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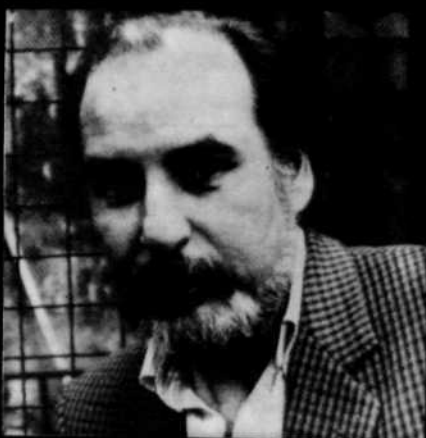
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Calixthe
Beyala



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Ben
Jelloun



Ben Okri

POSTMODERNISM & the Impossible Death of the African Author

IN 1968, the year Roland Barthes, the French philosopher, announced the 'Death of the Author', Wole Soyinka was in detention for opposing the prosecutors of the Nigerian civil war. The poet, Christopher Okigbo had been killed in the early skirmishes of the war.

Chinua Achebe was in exile, engaged in matters as distant from the literary as, raising funds for and campaigning for the rise of the Biafran Sun. Mongo Beti was in Paris on a contested visa, his book soon due for banning in both his Camerounian

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homeland and France. Naguib Mahfouz's book *Children of Gebelawi* was banned in his country. Camara Laye was on the run from Sekou Toure's gendarmes. Can Themba had drunk himself to death in a Joburg shebeen. Bloke Modisane, overwhelmed by the depression of exile, was reported to have jumped down from a New York Skyscraper. Alex La Guma was still incarcerated on Robben island. And Dennis Brutus, freed from Robben island, was in exile as was Ezekiel Mphahlele and many other South African writers. One case parodied the other. The fortunes of the producers of African literature, was evidently in such dire straits that it would not have required a stretch of the imagination to grasp what the French philosopher was talking about. Roland Barthes, however, did not have the African writer in mind when he declared the Death of the Author. His verdict of an endgame for the writer was absolutely European in conception. It was also rather indifferent to, if not blind, to critical aspects of the European experience; that is, blind to the impact of the scriptural productions that armed the Enlightenment, the liberal revolution, the Students' Revolt of that year, the Algerian Revolution, and a whole forcefield derived from the 'maligned' author. It was, in effect, a generalising move whose applicability to any particular environment - including the African one - could only have been considered within a forced sense of universality.

As it happened, the common temptation of traditional literary criticism was to treat the idea as just another bubble among several bubbles for which French and Western literary history in general are famous. It seemed no more than a passing distraction for Academies in a Europe that was free of war and without the extremes of poverty that was known in other continents. It may have remained just that - a mere distraction, covered by good-humoured condescension - but for the fact that, two decades after, the ziggurat of theories - postmodernism - of which it forms a part, dominates Euro-American literary establishments. It is even being valorised as Third World-friendly. Its ground-clearing career in relation to African literature has tended to follow the social Darwinist presumption of the colonial enterprise according to which the African writer, moving from tradition to the modern and then to the postmodern, as Frederic Jameson pictures it in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, is doomed to be ambushed by all the problems and fashions that have afflicted the European writer. The fact that the majority of African writers, at least the better known ones, began and continue to write in European languages and within genres of European provenance, has tended to give credence to this presumption. And so, the question has appeared straight-forward enough: If the Author is already dead in Europe, how could he or she hope to survive for long in Africa?

This, of course, is not a question that can be pursued without causing disquiet among people who are aware that the relevance of European 'discourse' to Africa is so often a matter of forced-draft universality. Knowing the economic, military and cultural complexes which give weight to certain ideas - not excluding the phenomenon of bullish expatriation of Africa's 'theory-class' and the power of international funding agencies over researches in African universities - the sense of disquiet can indeed be quite over-powering. With particular reference to the idea of the Death of the Author, what rankles is that it came at a time when African writers were just emerging from the belly of the anti-colonial struggle onto a stage that had been set and dominated by Euro-American writing for centuries. To think of it! Just when it was still *Morning Yet On Creation Day* for many African writers, this French philosopher comes along with a discovery almost tailor-made to kill them off. This was how it looked and what it looks like when considered that Africa had been dubbed by the best minds

in the West as a Dark Continent, a Heart Of Darkness, a continent without history or philosophy, because the written word had no dominion in African affairs. In a continent which was still predominantly non-literate and one in which literacy campaigns had been so much hostage to the myopia of native rulers - Europe's political stepchildren - to talk of the Death of the Author was like killing off those who were ready to script their people into history. From this standpoint, the extension of Barthes to a full dress discussion of African literature cried for a confrontation, or at least a necessary interrogation, to draw attention to the intellectual anxiety that it implicates, whether for Europe or for Africa, and the manner in which it could becloud the circumstances that point to a literal, rather than a metaphorical, Death of the African Author.

Needless to say, outside the jargon and the hype of academia which surrounded it, the idea of the Death of the Author appeared simple enough. For Roland Barthes, as critics like David Lodge have essayed to make plain, the Death does not imply that there are no living individuals who regard themselves and are treated by other people as writers and authors. It does not deny that the names to be found on the covers of books refer to actual persons; that even pseudonyms are used by determinate individuals whom we can see on television, on street corners or have a drink and a fight with; it does not dispute the fact that publishers pay royalties to these authors or that it is authors not their ghosts or phantoms who win the prizes so often celebrated in the media. The idea of the Death of the Author is not insisting that biographies of authors, enjoying such a boom in the Western world, are about fictitious entities who never wrote a thing. Barthes discounted such mundane elements to concentrate on authorship as a practice without an individual source. He was obviously working in the tradition of that movement-inspiring notion to be found in all cultures which presume that individuals do not make history, and which in European experience had been raised to the level of doctrine by thinkers like Karl Marx and Frederick Engels who have made quite a lot of history.

IN Barthes' formulation, the idea of a practice without an individual source takes the form of a creeping collectivism. In reference to literature and scriptural practices in general, it assumes that the original source of a text is the language in which it is produced. Language is viewed as a hand-down from preceding users who have invested it with tricks and mysteries that account for the meanings that a particular text may yield.

The classics of the past are assumed in this sense to have famished new directions. What remains is for what has been written to be rewritten, revised, imitated, parodied, calumnised, contradicted, and affirmed by other texts. Language is seen as some kind of fascist overlord imposing forms of creativity upon narrative in a manner that makes the talk of the originality of a particular writer quite suspect. This fascist overlord is assumed to have locked up meaning in a prisonhouse so that every sense that a text makes interweaves, interpenetrates and intersuggests another. It is another way of saying that all those who use a language and can make something of a literary text are part authors of the work. The writer as author is assumed to have died because anyone who can read and interpret a text becomes

a co-author of what is produced. A simple logic emerges: If all of us are authors then there are no authors.

