Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize

By REED WAY DASENBROCK

The award of the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1986 to Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian dramatist, poet, novelist, memoirist, translator, critic, and polemicist, is at once extremely significant, likely to prove quite controversial, and thoroughly deserved. Soyinka's prize is significant above all because it is the first Nobel Prize awarded to an African writer or to any writer from the "new literatures" in English that have emerged in the former colonies of the British Empire. Soyinka's mother tongue is Yoruba, and he has translated from Yoruba into English (D. O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, 1969); but all his creative work has been in English. In this he is far from alone, as the dominant literary (and political) languages of sub-Saharan Africa remain the languages introduced by European colonizers: English, French, and Portuguese. This is true, of course, not just in Africa, for around the world rich literatures in English have emerged wherever English has taken root either as a first or a second language. The sun has definitely set on the British Empire, but today the sun never sets on the empire of literature in English. English has become a truly international language that no single nationality, not even the English, can claim as their exclusive possession. Significant creative work in English is being done in at least thirty countries around the world: not just in the traditional center of the language, England, and in the countries settled by English-speaking peoples, the United States and the Dominions (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), but also in the West Indies, in the Anglophone countries of Africa and Asia, and across the Pacific.

This development poses a sharp challenge to our received image of English literature as, essentially, the literature of the English and the English-speaking peoples. This challenge has elicited a number of different responses. Perhaps the most enduring reaction in the traditional centers of the English language has been to ignore it. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, our institutions of literary study continue to regard literature in English as a combination of English and American literature. Whatever is outside those categories that can be made to fit inside them fairly easily is accommodated, so that Katherine Mansfield, Doris Lessing, and Tom Stoppard, despite their "exotic" origins in New Zealand, Persia/Rhodesia, and Czechoslovakia/Singapore, are widely read and considered part of English literature. Whatever does not fit so easily, however, tends to be ignored. Soyinka himself (in *Myth, Literature and the African World*) tells the story of his stay at Cambridge just over ten years ago, when only the Department of Social Anthropology was prepared to recognize his existence. Every article I have seen in the American press on Soyinka's prize has mentioned the fact that he writes in English, as if this were news. Unfortunately, it *is* news, as even the well read among the general public are almost completely unaware of the existence of the new literatures in English. This fact points, moreover, to a broader failure among the critics, the cultural middlemen, who have failed to introduce this exciting body of literature to the public—largely, I suspect, because they in turn are unaware of its existence.

In this context of general ignorance and indifference, Soyinka's Nobel Prize takes on considerable importance, as testimony from a comparatively objective and certainly well-known source that the new literatures in English reward attention. I would not be surprised if Soyinka's prize were followed by other such selections in the future, for the West Indians Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul, Soyinka's fellow Nigerian Chinua Achebe, and the Indian novelist R. K. Narayan are surely of Nobel Prize stature. It is also important to remember that the new literatures in English are still young: there are many fine younger writers from around the world, including the West Indian Earl Lovelace, the South Asian Salman Rushdie, the Somali Nuruddin Farah, the Samoan Albert Wendt, and the Maori Witi Ihimaera, to name just a few novelists who are at earlier stages of what also seem destined to be important careers.

In short, Soyinka's Nobel Prize should conclusively demonstrate that the response of ignorance is no longer viable: contemporary writing in English from Africa, Asia, the West Indies, and the Pacific is at least as vital and important as contemporary American and English literature. Furthermore, if we in the traditional centers of literature in English continue to ignore the English literature written elsewhere, it will be an impoverished body of English literature that we read and study. We need to recognize the vitality of these emerging literatures in English, and it is as such a recognition that Soyinka's Nobel is to be celebrated.

