life is lived in the expectation of what is going to be written. The writer is a vampire, drinking blood — his own blood — a winged creature who flies by night, writing his books. The writer has no duty, no responsibilities, other than to his art. Art is higher than reality.

In spite of the moralizing in Gogol, Leo Tolstoy and Pasternak, Russia had one writer — Pushkin — who was completely outside this framework. His work is art, not sermons. Speaking of his technique of 'fantastic realism', Sinyavsky says:

I don't think of modernism as some kind of device. It is no more so than realism which is itself a convention, an artificial form. Realism pretends to be able to say the truth about life. I'm not against truth, but it can be sought by different routes. In the nineteenth century realism was very productive as a form, but in this century — it's impossible.

What happened in Russia was that at the beginning of this century poetry was highly developed, while prose somehow lagged behind — with some exceptions: Bely, Bulgakov, Babel. My task as a writer was to take the veins of modernism, symbolism, futurism that had developed in poetry and transfer them to the language of prose.

I find myself in the same position as Sinyavsky. In that quotation he was replying to the question why he saw himself as a modernist — the same accusation directed at me by the censorship board when they banned *Black Sunlight*. Sinyavsky is now dying in the environs of Paris — an exile, like I was. It takes only an instant to become a person without titles, without a label, to become the raw person, the point at which low-life naturalism meets its *doppelgänger*, the existentialist. Tragedy peers over everyone's shoulder. There are those who write while working in the service of the State, or some religion or ideology. There are writers who can only write while they are free to develop their own personality, to be true to themselves. What is the answer? Sinyavsky replies:

A writer who is a fanatic can be a great writer. There are many examples of fine writers who have written within the framework of a state ideology or religion — Derzhavin, Mayakovsky, for example. But their greatness comes not from the fact that they served an ideology but from the fact that they believed in it. If a writer has lost that faith, then he will not be able to produce real art by trying to adapt himself in the service of the state. That is where freedom becomes absolutely essential. But then, people still argue about whether genuine art requires absolute political freedom. For instance, the poet Brodsky defended censorship on the grounds that it helped to develop metaphorical language, yet it was censorship that killed Brodsky's fellow poets, especially Mandelstam. I will never give my blessing to censorship on those grounds — any more than I would to war, or prison, or, for that matter, death.

It is not unworthy to now mention the so-called absurdist writers of Leningrad. These are Dmitry Prigov, Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky. Prigov is still alive. His poems have a disarming lightness, his characteristic tone of mild grievance and bewilderment, which is underlined by a nihilistic view of a world in which modest and inoffensive souls find themselves inexplicably thwarted, inexplicably guilty, and unable to make sense of the grand notions — conscience, freedom, dignity — whose names nevertheless invade their day-to-day vocabulary. I quote:

You've put four walls around yourself
And hung a ceiling overhead
Locked yourself inside your room
To do shameful things alone

And do not see, and do not hear
That you are visible in there
As if they'd lifted off the roof
And fixed their gaze upon your shame

You raise your eyes — and Oh, just Lord!
Either the criminal must run
Or do his trousers up at least
Or at least remove the corpse.

The Czechoslovak novelist, exiled, of course, Jan Pelc, in his first novel *It's Gonna Get Worse* — he is only 29 years old — follows this absurdism or fantastic realism, or menippean manner, to produce a work which is still making heads shake among emigré Czech communities and the readers of samizdat literature. It is in fact the ugly twin to John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*. This is the same territory as that of the English Liverpool Poets, their articulate chagrin against the pigs, the fascists, social injustice and English racism. But these were rather a late reflection of the American Beat Generation with its gurus like Allen Ginsberg, Allan Watts, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac. Ginsberg's words, 'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix', were echoing in my ears when I was writing *The House of Hunger*.

SOYINKA, DOSTOEVSKY: THE WRITER ON TRIAL FOR HIS TIME

D. MARECHERA

Dostoevsky, when his brother and his wife died in the 1860s and his journal *Epoch* collapsed, said:

I find myself alone and simply terrified. My entire life at one stroke broke into two. In one half which I had lived through was everything I had lived through, was everything I had lived for; and in the other still unknown half everything was strange and new. There was not a single heart that could replace those two.

What remains from all the reserve of strength and energy in my soul is something troubled and disturbed, something close to despair. Worry, bitterness, a completely cold industrialness, the most abnormal state for me to be in, and in addition loneliness.

And yet it seems to me that I am just now preparing to live. Funny isn't it? The vitality of a cat.