True, Barthes may not have had the African writer in mind when he nailed the coffin of the author. But his theory may well have been speaking for that period in pre-colonial Africa when ritual art, as Chinua Achebe has noted in the case of Mbari Art among the Igbo of Nigeria, was treated as a collective product. In that era, still not fully overtaken by bourgeois capitalist ethic, even the individual agent, the artist, who executed a sculpture did not dare to acknowledge his contribution in the open because it would have been sacrilegious to do so. By the same token, proverbs which passed from mouth to mouth could not be credited to individuals. Only elders and the dead, the ancestors, could be taken as the source of the wisdom contained in them. From this viewpoint, it would have been taboo to lyricise over proverbs to be found in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance Of The Forests* or Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* except as an acknowledgment of the collective genius of the communal heritage. Presumably, the writer merely extracted the proverbs from the common pool in the Yoruba or Igbo language and placed them in the mouths of 'fictitious' characters. Even then it would still have been out of place to praise the writers for rendering the Yoruba or Igbo proverbs so well in English. Michel Foucault, who did not believe it was really enough to announce the death of the author, pressed the point home when he described the author as 'a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses, in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction'. The words, 'in our culture', is significant as it is a distancing from other cultures in which there is no author to serve as impediment or where access to meaning is not revised or affronted by the author's capacity to limit, exclude, or choose. Simply, Foucault reduces the author, from a once-supposed centrality to the role of mere conduit, or worse, a ruse. He presses this point towards the necessary hegemony of discursivity over all practices and arrives at the conclusion: that writers 'are' mere functions rather than authors. He grants authorial status only to initiators and founders of discursivity like Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (because their works contain 'characteristic signs, figures, relationships, and structures which could be reused by others') He denies the same status to the novelist's text (because the text merely 'opened the way for a certain number of resemblances and analogies which have their model or principle in their work'). This distinction between novelists and initiators of discursivity, no matter how disguised, turns out to be really a direct heir to Plato's discourse of poetry as a mere issue of divine frenzy, incapable of producing knowledge. It is more: in the universe of discursivity, the author is an initiator of difference as against mere imitation or affirmation, as in art. In essence, the making of difference rather than mere analogy becomes the mark by which the author is known; and the mark by which founders of discursivity are embossed over writers of fiction. Foucault reminds us in this regard that: 'Texts, books, and discourse really began to have authors (other than mythical "sacralised" and "sacralising" figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive'. Transgressivity here is viewed principally as a code of difference, by which originality may be determined and whose absence is deemed capable of ensuring the disappearance of the author as 'genius, as perpetual surging of invention'. Foucault raises the stakes, so to say, by granting discursivity the status of a science or a model in science: In the Middle Ages, as he points out, scientific work was accepted as true when it was marked by the author's name; in the 17th and 18th century, however, scientific discourses began to be received for themselves 'in the anonymity of an

established or always redemonstrable truth; their membership in a systematic ensemble and not the reference to the individual who produced them'. This shift is supposed to indicate that authorship does not arise from something intrinsic to it, but is subject to changes in perceptual and institutional climates. What Foucault does not dispute, what he in fact affirms, is that power has a lot to do with it as with Kuhnian paradigms in scientific communities. Power, lop-sided power, certainly had a lot to do with it in the traditional societies - the feudalist and partriarchal gerontocracies - in which the author was discounted (or repressed) and the freedom to deviate from norms and taboos was held in abeyance by fairly draconian codes. From Barthes and Foucault's postmodern standpoint, this power converts into an apparent war on the author and as such a liberating dig at the rise of capitalism which, never to be forgotten, enabled and promoted property rights through which the author-function parades as something of consequence. In fact, from this perspective, we are supposed to take as models those societies in the past which never heard of or never permitted individual authorship; we are to assume that the rule of the collective which this implied is a necessary ideal of liberation; an ideal which views individual interventions that were once supposed to generate or regenerate fictions as a hindrance to their free circulation.



One sense of this envisaged goal of liberation is the location of a prior source of discursivity either in a scientific community that enforces a paradigm in Kuhn's sense of the word or a traditional community or a religious group that imposes a ritual if not a common language. As in science which turned from the inspired individual scientist towards a community of scientists in order to redress subjectivity through intersubjectivity, discursivity is placed topographically on similar footing. The pacification of individuality through insistence on redemonstrable truth in science is equated with the force of collective sanction in traditional society. The point however is that a difference exists which distances science from that which overcomes a community

**Kojo Laing (top),
Okot p'Bitek
(above)**

through naked power or enforced ritual.

As it happens, redemonstrable truth in science takes place, more or less, 'out there' in a test site, a field outside the subject, and there, to be imitated and affirmed and contradicted, away from subjectivity while truth outside it, as in the realm of the fabulist arts, belongs more to the 'inside' of the subject where intersubjectivity has to be ploughed and threshed through analogies as Foucault taught. Put more metaphorically, this is to say, that the limiting, excluding and choosing by which the author conditions the flow of knowledge in science is achieved by lifting the bridge of

discourse above the mush of subjectivity. To arrive at a similar effect in the fabulist arts, it is a case of lowering the bridge into the mush of subjectivity in search of a siltbed, a common sensibility. Whichever way it may be viewed, whether through ritual, science, a free interplay of images or the imprimatur of naked power, the point is that the pacification of individuality and the consequent redress of subjectivity is assumed to be capable of annulling the place of the author.

Reading Roland Barthes, Foucault, and their disciples, intimates the notion that this lowering of the bridge of discourse is, properly speaking, incapable of producing real meaning. We are induced to acknowledge the immersion in subjectivity almost as an act of faith in the search for meaning - a search that it is necessarily a leap in the dark that proves itself only through experience; meaning, in essence is a phenomenon which testimony (language) may unveil but only a constant collocation of analogies through discourse, can effectively corroborate, affirm, contest or correct. True, the commonsensical proposition of the Death of the Author is that the multiplicity of analogies, brought to a junction in every subject, rubs out the kink that makes the author possible. Which is to say that whatever the multiplier, no piling of analogies can create the basis for a rupture, a departure from the norm, that makes a real difference. In which case, following the privileging of discursivity as the necessary assigner of the status of author, we ought to be obliged to accept this absence of a kink in the firmament of analogies as the ultimate inscriber of the disappearance of the author as 'genius, as perpetual surging of invention'. Inferentially, this is the case until we consider how analogies may and do rise qualitatively rather than quantitatively from the silt-bed into the open air of discourse.

The point to note here is that, as Foucault and Barthes project it, it is not so much individual persons who are to be held responsible for what happens in the prisonhouse of language: it is texts that speak to texts, not persons to persons. Straightaway, we enter the order of intertextuality in which what is written today is a child of, a slave of, a factor of, and a function of what was written before. All of us, in short, are supposed to be already in the texts as our languages speak for us in advance. Foucault sets out the manner in which it does. 'A text', he argues, 'is made of multiple writing drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation but' - and this is the big but - 'there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author...'. Furthermore, 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination'. And that destination, the junction, so to say is '... the reader'. This reader, as Barthes notes, 'without history, biography, psychology, is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted'. We may ask: How much of a 'single field' may this reader be who has no history or biography if as we are also told by Roland Barthes, the 'I' which approaches the text is already itself 'a plurality of other texts, of codes, which are infinite or more precisely lost' (*S/Z*). Decidedly, we are obliged at this level to concede that the meaning of a text is not what a particular author may intend: the argon is that there is no univocal, no single 'theological' meaning of a text. Since texts speak to texts, revise texts, debunk texts, then texts are privileged inscriptors of meaning doing what they can with what belongs to all texts in common. Hence there should be no sleep to lose over the distance between reality and the way reality is presented. What's more, the fact that a particular signification of reality may be frayed or deadlocked is simply taken as proof that all signification must be so. That some text may be more representative than the other is considered a matter of detail: a matter of language

which is used to exercise suzerainty over reality through citations that are 'anonymous, untraceable and yet already read' (*Work to Text*, 160). In effect, the idea of the Death of the Author sacrifices or hedges the possibility that a text can be deployed to lay a claim which is expected to be sustained by a more or less determinate response from those who receive the claim. Since texts are always in trouble with one another and the reader is supposed to have the freedom to enact his/her own interpretations of the texts, there ought not to be, according to the argument, a basis for trusting the author who presumes to yield a message that can be readily shared in common by all. Which would just have been all right as a ticket into the heaven of relativism but for the question which it leaves open: the question of how much room the reader can have to impose a particular construction on whatever is on offer. Surely, as the author may indeed be untrustworthy as no univocal meaning may have been intended in the first place, the question is what makes the reader so trustworthy as a junction of meaning in a world in which a plurality of meanings for a text is recognised as norm. This is a question which,

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unaddressed, suggests that the next announcement to be made would have to be the Death of the Reader. Surely, if the author is already dead and there is none to motivate and design and create outside language then we are obliged to grant the role of author to language which becomes its own motivator, as the Ultimate Subject in extremis. Language, as Subject, credited with all the dispositions of persons, can then overaw author and reader at the same time as pre-figured by various postmodern turns: in the feminist critique of essentialism, Rorty's pragmatism, Lyotard's local narratives, Foucault's genealogies, Queer theory or the play on rhetorical strategies in the social sciences. The short of it really is that language as a means for acquiring knowledge is forced to succumb to the presumed indeterminacy of the knowable or is it unknowable subject in an ostentatious relativism that eats its own tail. Evidently, it bites its own tail and dies; it resolves nothing. At best, it centralises a desultory discursivity which may enhance the capacity of the critic - of Foucault and Barthes and their heirs - to play creator: a transfer of function that may not be intended to, but annuls the subjectivity of the Other in the vain presumption that one subjectivity easily substitutes for another and that the risk of representation is resolvable by discourse.