Soyinka, of course, should not be considered simply as an international writer in English; more specifically, he is an African writer. An African reader of this essay would probably be astonished at what I have said so far about Soyinka's deserving wider recognition, for in Africa Soyinka is emphatically not a writer who has lacked recognition. He is an important and controversial public figure in Nigeria, and the attention he has received has not always been flattering. It is a matter of historical fact that English came to Nigeria (and to the other countries in which the new literatures in English have emerged) as the language of colonialism, as a language of domination, and it has been

argued that the use of English by writers such as Soyinka in the postcolonial situation merely perpetuates colonialist and neocolonialist domination. There are some strong pragmatic arguments in favor of a continuing rolê for English in countries such as Nigeria: English serves as a link language between Nigeria and the rest of the world; it also serves as a link language between and among the various communities of linguistically diverse Nigeria. If Soyinka were to write in Yoruba, his audience would be restricted to speakers of Yoruba; English is the only viable way to reach a broad Nigerian audience, let alone a broad African or international readership. In a country such as Nigeria that has been torn by civil war, this has a political dimension as well: Yoruba is the language of the Yorubas, Ibo the language of the Ibos, et cetera, and thus it can be argued that inside Nigeria itself, English is the only possible national language, the one language that is not the carrier of a particular ethnic group's values. When Soyinka protested against the slaughter of the Ibos in 1966 by Hausas and his fellow Yorubas, he was accused of being a traitor to his own people. He was risking his life, however, and was imprisoned for a larger, more inclusive concept of community, a Nigerian rather than a Yoruba one, and arguably it is only in English that such a broader sense of community is readily available.

Every point made in the preceding paragraph can be and has been challenged: many African writers and critics feel that the discussion of the proper medium for African literature cannot be maintained on simply pragmatic grounds and, moreover, that English can never be a neutral—let alone friendly—medium for the expression of an African ethos or perspective. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kenya's leading novelist, wrote in English for twenty years but has subsequently abandoned English to write in his mother tongue, Kikuyu. This shift and Ngugi's eloquent articulation of the reasons for it have reawakened the debate over language that has smoldered ever since independence. Soyinka obviously concedes at least some of the case against English, for he has said that he would prefer the emergence of an indigenous African language as a pan-African language that writers could use, and he considers the East African language Swahili to be the best candidate for such a role. It is difficult to know how seriously to take Soyinka's argument in favor of Swahili, for it is not one of the languages in which Soyinka himself can write; but his argument does underscore the importance that pragmatic considerations have for him in choosing a language in which to write. He seems unwilling to contemplate restricting himself to the audience he would have if he wrote in Yoruba, even though it would be a much larger audience than Ngugi's in Kikuyu. Until such a pan-African language is established, however, Soyinka intends to continue writing in English, and this indicates that he does not agree with the other advocates of African languages when they argue that English is ineluctably a carrier of colonialist and European values.

There is a third school of thought on all this, which is that it is not the choice of English that matters as much as the way one handles English: English is by now an African language in a number of senses, and it is therefore acceptable to write in English. Still, it is important to guard against a kind of neocolonialism in literature, and one guards against that by consciously working to express an African ethos and African values in literature. This approach praises the work of Chinua Achebe, above all, for his conscious and deliberate "Africanization" of English, for his attempt to make it a vehicle of African modes of thought, expression, and narration. So these critics argue that it is not absolutely necessary to "de-Anglicize" African literature, to eschew the English language, but it is necessary to "decolonize" it, to eschew any conscious or unconscious reflection of colonialist or "Eurocentric" values and ideology.

The context I have briefly sketched is the context in which Soyinka's Nobel Prize is likely to prove quite controversial, for both the advocates of de-Anglicization and decolonization have attacked Soyinka quite sharply for being a "Eurocentric modernist," for being insufficiently anticolonialist in his use of English. It is possible that these harsh critics of Soyinka will nonetheless celebrate his Nobel Prize, considering it a valuable, if belated, recognition of the richness of contemporary African literature. Because Soyinka has been at the center of the controversy over African writing in English for so long, however, I think it far more likely that his receiving the Nobel Prize will be taken as one more proof that he is Eurocentric in his values, less a true African writer than a colonized imitator oriented toward the taste and values of his former colonizers. Soyinka's Nobel Prize thus poses the question of the viability and worth of African literature in English (and implicitly the other new literatures as well): does the 1986 award constitute a recognition that there is a valuable body of expression in the new literatures in English, or does it offer indisputable proof of these literatures' neocolonialist nature?