The tiger in Soyinka is a restless active intelligence, a magnetic personality. I last met him at a writers' conference in West Berlin in 1979. His talent is unique. Nigeria, and Africa, should be grateful: Soyinka is a voice of vision in his own time. This links him very much with the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century who, though steeped in European literature, saw themselves as voices of vision in Russia's political and spiritual evolution. The passion to rehearse the future in one's monumental works exacts a heavy price. Nikolai Gogol, while working on his astonishing novel, *Dead Souls*, became a fanatical believer in an esoteric fringe cult guided by a weird monk. Soyinka, like Dostoevsky, has already been in prison. Within the writer's limits, Nigeria, like Dostoevsky's Russia, seeks an identity that has so far eluded it. Inevitably, the margin between literature and politics is breached. This has happened to Ngugi in Kenya, whose sources are now those of Soviet socialist realism. It is one thing to cut one's literary teeth on the *Communist Manifesto*, as Ngugi is now doing; it is another to recognize the distance between self-exploration and self-mystification, which is what Soyinka does. There is a level at which the imagination subsumes all differences of thought and feeling and creates that staggering miracle for which Soyinka has recently received the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature. His is an achievement of the calibre of the Greek, Seferis, of Elias Canetti, and perhaps Pablo Neruda.

There are those who find in memory the evidence of their identity; indeed, some say each individual is himself the microcosm of all that mankind has been from the beginning of time. But perhaps this is to be seduced by metaphors — an

act of self-mystification which beguiles those writers and readers for whom every novel or poem is seen as autobiography. A lot is said about Soyinka's use of myth, especially religious mythology. Such myths are understood to belong not to the individual but to his race, even to all mankind. This is a mistake. It is to reduce Soyinka's vision to the level of a dictionary of mythology. Myths are a type of memory, and there is no certainty in memory — as when people talk about roots: no evidence of identity in memory. Where memories disagree there is often no way to settle the argument. Also we remember what we wish to recall, and forget the rest. Besides, memory tends to colour the things it holds. Then, there is amnesia, complete loss of one's past. Identity is an act of faith, impossible to verify.

It is at this point of the impossibility of verification that Soyinka — and perhaps Okara in *The Voice* — leaps into the dark of *The Interpreters* and the nightmare of *Season of Anomy*. It is the point of death, Tennyson's 'Crossing the Bar'; and at once Soyinka himself becomes *Abiku*, a spirit child who is fated to a cycle of early death and rebirth to the same mother. Christopher Okigbo is another. Gadflies on their nation's leaping flanks. At this point the writer ceases to be African or European. He has become the exploding atoms of his searing vision, become Soyinka the Nobel Prize Winner, become Dostoevsky of the great novels that began with *Crime and Punishment*.

This is the area where the irrational is the only true condition of man. This truth inflicts first-degree burns on the body of both the individual and the State. It affronts our complacency and all we take for granted. It is the area of Soyinka's poems and ranges from the pure comedy of 'Telephone Conversation' through the carnage of Lagos roads and the Biafran war to the spirited anguish and celebrations of the psyche in *Idanre and Other Poems*. He is no longer a mere recorder of his society's mores and experience. Soyinka is a case in point in the argument for the expansion of the writer's freedom in Africa. He is more talked about than read. He has, in Zimbabwe, been dismissed as an art-for-art's-sake bourgeois reactionary writer; he has been labelled a buttonhole flower for the élite. But his attackers have barely read his work. Africa's Nobel Prize winner has rarely been welcomed by Africa itself. Students shun him for being difficult. The public shun him for being a student's novelist, a writer for writers with nothing to say for the masses because he is difficult. It is a paradox that modernism has from the start been identified with difficultness, and, on a continent still barely literate, modernism has, therefore, been condemned as being irrelevant on African soil.

It is not too long ago that Achebe invoked the apocalyptic vision of the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats, of Western civilization in crisis; not too long ago that T. S. Eliot stumbled on the Wasteland; not too long ago that Okigbo in his last poems saw the monstrosity of this century — a century in which we no longer fool ourselves about man's inherent goodness. The only permanent values left us by our

atrocities against each other have the vibration of horror. This is at the heart of Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*. It is the weather of *The Man Died*, Soyinka's personal record of his harrowing time in prison. It is akin to Ngugi's own record of detention; the awful possibilities a writer invokes against himself when he dares expose his vision to the light of Africa. I hope Soyinka's Nobel Prize for Literature will mean less censorship, less harassment of writers. As Professor David Cook says in his critical work, *African Literature*, 'When the wheels catch fire, the poet dissolves all boundaries and makes distinctions unimportant'.

In the last resort, distinctions among writers of different nations are not at all of importance. The Latin American writer Jorge Louis Borges has said, 'It is not necessary to say that the idea of a literature must define itself in terms of its national traits; or that writers must seek themes from their own countries.' Racine would not have understood a person who denied him his right to the title of poet of France because he cultivated Greek and Roman themes. Shakespeare would have been amazed if people had tried to limit him to English themes (*Hamlet* is Scandinavian, *Macbeth* is Scottish). What is truly native can and does dispense with local colour. I found this in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*: Gibbon observes that in the whole of the *Koran* there is no mention of camels. After all, the Middle East takes the existence of camels for granted.