Against such a relativism that so easily becomes banal, the search simply has to begin for that pre-motivator of language who makes from ready material a world, that elects or evokes behaviour from a repertoire of finite or, if you like, infinite patterns. The finitude or infinitude of the patterns is not, for that matter, really the issue. The issue is that the intervention of a particular subject in a culture, in waves of intertextualities, is a unique act even if intertextuality's manifestation in a given

performance comes in common fibre. We may belabour this by recalling the emblematic interface between Chinua Achebe, the author of *Arrow of God* and Joseph Conrad, the author of *Arrow of Gold*: between, on the one hand, the European travelling on a steamer on the River Congo who could not make out the faces nor could he understand even if he heard the voices of the people peering from the forests and, on the other hand, the child of the forest retailing the lores absorbed from living among his people against the noise of the steamer interfering from the background. Due to the accident of imperialism, the two become citizens of the same language and aspirants to a common morality; they are trapped in an unequally yoked unequally shared context in which representations, due to ignorance bred by distance, are discrepant. In the inevitable culture-clash of incongruent representations the drawline between them, between native and stranger, can be superseded in a widening of shared commonalities



but this does not remove the need to confront extant incongruences and discrepancies in the representations. The truth of the matter is that incongruences and discrepancies cannot be determined unless there is, in principle, a conception of a world 'out there' in principle that enables hard distinctions to be made between the subjective spaces of the two. Only a refusal to accede to it empowers the kind of luxury that animates the un-named character in Ben Okri's *Astonishing The Gods* who declaims that 'Names have a way of making things disappear... Things die a little when we name them'. Yet, not to name, or to be nameless would be no solution. It so happens that dead things do come alive when they are named: that aphasia is the fate of those without a name or those unnamed especially in their own stories. Or, put differently: whatever new circumstances and new interactions may intervene in the life of a language, and whatever new perspectives or inflexions may be opened up beyond the grooves provided by prior usages or non-use, the naming function is primary to meaning. It may be jettisoned only at the risk of the complete annulment of intelligibility. Consequently, where naming subsists and representation is to that extent potentially feasible, some notion of a world outside language, which language seeks to represent but cannot exhaust, will have to be upheld. Who makes the connection between what is represented and the language as a means of representation is not as important at this level of the argument as the fact that you need to have a sense of a world outside language for meaning to be validly pursued. There is a logic to it beyond relativism which contrasts with the need for that linguistic adventure framed by oriental philosophers



Kole Omotosho
(top),
Farida Karodia
(above)

who have asked 'Is there a sound in the forest if a tree falls but there is no one around to hear it?' The straightforward answer ought to be yes. Without a quibble. Although the dramatist Femi Osofisan who toasted this question in his inaugural address 'Playing Dangerously: Drama at the frontiers of terror in a postcolonial state' would appear to be more thrilled by the capacity of such questions to enable us think the unthinkable, the existence of a world outside our heads, beyond our 'insides' and our consciousness, whether we hear its sounds or not and whether we have a name for it or not, cannot be doubted *with consistency*. Doubted consistently, the possibility of meaning would be displaced. Hence, against the character in Okri's *Astonishing the God*, an

alternative may be considered as intimated by the narrator of Jeaneatte Winterson's *Written On The Body* who posits that 'the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear'. As it goes: 'I love you', is always a quotation. You did not say it first and neither did I, yet when you say it and when I say it, we speak like savages who have found three words and worship them'. Nor do we have to worship them to know that pain or pleasure derived from the absence or presence of love can exist without the language that describes or matches it. A rose by whatever name called will smell as sweet. A rose even if unnamed will smell as sweet. Hence, what love and the smell of a rose can yield are no less momentous because of their analogical statuses as 'quotations'. Each moment, it may well be said, packs a punch that can make a difference to perception, consciousness and, wait for it, discursivity. Nor should discursivity have a millenarian potential, a sea-change attribute of the magnitude of a Freud or a Marx, for it to make a difference that assigns authorial status. Unless the death of the author is also to be matched to the disappearance of the reader, there ought to be an acknowledgment of the impact that 'little' differences make to discursivity. They are 'little' limits, exclusions, choices, which the reader can embody or personify but are already posted, already prefigured, not necessarily wholly, by an 'origin in the author. Without the limits, exclusions and choices which the author constitutes and executes, meaning must die and the reader with it. The reader's share in authorship is truly blown if the author even as a mere adept at quotations, ceases to exist.

Not to forget: in the idea of the death of the Author we confront here in disguise an old argument about art's capacity to educate and conscientise. In a society supposedly overtaken by the death of the author, it is a case of discounting the efficacy of the literary arts, as distinct from the written word, over which there has been a life-and-death struggle in virtually every society. Evidently, where the author has died, writers are not only not to be taken seriously, it would seem to be wrong to take them seriously. Art, essentially, is then forced to enter a realm away from the big issues which shake and condition the cultural economy of the times. The big issues find unbidden entrance however or better, they barge into discursivity, only when a Salman Rushdie or a Naguib Mahfouz scandalises a religious group which then responds as if literature matters. To the believer in the Death of the Author literature no longer matters. What matters, so to say, is the necessity for every individual to make meaning for himself and herself in a world of freedom of choice in which discursivity is not seen as a function of aesthetic projects but an overcoming of aesthetics. With discursivity embossed, the critical ambition would appear authorised to remove from disciplinary considerations that which goes by the name of literature as an issue of aesthetics. The problem of course is not new.

It is a problem that has centred on the necessary assumption, since Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, of an implicit disinterestedness, a capacity for universalisation, and yet the inevitable recourse to subjective judgement in the determination of taste. Much meal has usually been made of this necessity in order to knock it sideways, and then to hang it on the horns of the well-known dilemma that since learning, sex, class, religion, nationality and ideologies differ, it is always difficult to arrive at the consensus implied by the need for disinterestedness and universalisation. This difficulty is stretched out of proportion to justify the abandonment of the need to search - because it is first of all indeed a search - for a common sensibility as the basis for aesthetics. What seems to be ignored is that whatever makes possible any proportion of shared taste within a given class, religion, nationality, or sex also

creates 'horizons of expectation', a sharing, across various other boundaries. This is why in spite of the differences between readers within a given culture, it is possible to have shared dispositions, shared 'competences' - a more or less common sensibility. And if indeed competence is not an immutable, untransferable property of cultures, then it ought to follow that the boundaries of a community or culture are only as immutable as the competence which defines them. One thing is to recognise that language which can occlude things can also unveil them. Once a language is translated into another, it provides the basis for a search for a common sense and sensibility which is not absolutely stable but can offer the possibility of stable meaning based on the anticipation of consensus if not unanimity between groups, classes, nations, if not the global village. For certain, human survival calls for such an anticipation which must recognise that a certain sense of unanimity on some front is necessary for the survival of community, any community. To make the unexamined assumption of unanimity in advance of such a community is less pernicious than to deny its possibility.

ONCE this is accepted, attention is called to a central lapse which bears belabouring in relation to the Death of the Author. The lapse comes in the form of a sleight of mind which posits that although it is text that speaks to text in the fort of intertextuality, it is 'someone' who becomes the reader of the text.