Soyinka's work, therefore, has been controversial in Africa for a long time now, and the controversy is both specifically about how "African" his works and values are and, more generally, about how "African" African literature in English is and can be. The major attackers of Soyinka have been a group he has dubbed the "troika": Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, who collectively wrote *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980), portions of which were published in journals during the 1970s; the major defender of Soyinka has been Soyinka himself, who, in addition to his other gifts, is a brilliant and tenacious controversialist. He directly replied to the troika's attack on his work in a 1975 essay, "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," but has continued to react to their criticism, both in essays such as "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies" (1981) and indirectly in his creative work, particularly in his autobiographical

memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1983). Thus, the controversy over the value of Soyinka's work, beyond defining a context in which his writing has been placed in Africa, has had an effect in turn on his own work and development. Certainly one of Soyinka's strengths as an artist has been his ability to respond to—and indeed thrive on—controversy. It is a strength he has needed to have.

The troika's attack on Soyinka focuses on his poetry, and here they have chosen their ground well. For if Soyinka is a great playwright, as *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) indisputably shows, and a great novelist and prose writer, as *Season of Anomy* (1973) and *Aké* demonstrate, he is not, at least in my opinion, a great poet. The general line of their critique of Soyinka's poetry as overly dense and enigmatic is sound, but that is merely the opening for their larger attack, which is that Soyinka's poetry is "un-African" and neocolonialist. Chinweizu et alia argue that traditional African poetry is not difficult and that the difficulty of Soyinka's verse must therefore be borrowed from abroad, specifically from the difficult poetry characteristic of European modernism. Therefore, Soyinka is an un-African and "Eurocentric" poet. This un-Africanness is accentuated by his imagery; the three criticize Soyinka's poem "Massacre"—in fact one of his most powerful and moving lyrics—for importing foreign and inappropriate imagery, and they go on to criticize the work of Christopher Okigbo for its use of Christian terminology and imagery. Religious imagery, like English itself, must in their view be Africanized; otherwise, it is the carrier of neocolonialist values and foreign domination.

There are any number of possible reactions to such an attack. One would be to question its consistency, coming as it does from critics educated in the West, writing in English, and—at the time much of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* was written—living in the United States. There surely seems to be a discrepancy between Chinweizu's rabid fear of foreign influence and glorification of African traditions and his own mastery of the very Western critical language he affects to despise. This is the line Soyinka follows in "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies," where he repudiates the double standard by which "leftocratic" critics can attack writers for an elitist rejection of the popular (or "African") in language that is itself the height of cultural and educational elitism. I assume Chinweizu is one of the people Soyinka has in mind here, though he is never mentioned by name.

In "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition" Soyinka's response is far more direct. The troika's presentation of the traditional African poetry they admire as always simple and direct shows, according to Soyinka, that they do not understand the traditions they supposedly value so highly. Much traditional African verse is difficult, enigmatic, gnomic, and, as Soyinka says, "It would profit would-be champions of tradition to actually immerse themselves in recitals of traditional poetry. . . . The stark linear simplicity of translation should never be permitted to obscure the allusive, the elliptical, the multi-textured fullness of what constitutes traditional poetry especially in recital" (39). Soyinka's description of traditional African poetry makes it sound, in fact, much like his own verse, and this suggests that the characteristics of his verse that for Chinweizu show his "un-African" Euromodernism may, on the contrary, establish his rootedness in African traditions. Soyinka's response to Chinweizu's attack on his poetry as "Euromodernist" is thus complex: he implicitly agrees with Chinweizu that traditional African verse is and should be a vital influence on contemporary African verse; but he denies that his poetry must be attacked in such a perspective. His poetry is deeply rooted in African traditions and is more thoroughly traditionalist than the "pseudo-traditionalism" encouraged by the troika.