The emphasis, therefore, is not that Soyinka the Nobel Prize winner is Nigerian or African, but is, as it were, on the acquisition of immortality. That he is of this continent vicariously confers honour upon us all — but it is not necessary to emphasize it. What is important is the challenge his Prize has thrust upon the younger generation of writers. Otherwise his achievement is a mere flash in the pan. This is why I call for freedom of expression — no censorship.

The record of atrocities against writers in Africa is a grisly one — only recently in Nigeria itself a newspaper editor died of his injuries when he was sent a parcel bomb. In Cameroon, 'journalism is synonymous with detention and harassment'. Charles Ndi-Chia, editor of the *Cameroon Times*, has been detained seven times since 1983. Paul Nkemayang, a journalist for the same newspaper, and another, Pius Kwendi, have also been picked up. In the 1960s, there were, in Cameroon, fifteen independent newspapers; of these, only the *Cameroon Times* is still publishing. In the Congo, the People's Republic 'has taken over the censorship practices of the former colonial administration'; right now the work of novelist Makouta-Mbouka is banned and he lives in exile. In Liberia, one of the two last independent newspapers had its offices burned down. In Burkina Faso about eighteen months ago, there was one small newspaper run by an independent journalist. When he came to work one morning, he found the offices burned down. As he had no money to buy new printing presses, that was the end of the independent press in Burkina Faso. The result of all this is that the best African writers and journalists live in exile in London or Paris, or simply live

out of a suitcase, shuttling between countries. Soyinka and Ngugi have indeed lived out of the academic and conference suitcase for some time now. You pick up invitations to lecture; you accept any invitation to a conference. Since expenses are paid, it means you do not starve. Though we share in his honour of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, I do not think many governments in Africa deserve such a grace.

Political pressure on writers has existed for a long time, indeed from the time when Plato, in his *Republic*, recommended that the poet must be banned into exile from the ideal State; from the time when Socrates was condemned to death by poison in Athens; from the time when the poet and novelist, Petronius, had his veins opened and was left to bleed to death at the orders of Emperor Nero, his erstwhile comrade in pleasure. Financial measures can also force writers out of business. They can be indirect, as in the case of publishers, who, afraid of their government, continually reject a particular writer's work: I have had three manuscript novels rejected this year alone. The measures can be direct: the Tanzania News Agency, SHIHATA, began licensing all local and foreign journalists from 1 July 1985, with the full authority of a 1967 law that empowers the Agency to issue press cards to newsmen. The card costs 40,000 Tanzania shillings (about 250 American dollars). On top of this, foreign journalists have to pay an additional 400 shillings, normal press-card charges, while local journalists have to pay 200 shillings. This means that independent journalists who cannot afford to pay the high fees will be forced out of business, rendering the Agency the sole source of news in the country.

In such conditions, the writer in Africa who has courage is fast becoming something like Dostoevsky's underground man, in *Notes from Underground*, veering between idealism and paranoia, between honourable principles and grossly humiliating circumstances. I submit that Ngugi and Soyinka are the new underground writers, sniping away from their nuclear bomb shelter of high education and astonishing imagination. They strike with novels, they mug us with brilliant essays, they destroy our illusions by the penetrating insolence of their plays. Their X-ray poems and articles expose the corruption in the marrow of our bones. Even the dead are not exempt from this autopsy and inquest: there is an ironic connection between Soyinka's *A Dance in the Forest* and Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. I cannot say whether in Soyinka the dead are sacred or profane, or merely co-existent with the living, but Chichikov, the hero of Gogol's novel, is travelling all over Russia buying up dead souls at bargain prices. He approaches each landowner, finds out how many servants of the landowner have died since the last census, and offers to buy these dead souls right on the spot. Meanwhile, we in Africa are talking about ancestors, and Soyinka is deftly conjuring them out of the ground to mingle with their descendents. It is a weird and comic conjunction between these two writers. Soyinka and Gogol are also at one in their use of satire

to indict their fellows. There are scenes in Soyinka's *The Interpreters* not unworthy of the writer of the *Diary of a Madman* or of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