Consciousness is seen from the standpoint of this 'someone', this atomised individual who is 'already written' within the sense of community presupposed by language itself. It leaves a mental gash, which should make one wonder why there is an atomised sentinel on guard duty in this post-modern walk around but no collective security within which individual sentinels may share and interpret what is accosted in the prisonhouse of language. The question is relevant: as through linguistic communication, the consciousness of different people can be organised and re-organised to yield a basis for common action, common responses in spite of the differences of interpretation that they may have. Even if there were no common ways of doing or responding to anything, the sheer necessity for intelligibility and the entrenchment of platforms for the defence of human survival, calls forth the need for invention of commonality. The very idea of human rights, for instance, stems from this. Deny the necessity for it as a principle; and human rights would be out the window as Peter Wilkin (Index on Censorship, 6, 1994) notes in response to Umberto Eco's claim in an earlier issue of Index (1/2, 1994) that 'we need not be concerned with the truth as "there are only opinions, some of which are preferable to others'. Since 'not all preferences are equally valid and Umberto Eco concedes that 'we end up seriously confused if we think all ideas have the same value,' then it ought to follow that certain principles are needed if society is to remain democratic and free. According to Wilkins, the boundaries of 'tolerance and the intolerable' which Eco would not agree to draw in principle must, be confronted not just in terms of preferences that cannot be equally valid, but 'distinctions between democracy and fascism that are as profound and true as they are irreconcilable'. Assuredly, not accepting their irreconcilability wrongfoots the apparent distaste that Umberto Eco has for fascist regimes. Otherwise, if, taken on his word, it must assumed that between fascism and democracy it is a matter of opinion not fundamental principle, it puts naked force on the same moral pedestal as the sense of commonality and shared sensibility built through free speech, freedom of



**Procession of
first
generation
African
authors -**

Top row:
Achebe, Beti,
Brutus,
Ekwensi;

Middle row:
Emecheta,
Head, La
Guma, Wa
Thiong 'o;

Bottom row:
Farah,
Peters,
Ousmane,
Soyinka

Courtesy: Abadina
Media
Resource Centre, U.
I, Ibadan

association and widespread education. It puts us in a bind such that whenever and wherever one opinion stands against another, the question of truth and rationality is reduced to a mere issue of the will to power. Not that they could never be issues of power but we need always to consider that they are not exhausted by such issues. At any rate, such a reduction tends to outdo Nietzsche and merely relieves us of the need to see will as exercisable beyond the ken or standpoint of atomised zealots. What is more, it empowers the kind of relativistic pursuits that emboss the individual reader of a text over and above the possibility and reality of a communal reader to which we may well turn.

Arguably, the notion that a communal reader exists need not annul the idea of the individual reader. Both are crucial constructs which would have had to be invented if they did not already exist or were not already at the centre of the enlightenment project that postmodernism seeks to antediluviate. On its own, the construct of the communal reader recognises that inside every individual there exists that which is shared with others, not only as biology dictates it - which can be fundamental - but as our interactions with others, 'with texts', insinuate it. It is this communal or collective reader who supports the *genus* of the tribe, the nation, the class, and the aspiration, if not the reality, of a common humanity. Distinct from this collective reader, there is, no doubt, the reclusive self, the beloved atom of bourgeois mythmaking who can trash about in studied or anarchic disquisitions with a 'theological' meaning. There is no

reason why the calling into being of the individual reader should exclude the other. Or, what force may we counterpoise to the fascist overlord of every individual's 'theological meaning' if the search for an interactive production of commonality - which is what the collective reader is all about - is stumped. For that matter, if the fascist overlord must be acknowledged then all rituals proper to the encounter ought also to be acknowledged. Since we have a collective author in language, there ought to be a collective reader. And if there is 'someone' who by that fact is assumed to be taking part in authorship, why not, we ought to have the individual author, too, who makes peculiar things from the stock that belongs to all of us. In essence, the proper thing is to recognise the two and to find out how they interact. There is no reason to expect only a unilinear basis for the interaction. There is certainly a clear warrant for weighting the scales in favour of one or the other. Although Foucault wished it as a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its roles as originator, and of analysing the subject as a 'variable and complex function of discourse', he also provides the measure by which to identify the author as initiator. If we use his own schema, we must reject his finding as no better proof exists that a novelist could initiate a discourse than the fact that critics make theory around, about and upon their works in the manner in which Foucault avers that 'unlike the founding of a science, the initiation of a discursive practice does not participate in its later transformations'. On Foucault's own ground, we must argue that 'the work of the initiator of discursivity is not situated in the space that science (read: criticism) defines; rather it is the science (criticism) or discursivity which refers back to their works as primary coordinates'. Works of art being self-contained ought actually in themselves to pass the Foucauldian test better than science. Or else, remove novels, drama, poetry from issues of aesthetics and emboss them as discursive practices or deny them discursive status, yet will there always emerge the problem of how language comes alive, motivated from inertness. Not to deal with this problem is to be unable to fathom how the subject status with which language is credited by proponents of the Death of the Author accommodates the unsaid, the unrepresented, the maligned in history. Is it a case of where there is no text, there is no life?

An ominous trend for Africa is clearly evident in the baggage of ideas which go with the post-modern embossment of the text. Although the leeway granted to the fascist overlord of language appears to weigh the scales in favour of earlier societies which knew nothing about scriptural authorship, the notion of the text which saturates the idea of the Death of the Author clearly discounts the illiterate or non-literate society. With text having all the space in the theory, there can hardly be space for a phonocentric society in which the spoken word is King. Where text is master and mistress and 'determines' reality, a society which places value on narratives in an unwritten form, has had it. As in much of precolonial Africa - non-literate, pre-literate or illiterate - the narratives, lacking scriptural status hence lacking in 'ready' textuality and hence having no Author, cannot count for much within the discursivity supposedly weighted on its side; it becomes the case that in a society where there is no text, it is not just the Author that dies, it is the whole society, its history and culture, its philosophy and science that is presumed to have died. Pio Zirimu's notion of orature, of oral literature, as a basis for defending the memory of a people is thus completely annulled even while theorists may deploy it for their purposes and, like the Madingo griot, Mamadou Kouyate, celebrate it to the point of discountenancing the value of literacy. Yet, celebrate orality as anyone might, masters of orature like Kouyate, not to forget Socrates, would not be speaking to us today but for the reclamation of the Word made possible by scripture. The

individual author as such may die in pre-literate societies due, as in the case of the Mbari artists, to social repression of the individual by the collective. In literate societies, the author is presumed to have died because language has been over-used; because the author has in fact over-written. Between the two deaths, lies the question: what to do by way of burial. The fact remains that the European writer, faced with the spectacle of languages that have been 'scriptured' and over-narrated to the point of banalisation, lives in a different conundrum from that of many African communities which do not have languages that could be said to suffer that fate. The room for recreating the world is still too large in many African languages for that to happen. All over Africa, the European languages in use are facing up to a reality that their native users did not and often do not anticipate. Even with the hegemony granted to them by history and current political and literary usages, these languages still have so much mobility to achieve in order to fully accommodate the disparateness of history and social rhythm that it must encounter before it can reach the level of devaluation which post-modernists valorise as a quality of the contemporary condition. As for the indigenous African languages including those that had been reduced to written form before colonialism, they are far from running the threat of banalisation through over-use. The danger to them lies more in many of them being atrophied through disuse, and misuse outside the Gutenberg galaxy. This is one reason that Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o decries neglect of indigenous languages and the use of 'foreign' languages by African writers. To Ngũgĩ, the neglect of African languages constitutes a death precisely because of the danger posed to African literature by the diversion of genius to the ploughing of fields belonging to the 'official' languages. For him, the African writer writing in any of the languages bequeathed by colonialism would need to be resurrected into his and her responsibilities, to go back to the source, not just in linguistic terms but through immersion in the life of the folk, the rural majority, the peasantry who are the repository of the culture that still lives outside the text.

Arguably, Ngũgĩ has revised the initial argument in *Decolonising the Mind* which made writing in anything but the mother tongue almost treasonable. Although readers of his *Moving the Centre*, his more recent collection of essays, will notice a movement allowing for possibilities outside the mother tongue, he is yet to free the African writer in European languages from the imminent death sentence that hangs over his and her head. The Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe never thought one needed to lose too much sleep over it. Achebe did not mind the use of supposedly non-indigenous languages for the purpose of writing African literature. His stand, centring on the question of nationality and nation-building, takes on board the complications imposed upon Africans by the logic of 1884 Berlin which brought together peoples of diverse languages and histories within the same colonies. Unlike Europe which had had two centuries to undergo construction and reconstruction of nation-states without external gerrymandering, the project which African writers have had to face in their search for audience is one of building a sense of community between and across different language groups in the face of imperial powers over-exerting presence and making demands that are not necessarily in the interest of the African native. As Achebe has seen it, the problem was not critical in the 'rather small, reasonably stable and self-contained societies' of the traditional past. But in the 'wide-open, multi-cultural and highly volatile condition known as modern Nigeria, for instance, can a writer even begin to know who his community is let alone devise strategies for relating to it? If I write novels in a country in which most citizens are illiterate, who then is my community? If I write English in a country in which English

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may still be called a foreign language, or in any case is spoken only by a minority, what use is my writing?'