Certainly part of the effect of reading Soyinka's masterful and engrossing memoir of his childhood, *Aké*, is to see the extent to which this is so. *Aké* shows how the young Soyinka was thoroughly engrossed both in Yoruba traditions and in the struggle against the British and belies any description of him as colonized in his values. *Aké* is a beautiful book, surely the place for anyone reading Soyinka for the first time to begin. Much of its beauty lies in Soyinka's power to evoke the sensations of his childhood: the sights, the sounds, and the smells. In one marvelous passage, after evoking at length his favorite childhood foods and food stalls, he jumps to the present. The very street in which he once bought his favorite *moin-moin* is now full of stores selling, not the delicacies of his childhood, but McDonald's hamburgers, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and other mass-produced products of industrial cuisine, which he denounces in a wonderfully splenetic passage that makes the reader share Soyinka's disgust, even if he has no idea what delicacies Soyinka is evoking. This is certainly a much less programmatic Africanism than what Chinweizu calls for, but it is also an extremely powerful and evocative one. Part of Soyinka's response to the Africanist attack on him, therefore, is to restate and clarify his African roots and identifications. In this respect, the troika are probably to be commended, for it may well have been their attack on him that stimulated the writing of *Aké: The Years of Childhood*.

Aké only answers a part of Chinweizu's attack, however. It establishes the fact that Soyinka prizes the heritage of the past, but it does not address the more difficult question: what is the relationship of this past to the present and future of Africa? Soyinka's stalls have been replaced by fast-food outlets; does this mean that the African traditions—however much he celebrates them—are irrelevant in a rapidly changing and modernizing Nigeria? This is where the question of imagery becomes decisive, for one's choice of imagery reveals the images one has of Africa. Soyinka begins his counterattack on Chinweizu by quoting an earlier essay in which Chinweizu defines the African poetic landscape as "a landscape of elephants, beggars, cala-

bashes, serpents, pumpkins, baskets, towncriers, iron bells, slit drums, iron masks, hares, snakes, squirrels . . . , a landscape portrayed with native eyes to which aeroplanes naturally appear as iron birds." Soyinka's response to this: "My African world is a little more intricate and embraces precision machinery, oil rigs, hydro-electricity, my typewriter, railway trains (not iron snakes!), machine guns, bronze sculpture, etc., plus an ontological relationship with the universe including the above-listed pumpkins and iron bells" (38). It is crucial to realize precisely what distinction Soyinka is trying to make here. In *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* the troika misread this statement as indicating that Soyinka "does not welcome the appearance of elephants, beggars," et cetera: "He would rather have African poetry deal preferentially with precision machinery, oil rigs, hydro-electricity, typewriters, railway trains, machine guns and other *European imports*" (235; italics mine). That is not Soyinka's point at all, any more than he would prefer to have Okigbo use Christian imagery. For Chinweizu, the decisive point about precision machinery is that it is a European import; for Soyinka, the decisive point is that—like Christianity—it is part of the African landscape today and therefore is something with which the African writer must deal. Chinweizu seems to want the writer simply to close his eyes and pretend that we are in precolonial Africa; perhaps, magically, that will make precolonial Africa return. Soyinka would say in response that precision machinery is here to stay and that closing one's eyes to it simply ensures that someone else will control its utilization.

This does not mean that Soyinka accepts a Eurocentric vision of history that rejoices in the European-style "development" or "progress" implicit in the arrival of precision machinery. He would argue instead that there is nothing intrinsically "un-African" about precision machinery. Africanness is not a matter of stage props, of having lots of calabashes around (but no trains or Christians!). It is a matter of "ontological relationship." For Soyinka, as well as for Chinweizu, Africa is and should be a different kind of a place from Europe. For Chinweizu, however, the way to establish that difference is to rid Africa of what is European; for Soyinka, that is an unrealizable ambition, something moreover to which Chinweizu is no closer than is Soyinka. The way to establish the difference is to deal with the European presence, to accept precision machinery but to learn to use it in a different (i.e., ontologically different) way.

So the dispute over the "Africanness" of African literature is at bottom a dispute over what "Africanness" consists of. Against the Chinweizus who valorize only African traditions and the African past, Soyinka has a vision of an African future in which precision machinery and African ontology can somehow coexist. And he distinguishes this vision from an uncritical acceptance of Western values: strongly critical of the West and strongly rooted in African traditions, he argues that these traditions must be carried and projected forward into the contemporary world, not accorded the reverence we give to objects in museums. As he puts it in the conclusion to "Neo-Tarzanism": "Sango is today's god of Electricity, not of white-man magic light. Ogun is today's god of precision technology, oil rigs and space rockets, not a benighted rustic cowering at the 'iron bird' " (44).