We must remember that these writers, Nigerian and Russian, are and were in countries in a violent search for identity. The Russia of the great novels is characterized by a proletariat of undergraduates (Dostoevsky's phrase). The undergraduates, until the end of the nineteenth century, were never more than a few thousand. However, entirely on their own, and in defiance of the most compact tyranny of that time, they claimed and contributed to the liberation of 40 million serfs. Almost all of them paid for this liberation by suicide, execution, prison, madness. The entire history of Russian terrorism can be summed up in the struggle of a handful of intellectuals to abolish tyranny, against a background of a silent populace. In independent Africa it is the university students who are in the forefront of the fight for the maintenance of liberty. Of course, when Dostoevsky coined the phrase 'a proletariat of undergraduates' he was not thinking of the students who get shot or detained or assaulted as in Liberia, Kenya, Nigeria; he was actually insulting them. Dostoevsky started as something of a left-wing radical but gradually joined the extreme right-wing even to the point of denouncing his fellow writers to the secret police. He and Turgenev, at first the best of friends, had a long acrimonious hatred, a state of war, in which they would denounce each other to the secret police. The officers who detained Soyinka were probably his ex-schoolmates. I myself feel strange when I realize that Zimbabwe is being ruled by people some of whom were with me at high school and university. I suggest here that the writer, whether poet or journalist or novelist or playwright is, in Africa, in the same situation the Russian writer was under the Czar.

It is interesting to note that the widely recognized father of Russian Literature, Pushkin himself, was Black. He was born in 1799 at a time when the Czar had closed down all private printing presses in Russia and prohibited, among other things, the importation of foreign literature, travel by Russians abroad, and even French fashions. Before he was 21, he wrote the *Ode to Liberty* and he was arrested and banished to south Russia. From then until his death he was a virtual prisoner, and the Emperor Nicholas ordered him to 'send me all your writings from now on: it is I who shall be your censor'. In a letter to his wife, Pushkin laments, 'It was a devil's trick to let me be born with a soul and talent in Russia'. I believe a lot of writers in Africa have at one time or another echoed Pushkin's cry. However, Pushkin is closer to Ngugi than to Soyinka in that for him the novel means a historical epoch developed in the form of an imaginative story. He brought history nearer to himself and his readers by giving it biographical interest. Ngugi uses the same technique in *A Grain of Wheat*, in *The Black Hermit* and in other plays such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. But with writers like Soyinka,

Gogol and Dostoevsky, history is not a well-ordered path leading from cause to effect as with Chinua Achebe; it is rather a psychological condition in which our senses are constantly bombarded by unresolved or provisional images. Soyinka's use of time and space, which actually is a rejection of those linear and spacial concepts, coincides with the temperament of the modern twentieth-century novel. This is what makes Dostoevsky's and Gogol's work contemporary with us. It connects with the psychodrama of the intellectual trapped in a superficially rational world, the scenario of *Auto da Fé*, the novel by the Bulgarian-born winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Elias Canetti.

Soyinka began to blossom at the time colonialism died in Nigeria. He felt no need to look back, as Achebe did; he was minutely examining the Nigeria that had been born, a witness of the turmoil of Independence. Dostoevsky, Gogol, were writing while their Russia still slumbered under absolutist rule, a time when the fights and arguments for liberation were raging in the drawing rooms and in the student cafes. The terrorism was real; the secret police answered it with equally grisly realism. In December 1825, the terrorist group known as the Decembrists were arrested and arranged in lines, and were then blown up by cannon fire in the square in front of the Senate in St Petersburg. Dostoevsky, in the 1870s, was writing his *Author's Diary*, his novel *The Devils*, and the monumental *The Brothers Karamazov* — he was writing this while, in 1878, a very young girl, Vera Zassulich, was shooting down the governor of St Petersburg. At the same time, the Emperor of Germany, the King of Italy, the King of Spain, were also killed. In the same year, Czar Alexander II created the Okhrana, the most efficient weapon of state terrorism the world has ever seen. In 1879, another King of Spain is killed and there is an abortive attempt on the life of the Czar. In 1881, soon after Dostoevsky published *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Czar is murdered. Sofia Perovskaya and her group are hanged. In 1888, the Emperor of Germany is murdered and the murderer is beheaded with an axe. In the same year, after a long illness, Turgenev dies in Paris, and is buried in Russia. In the year 1892, there were more than a thousand dynamite bombings in Europe. In 1898, the Empress Elisabeth of Austria is murdered. In 1901, President McKinley of the United States is assassinated. Tolstoy is plodding on with his work, as is Maxim Gorky. Nihilism, which Turgenev had deflowered in *Fathers and Sons*, finally culminates in revolutionary terrorism.

I need not paint the condition of Africa while Wole Soyinka continues his work. Military regimes, corrupt civilian regimes, murders, civil war, apparitions like Bokassa and Idi Amin, the struggles for liberation in Southern Africa, the horrors of famine, etc.

And now the murder of President Samora Machel within a few days of the Nobel Prize for Literature being awarded to Wole Soyinka. I salute the one and offer only silence to the other.