Not every African writer may experience Africa's dilemma in this Achebean sense of it. But in a society where an author may feel this way, the Death of the Author comes within an absent discourse, the kind that emerges when an illiterate philosopher trapped in a literate situation demands to know 'what paltry wisdom is that which is congealed in dumb books?' It should be obvious that where the Author is dead because books are perceived as dumb, the issue of building a common sensibility involves a special challenge - the creation of that which does not yet exist. The teller of tales, in the circumstance, may not be fruitfully distanced from the builder of new nations. In relation to the new community of sensibility that has to be created - whether through the evolvement of common languages and visions, eradication of illiteracy or the erection of common institutions for solving socio-economic problems - there is a place for an author, a creator, who fashions something new out of material that may or may not have been already available. In terms of what needs to be created, there is, so to say, room for one who, to borrow Barthes' words, 'exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives, for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work, as mother to his child'. Indeed, just as a woman is recognised as a mother only after the fact of a child that has been biologically or socially acquired, every participant in the project of building a new community, like the world of a story, may be said to have a prior or simultaneous birth with what is brought into existence. The predication presupposes a subject. The builder of a new community or of a new civilisation, may be transformed by and through what is being built; but the aprioriness of the builder is not thereby to be discounted. In fact, in Twentieth Century Third World, to discount the *aprioriness* of the builder is to succumb, willingly, to First World over-determination of discourse. More often than not this amounts to succumbing to ignorance, blatant and subtle racism, if not a paternalistic, forced-draft universalism. In essence it needs to be recognised that, to the creator of nations as of literary works in Africa, there are clearly unused resources, especially of language, waiting to be exploited; there are areas unpenetrated by 'scriptural' texts in English or African languages which empower a dream of new directions and new meanings. Even where these are absent, the author would still wish to exercise the power of naming the world afresh, naming the unnamed, and relating in a new way to the already-named which takes on a new aspect as a result. Indeed, as new circumstances and new interactions intervene in a language, new perspectives are opened up beyond the grooves provided by the fascist overlordship of prior usages and disuse.

In effect, this is to say that writers are not stuck in the groove of existing languages but can goad it to do what it never did before - including the transgression of existing formalities and pre-existing analogies. Needless to say, this is why authoritarian regimes in history and all manner of thinkers, from Plato to the Ayatollah Khomeini have tended to sue for a literature police. It is for the same reason that the Soviet writer, Andrei Sinyavsky, determined to take responsibility for his writings, once argued before one such literature police that he published his book under a pseudonym; he did not write under a pseudonym. Or should the writer just plead his and her death qua the Death of the Author as a way of escaping responsibility for whatever offends the reader?

To extend the argument a little: we may recall once again the situation in 1968,

the year of the Nigerian Civil War and the year of Barthes' Death of the Author. Christopher Okigbo had just died in Biafra and Wole Soyinka was in detention on the Federal side. Could it have been in order for us to treat the events as being of little consequence because their creativity was already a function of a language fed by past classics and usages? Given the post civil-war significance of their works, it must take some myopia to overlook the yawn that the absence of their writing would have left in the life of a people for whom, say what you may, the way a story is told as much as the story told can still confer authorship. What is recognised here is that the different strategies deployed in the telling of the same stories, can so affect the way we look at the world that the world itself and we, who relate to the world, may no longer be the same after it. Whatever the question about it: there are good grounds for saying that the way a story is told if not the story itself can make all the difference to how the reader is recreated. It can make all the difference to existing languages in favour of a new way, perhaps only another of the many old ways, of grasping reality. The reader is not thereby denied a space in which meaning can be remade. But the reader was never quite a free agent. The strategies employed by the writer ensures that limits exist which the reader may assault or revise but cannot remove. To remove the limits, the circumscriptions which the author represents, is to banalise the text and endanger meaning through indifference to or distancing away from definite and traceable social and historical contexts.

ONCE this is accepted, attention is called to a central lapse which bears belabouring in relation to the Death of the Author. The lapse comes in the form of a sleight of mind which posits that although it is text that speaks to text in the fort of intertextuality, it is someone who becomes the reader of the text.

In relation to the Death of the Author the originating historical context was indeed definite and definitive: one in which it was believed that society (read: Western society) had arrived at its destination. It has boasted the triumphs of science and technology, industrialisation and enterprise, democracy and affluence. It has meant a society in which the civic freedoms, universal adult suffrage and an all-pervasive ideology of free choice are shored up by mass literacy, mass production and the means, if necessary, of mass suicide. It is a society that has so potentionously breached necessity in favour of freedom that it can afford to produce the welter of theories and anti-theories which posit the death of the author. Surely, homo sapiens could afford to be nothing but homo ludens if all the structures proper to the elimination of necessity were in place and could be relied upon to be self-reproducing for the foreseeable future. Theorists, in the circumstance, being true descendants of Nietzsche and his atheoretic theories, acquire warrant, or so it seems, to think that godhood could be approximated through the bubblegum of verbiage. It is almost as if they will the circumstance into existence: a peculiar Western circumstance, one in which the European did not know enough of the world, treated the rest of the world as Other,

but traded on the hyped right to speak for the universe. It has been a glorious run from Nietzschean discourses which declaim that 'God is dead' to the notion that the 'novel is dead' or dying; that poetry and drama are at the limits of performance in a natural habitat of obscurity and silence; the end of ideology has come opening up the ideology of the end of knowledge, while philosophy is in a guagmire because language has been devalued and banalised beyond recognition by the mass publics and mass politics of the age. It is a circumstance which, at the last post, as Fukuyama has since presented it, proclaims the end of history. In this connection we are better helped to appreciate the mock-serious sendup of the whole conundrum by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, who saw it boiling down to a faith in technology rather than in the makers of technology. Calvino envisioned that this faith would be eliminated through the invention of a literature machine that can be programmed or self-programmed to yield literary classics in accordance with the most advanced developments in cybenetics. For that brave new world, the Author may not only be dead but the successor has already been found in the computer. At any rate in a

society that has already arrived at its destination, to repose faith in the computer as the creative genius - an invention for the creation of other inventions - spells the exhaustion of an age if not of reason; it suggests an endemic euphoria of arrival at the terminus of all civilisation, or submission to a driving sense of unreality. It could also imply - and I think that this is more like it - that far from arriving at their destination, those who accede to these views have lost sight of destination. All that they have done, perhaps, successfully, is to define themselves away from the other, the non-European, still saddled with so much pre-history. Turning their faces towards the text as the end of wisdom, they see industrial or post-industrial production as authorising the freedom to interpret rather than to remake the world. They spell the unseen and the unknown in a roleless social progression as they fasten upon what the text vouchsafes in the manner in which Western scripture has permitted it through the ages.