The key imaginative work that elaborates this vision is Soyinka's second novel, *Season of Anomy*, a fine work which has not been accorded the recognition it deserves. *Season of Anomy*, which I have analyzed at length elsewhere, articulates a powerful and acerbic critique of the Westernized corruption of contemporary Africa and shows the complete inaccuracy of the Eurocentric caricature of Soyinka presented by his critics. However, that does not mean that *Season of Anomy* would receive the approbation of the "pseudo-traditionalists," for it is a difficult novel, modernist or, more precisely, postmodernist in many of its devices and in its tone, even though its point is that we need to reject the West's anomie and individualism, projecting the positive communal force of traditional African society into the technological and industrial present. Soyinka's work learns from Western art as it criticizes the West; it values the African past as it presents an Africa very different from that past. He is therefore not an easy writer to pigeonhole and categorize, calling neither for an unthinking Africanization nor for an equally unthinking "modernization" or Westernization. This is true in esthetics and in politics alike: he rejects any sweeping rejection of the West, but his work is nonetheless deeply rooted in Yoruba traditions. Similarly, he wants an Africa with, but not enslaved by, precision machinery. His politics and his esthetics are one.

So what at first glance might seem like a debate over esthetics is also a debate over politics; and this is only as it should be, for what these writers and critics are hammering out is precisely a sense of African identity that has political and social consequences as well as purely literary ones. Though we in the West have managed to ignore the power of contemporary world writing in English, much of its power comes from this fact, from the fact that these writers are urgently concerned with social and political issues. Soyinka himself is an important figure in the political life of Nigeria: his best-known involvement in politics led to two years' imprisonment during the Biafran War for his opposition to the government (recorded in his prison diary, published as *The Man Died*, 1971); but he has spoken out on other occasions against many other of Nigeria's governments. Still, this does not take away from his art; on the contrary, it is one of the wellsprings of his art.

There are many reasons why Wole Soyinka is a richly deserving recipient of the Nobel Prize, only a few of which I have had time to comment on here. There is no finer playwright working in English today, and his adaptations of Brecht and Euripides show him to excel in that role as well. The very multiplicity of the genres

in which he works is fascinating: his attempt to halt the Biafran tragedy and his subsequent imprisonment provided the source material not just for *The Man Died* but also for a play, *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), a book of poems, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), and the novel *Season of Anomy* (1973). It would take a book-length study to describe all his work in adequate detail. What I have tried to delineate here is what I believe to be the real source of his power. Another man would have been broken by his experiences in the Nigerian Civil War, but Soyinka's work has deepened and grown more powerful in response to those events. I believe that it is largely the public nature of his art that is responsible for that power. Soyinka's works do not give us every answer to Africa's problems, but they do give us a perceptive, utterly honest, and often anguished reflection of the complex reality of Africa today, not one obscured by ideological presuppositions. Soyinka was almost alone among Africans in being prepared to denounce Idi Amin for what he was, a murderous barbarian, when other African writers and intellectuals were celebrating Amin as representing the rebirth of the African warrior tradition. It is this continuous and profound reflection on the contemporary African situation that gives his art its tremendous range and power, and it is for this that he richly deserves the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature.

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Finding Our Roots in Exile: Folklore versus the Humanities

By KARLIS RACEVSKIS

Counterposing folklore to the humanities is a procedure that may at first seem puzzling.[1] For one thing, the two terms do not appear readily comparable, and although the notion of folklore has a fairly clear and stable referent in our culture, the term *humanities* covers a very rich and highly complex cultural reality. It is therefore necessary to point out that I intend to treat the humanities and folklore as modes of cultural expression, as discourses that are useful (and revealing) vehicles for a society's or a social class's values—not as corpuses of cognitive information or esthetic expression. In other words, these two areas are important for my analysis because they have something to do with the aims and aspirations of people, because they relate to both the visible and hidden designs of a civilization.

Second, it could also be objected that the contrasting of folklore and the humanities implies a commonality of context that is far from self-evident. However, in the