What must be confronted is that societies in Africa are not just spatially but historically distant from those for which the idea of the Death of the Author has been hatched. To be historically distant is not here a reference to temporality but differences in social and economic yoking. While great violence, if not injustice, is often done and also often removed by yoking the world into a common globality, necessary

indifference to either is called for to acknowledge the very banal fact that African societies unlike Western ones have not yet arrived at their destinations nor have they finalised what the destination should be. Nor have they reached an establishmentarian consensus that there should be no looking forward to a destination, as the open-ended discourse of the Death of the Author suggests. At any rate, unlike the European societies of Barthes' background, contemporary African societies confront the crisis of existence in the Twentieth century within the logic of scarcity rather than abundance, mass illiteracy rather than a surfeit of literacy, the brazenness of oppression, both inter-racial and intra-racial, and deprivation rather than the effluence of the freedoms of speech and association. The daily lot for many is the



rank distortion of choice and life-chances by personalised power strutting at the expense of institutional designs. Indeed, over the years, with the songs of independence wilted and the promised lands that cornered the imagination of generations in virtual dystopia, the vultures in Africa have been having a literal rather than a metaphorical swoop. Not just a matter of the drought and famine in many parts of the continent, it is the tragedy of human errors: governments that can only be changed by military coups; one party autocracies outdoing in heinousness what Wole Soyinka has called the divine right of the gun; leaders preaching national unity while dutifully organising pogroms that divide their people while the yawning jaws of detention swallow up even the loyal opposition. We may well add the absolute atrocity perpetrated by ruling elites, usually clients of some foreign power - no need to give examples - whose mismanagement and graft yield personal foreign bank accounts that explain if not outbid the size of the national debt. In recent years, the chickens have come home to roost in economic structural adjustment programmes induced by foreign creditors resulting in the closure of factories, hospitals, schools and the retrenchment of more than a third of labour force in some countries. The list of unwholesome factors can be lightened to wearisome dimensions: explaining the daily disorientation, the grisly spectacles and the general wretchedness and misery of life which give the cast of motiveless malignity to the circumstances of power in many African countries. They suggest, too, societies in which the idea of the death of those who can create something new, and transgress the usual, and whose practices promise a deviation from the norm of adversity and crisis, cannot just be swallowed with grace. For good reason too.

I T so happens that killing off the author is virtually all that has been happening in the struggle for meaning in many African countries. What post-modernist arguments take on at the level of pure metaphor, the circumstances of many African countries have reduced to purely literal dimensions as those who have authority on their side seek to determine the limits of language by manipulating every symbol in the public space to obscure their exercise of instrumental power.

Their aim is to grant no place to the author, or to subsume the place of the author under a higher, political authority! This is the rude requirement in all authoritarian societies of the world as they seek affirmation, or silence in defence of the 'one sided truths' of power. In essence, while the liberal framework of Western societies may be said to provide the backdrop for a notion like Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author', it is the illiberal environment within which the African writer has to function that spells what may be termed the Death of the African Author. Illiberalism here refers to that general absence of the freedom of speech and association which in most African countries has made the convenience and the thin skin of ruling elites the measure of what is permissible as a civic right. On the face of it, the creative writer and the journalist tend to carry the burden of other citizens who may not be in a position to speak for themselves. As the example of Ken Saro Wiwa demonstrates so well, the writer faces the danger which is the practical reality for all those who try to give voice to the voiceless. He/she, willing or not, is right in the thick of that crisis which has seen the capricious closure of newspapers, the frequent detention

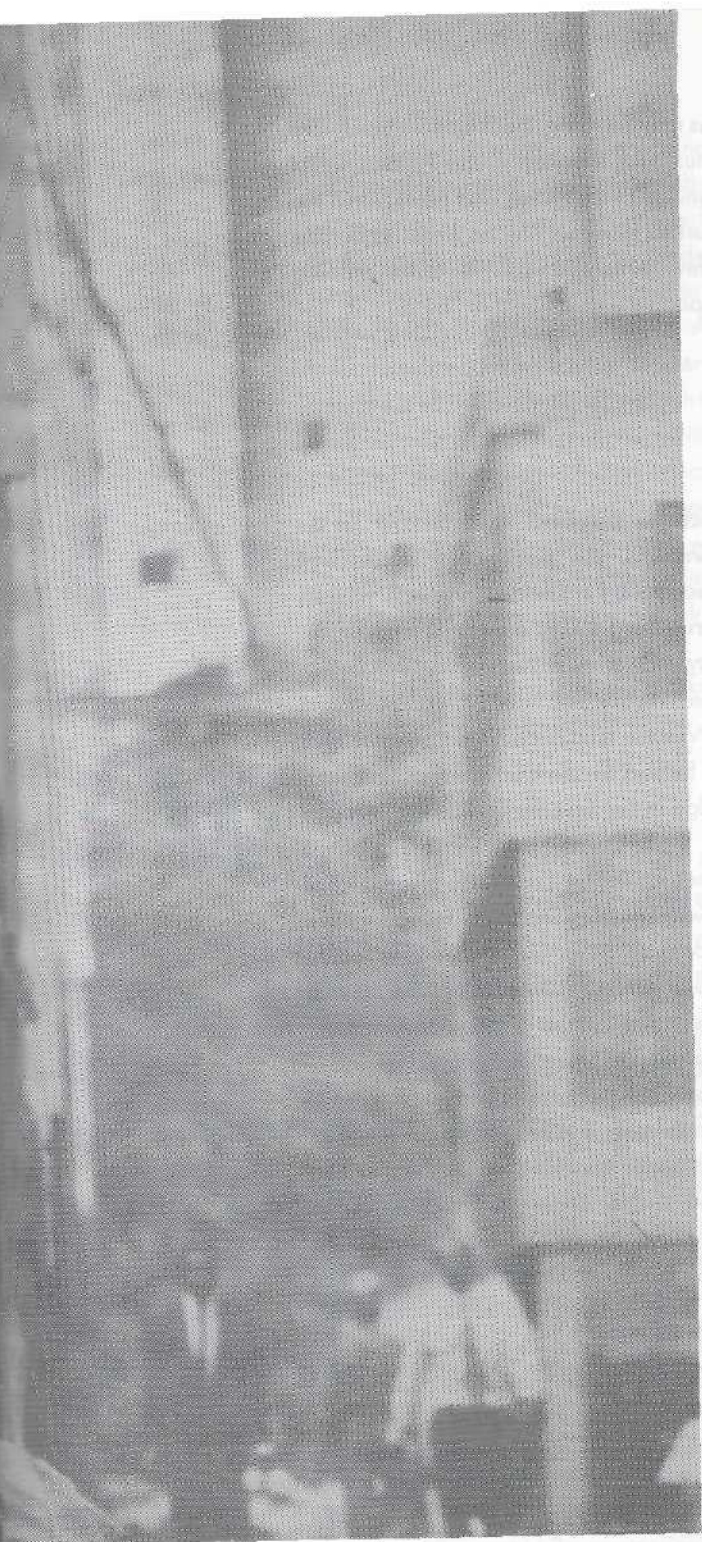
without trial of journalists and dissidents and the dismissal of lecturers who ostensibly teach what they are not paid to teach. One form of unfreedom, ramifies into others. With specific reference to the creative writer, decades of siege have produced a pattern: writers who are critical of the regimes in their countries either must face detention, stay in exile, risk their books being banned or get killed. The list of writers in exile, because they face a danger of detention, physical liquidation or economic annihilation, is a long one. Some of the best known and not so well known Nigerian writers, about seventy at the last count, including Chinua Achebe, Olu Oguibe, Ola Rotimi, Tanure Ojaide, Esiaba Irobi, Kole Omotoso, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie live abroad; Wole Soyinka was until Abacha's exit having almost a fourth bout of it; it is as if Nigerian writers have taken the baton from writers under yesterday's Apartheid and in the footsteps of other denizens of exile like Camara Laye author of *The African Child* whose situation was tragic because he apparently succumbed to silence while in exile. Even after the fall of Siad Barre from power in Somalia, the hope that Nurrudeen Farah would end the nomadic existence that he had led outside his country for two decades was made more distant by marauding warlords. Mohammed Choukri's books, banned one after the other in his native Morocco, placed his fortunes in a similar light as that of the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o,

According to Ngugi, the writer can adopt silence or self censorship, in which case he ceases to be an effective writer. Or he can become a state functionary, an option some Kenyan writers have now embraced, and once again, cease to be an effective writer of the people or he may risk jail, or exile, in which case he is driven from the very sources of his inspiration

who has lived in exile since his detention without trial and the ban of his books. Like Choukri whose attempt to publish in Arabic, the language of the popular majority, shook up the censors, Ngugi found himself in trouble with the authorities when he began to use the Gikuyu language. The dimension unveiled by their common predicament is that the authority of authors would be more critical if literacy were more widespread, and if more African writers could reach the non-literate majority through a language that they speak. The Kenyan and Moroccan examples, in their negation of art, may be compared to the situation in Nigeria's First Republic when Hausa and Yoruba poets, dramatists and musicians were exiled or had their works banned because of the direct access of the majority to the 'medium message'. Today, as witnessed by the ban placed on Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* at the National Theatre, writers are simply denied air time on radio, forbidden to use theatres and public facilities; or government newspaper editors are ordered not to grant them space unless, as ostentatiously announced in Soyinka's case, it was to report his death. Incidentally, the journalist who reported that books by Ken Saro Wiwa were seized from vendors and that a vendor was detained for selling the books, was himself picked up by security agents in 1997. The situation, until the death of General Sani Abacha, was worsening by the day as it had become in Kamuzu Banda's Malawi,

where the poet Jack Mapanje had to opt for exile after five years in detention. The patriarchy in Malawi made no distinction between medium or message. Whatever it did not understand or take a liking to was defined as dangerous. Not surprising, Malawi had the longest list of banned books and banned authors outside Apartheid, ranking as one of the most dangerous spots for the survival of authors since the written word began to gain dominion in African affairs. In the decade of Khomeini's *Fatwa*, Somalian writer, Talib Saleh, suddenly found his book *Seasons of Migration to the North*, published decades before, under the ban of a fundamentalist sect. Nonagenarian Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the 1987 Nobel Literature prize was stabbed by one such fundamentalist. In essence, what the African creative writer faces is a situation in which detention, exile, or death of a fellow writer has the effect of defining, or misdefining, the limits of self-expression. It poses a serious dilemma to those who mean to be relevant to the solution of the problems of their time. According to Ngugi, the writer 'can adopt silence or self censorship, in which case he ceases to be an effective writer. Or he can become a state functionary, an option some Kenyan writers have now embraced, and once again, cease to be an effective writer of the people or he may risk jail, or exile, in which case he is driven from the very sources of his inspiration. Write and risk damnation. Avoid damnation and cease to be a writer.' Incidentally, the dilemma is not exhausted by the war-torn parts of Africa - Ruanda, Burundi, Liberia, Somalia - but also in the areas of the new-fangled pursuit of democratic transition all over Africa. In the West African sub-region where a makeshift tradition is being engineered for soldiers to strip themselves of their military uniforms in order to rule as civilians, the dilemma is fast becoming a staple.

The illiberalism of the political environment is of course related to the endemic economic crisis which defines the African situation. It is quite glaring in the loud collapse of the world of African publishing. In spite of Afronet, Apnet, and the African Books Collective - those valiant networkers in the international book-selling industry - the vicious segmentation of the world of African publishing from the rest of the world and one African country separated by deaf walls from others, tells the story of how the literal death of the African writer has become quite a viable proposition. On this front, the long-standing anti-intellectual strain in the political culture of many African countries has meshed with current economic austerities to turn what would otherwise have been a distant world recession into a war on books. Bottlenecks in importation have meant that books written by Africans may be available abroad, in some manner, but are denied to those who ought properly to be regarded as the primary audience of the writers. Where the books are available, the costs are prohibitive. A paperback in any Western capital sells in many African countries at higher than the monthly minimum wage. That is, where there is still such a luxury as the minimum wage. Indigenous publishing which ought to fill the gaps is not of much help as Nigeria proves so well. Although the country easily outclasses most African countries in the number of books published, the percentage due to vanity publishing tells of the death of the industry as commerce. Like all the industries dependent on foreign sources for raw materials, indigenous publishing is strapped by high tariffs and currencies devalued to the status of tissue paper. This means that the centrality of books to culture which, for non-literate societies, ought to be one of the primary goals of social engineering even in bad times, has also been devalued. Even in the best of times, indigenous publishing could not compete with imported books which lured the marginal reader by sheer gloss and finish. The matter goes beyond the issue of publishing aesthetics and marketing strategies. There are simply no books in the sense in which decades ago, even with less number of people in need of books,



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there were bookshops enough to make the day for the reader. The Nigerian example of bookshops reduced to glorified distributors of stationery and primary school texts says it all. The unspoken part is that indigenous publishing has been knocked sideways in accordance with the strange logic of the debt servicing conundrum and World Bank conditionalities which require governments to invest on the importation of books rather than support local publishing. It is a situation incapable of exaggeration as the taste for books which normally lagged at an atrocious distance behind the snail pace in the eradication of illiteracy is now being pressed back to the tradition of sheer orality. The claim is heard ever louder that there is no market for books here. Although there are more hands than ever before to reach out for books, the 'no market' is assured by prices scaled to heights that scare away potential buyers. Inevitably, the logic of opportunity costs tends to take over. The general inflation in the economies already ensures that book-buying takes a secondary place to more existential demands. The average book buyer, normally more disposed to books that are for promotion at school or at work, is simply being weaned off imaginative literature. True, this may not affect the more established writers who still have a captive audience in the school system and outside. For the relatively unknown writer who is required by publishers to be an established genius before the proof, the destination appears to be limbo, outside the school system which, to think of it, is not much of a saving grace in these times. Thanks to the apocalyptic economics of the regime of Structural Adjustment Programmes, and the undertaker logic of its homegrown operatives, there has been a virtual decimation of educational structures, a relative reduction in school populations, virtual closure of University Departments, and reduction of libraries to museums of moribund books and journals. Since the Universities for a whole decade have tended to enjoy indefinite closures that may end with the originating crisis still simmering, it has not been just a case of moribund books but moribund institutions, lacking the sap for self-rejuvenation. Consequently, just as there was the famous Band Aid for the victims of drought in the eighties, the nineties saw Africa entering the age of Book Aid to redress Africa's book famine. Except that donations from international organisations rise only to raise the myopia of state policies on libraries and book culture. Specific

to imaginative literature: while book donations may be rising, book donors hardly put the African creative writer in the picture. Thus, the situation of the African writer appears to be beating a retreat to its beginnings in the forties and fifties when the absence of a sizable literate class at home turned many an African writer to Europe for audience. The truth, all the same, is that few writers can survive in the ensuing battle for audience outside the not so hospitable environment at home.

THE market in Europe, for reasons which go beyond the literary, is as good as closed to most African writers. As part of the natural segmentation of markets which is imposed by nationality even within citizenship of a common language, a gruelling toll is exacted by tariffs.

This and the inward-looking propensity that a common polity induces in publishing ventures and book trade overtakes literary ambitions. In particular, the wayward representation of Africa in the Western media and the general bias mobilised by old and new imperialisms have helped to shore up a disposition that, as Wole Soyinka encountered it at Cambridge in the seventies, receives African literature as an issue of anthropology rather than literary arts. The disposition is hardly exhausted even as we look into another century. It has been given a lot of fillip by the death of the euphoria that came with independence: As independence palled and as the novelties, great expectations and titillations of headline uhuru worship receded, wearisome pictures of coups, draught, famine and their camp follower of disaster-reporting assaulted the 'fun' in literature. While 'post-modern' audiences in Europe were ready-seduced by the need to have less history, less social responsibility, less commitment and more escape, another kind of alienation was the lot of the African audience. As Nadine Gordimer notes it in her recent collection of essays *Writing and Being* there are those angling for the reduction of the elevated diction of African literary texts to meet a vast semi-literate audience. No doubt, if the writer had to meet the different forms of alienation, this would have entailed the banalisation of the language of literature. The writer would have to risk a career of irresponsibility - shying from disaster-reporting, looking away from ethnic imbroglios, apartheid (while it thrived) and the horrid assaults on normal life by Africa's military and one-party regimes that have done so much to increase the culture of illiteracy. Even then what would be the guarantee that such capitulation by the writer to the insistent forces of a beleaguered environment would overcome market closure?

The short of the matter is that there has been no hiding place for the African writer. This is another way of saying that the solution to the current crisis in African literature is not to be found through a naive reaching for cover. There is no place to hide. The African writer is so securely in the middle of the whirlpool that little can be done by way of escape. It will have to be acknowledged that African literature will remain for some time to come in an obscure corner on the European shelf without necessarily arriving where it should be on its own turf. Realism, in fact, dictates the necessary recognition of the prospect that the proper emergence of African literature outside Africa would depend on the force of African literature within Africa. Unless the literature is thriving on the ground in Africa, the story outside, far from becoming a saving grace, will go to pot. We may continue to berate centuries of European misrepresentation and the dross of parochial Western educational systems for the

extant reality. We may go on ad nauseum lamenting the spectacle of supposedly enlightened Western circles in which African literature remains a curio, an issue of anthropology rather than literary arts, but ghettoisation would remain the lot hounding an African literature that has no readership at home. Nor is it desirable or wholesome for a European audience to abandon or be expected to abandon its home-grown writers simply in order to embrace African writers. The best that can be expected is for those who have reasons to interact with Africa to relate to individual countries or to the idea of the continent through the literatures. No question about it: the intensity and volume of the interactions will be determined by the improvement in those political and economic factors which, at the moment, keep the countries and the continent down. Thus, we ought to have it as an axiom that any improvements in the foreign market for African literature would tend to imply that the conditions existing for the survival of an audience for literature, an audience that has enough means to sustain itself and to spare, is already having a career on the ground in Africa.

The consequence of this thinking is that to look at African literature simply

While book donations may be rising, book donors hardly put the African creative writer in the picture. Thus, the situation of the African writer appears to be beating a retreat to its beginnings in the Forties and Fifties when the absence of a sizable literate class at home turned many an African writer to Europe for audience

in the light of an international environment in which things African suffer from biases is not enough. The biases need also to be placed in the context of how the illiberalism and poverty of the African environment attract untoward tendencies to desired objects and aspirations. Also, it will have to be admitted that the evident dilemma which the African writer and African literatures face is resolvable only to a limited extent through individual genius. No doubt, whatever happens, some individual authors would survive the evident dilemma inherent in a collapsed publishing industry and in national economies brought to their knees by the destructive engagement of an illiberal political class. All the same, such survival needs to be predicated on the fate of the whole community: on how the upliftment of whole communities can make a positive difference to the expression of individual genius. Recalling that there was a time when African writers literally trooped the colours from conference to international conference to haggle about how or whether literature can be relevant to the solution of Africa's problems, the question now may well centre on how literature could survive the failure of African states. This question has been claiming centre-stage since the collapse of several political economies and the emergence of book famine which has confronted whole generations with the equal annihilation of the book, the writer, and the state. The writer has been overtaken by the need to consider not just Irving Howe's epigrammatic statement that 'where there is no freedom politics is fate' but beyond it, that the writer must be activist enough to create a society in which it is possible to live and work as a writer.

Individual authors must, on their own, choose, where choice is still possible, how essential creativity must connect with communal goals to make a difference. In this regard choice is of course also about exemplars. The example of Christopher Okigbo, the writer who picked up a gun to fight in Biafra has been much celebrated and escoriated according to the temperament of individual writers and critics. Beginning with Ali Mazrui's iconoclastic novel *Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, and J. P. Clark's distinction, often parroted out of context, between the writer as writer and the writer who picks up a gun to fight for an ideal, there has always been the unspoken issue of who protects the writer who would not or cannot stand up in defence of the kind of society in which a writer can live and work. There are, for that matter, Nigerian writers who have insisted almost in consonance with apostles of military diarchy in the sphere of partisan politics that a rapprochement with dictatorships should be pursued by writers as a means of fulfilling at least one social imperative: the building of consensus in society. This happens to be a different demand from that which retorts that since a writer may not be able to escape the implications of government policies as it affects literature, the writer would have to interact with the government as part of the larger society. The idea of a rapprochement becomes something else when it is viewed as a means to a consensus between such radically opposed catchments of society as those on the side of free speech and association as against those on the side of dictatorial fiat and decreed unfreedom. To demand such a rapprochement is no different from taking up a gun against or submitting to bad governors. Both methods, taking up a gun as Okigbo did or working for a rapprochement with dictatorship as Nigerian writers are urged to do is a resort to brokerage techniques outside the ken of literature. One writer becomes an ambassador for the opposition and the other builds rapprochement with military dictatorships. Each is a case of political choice being embossed. They ought to be acknowledged for what they are. They are choices that citizens can make whether they are writers, soldiers or mechanics. Clearly, it is difficult to see how in a state of general unfreedom, we can factor rapprochement with military dictatorship into choices confronting a journalist detained for reporting the seizure of novels from vendors or journalists who, for reporting a coup trial, are jailed for life as 'accessories after the fact' of treason. The distinction between the writer as writer and the writer as citizen becomes truly academic in the circumstance..

Of course, there would always be those, even then, who would remind fellow writers, as Ben Okri did recently, that the writer as a political activist in the manner of Wole Soyinka is not the only option, nor the most desirable. Arguably, it is an important point to make in a society where 'exit' is not the only voice available as an alternative to acquiescence or collaboration. Besides, writers in extreme situations perhaps need to bear the point in mind as a corrective against immersion in activism, that could displace the literary as a means of sustaining our humanity. All the same, since Soyinka has not regressed from his literary pursuits, and has indeed proved an admirable capacity to sustain the volume and quality of his literary creativity in spite of his activism, Ben Okri's admonition simply becomes a way of registering the obvious: that some writers are ambidextrous, some are not.

True, the categoric confrontation between opposed forces which political activism like Soyinka's gives rise to, may well suggest a return to the fortified world of the days of colonialism, apartheid or the cold war. It is a world of warfare, behemoths, imperatives, and monologic discourses, quite unpopular in the hyped

pluralism of the post-cold war era. It implies an interface between at least two differing notions of social organisation: between the armed and repressive and the unarmed vision. It brings home to all the difficulty of distancing literature from the environment in which it is produced. The writer as a chooser in the context of military dictatorship, simply must confront, within or outside his writings, the spectacle of living in a world that stands between a post-cold war and post-apartheid culture of democratisation and a Nigerian maelstrom which is actively de-pluralising even as the soldiers go from one endless transition to another. Writers who invest their talents in exploring such worlds which the rest of the world may now consider to be too inside history, too particularistic, in the age of Fukuyama's 'end of history' may well kill off the author by relegating him and her to a ghetto. Those who must escape death in the ghetto, as it seems, must rise towards a more or less rootless universalism as many writers indeed are opting for as a means of exiting from ghettoisation which, wrongly in my view, is prefigured as the lot of the writer who is over-identified with Africa and African problems. While, for some, the exit resides in a depoliticised literature, whatever that means, for others it is naturalism or realism against which a distancing must be consummated. Thus, magical realism, some form of metaphysical picaresque tends to be valorised, at least in theory, as a universal idiom that could help that distancing.

Unlike an earlier generation represented by Peter Abraham, Sembene Ousmane, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Bessie Head and others who made their 'universal' mark by laying claim to Africa and even going as far as making implausible claims to ethnic imperatives as a means of authenticating their Africanness, the temptation is to have recourse to a new 'universality': a universality from a polar extreme that does not look at the rest of the world from Africa; it looks to Africa from the kingdom of the Written Word. Charity, it seems to say, begins from the kingdom of the text, a positioning which could help a writer to dispense with worry about problems of community and nationality. Except that in a world situation in which the politics of identity wrong-foots every claim to universality, the question always arises: whose text?

This question may find the Moroccan Ben Jelloun the 1987 winner of the Prix Goncourt Prize or the Nigerian Ben Okri, the 1991 winner of the Booker Prize appearing as 'not an African' writer. Yet, they still may not be European in the manner of, say, Martin Amis or Albert Camus. They are forced by the logic of nationality and market forces or the logic of nationality in market forces, to have to be located within a 'pre-text' that mobilises bias in the relationship between texts. This is the point at which the future of the African writer and of the literature exacts a peculiar logic of its own. It is the logic of living in the world as it is, not as we would want it to be. It is a logic which essentially constrains and reminds the writer that individual genius may be free to roam where it lists but it must in the end be tied to the freedom of the environment. Where the freedom of the community is jeopardised, as the case of many African societies show, individual genius must sooner or later suffer stasis or regress. In this realisation lies the value of performances in our literature such as Ken Saro Wiwa's which intervene within the possibility of affecting reality outside the text, making things new, spelling, ultimately, the freedom of the writer as the freedom to be part of a community in which it is possible to lead a healthy life as a writer, that freedom surely covers the freedom to write about genocide and biocide as well as awakening of the community to resist that which makes trivia of their lives. **GR**