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HOMAGE TO PARADOX

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HOMAGE TO PARADOX

All Discord, Harmony not understood;
All partial Evil universal Good.

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen, it gives me unquantifiable pleasure to present the 210th inaugural lecture of Obafemi Awolowo University.

Searching for a topic to write on, my mind seized upon an idea expressed in the 49th inaugural lecture of this same university, given by Wole Soyinka, that “leftocratic” literary critics cannibalize and condemn creative works of “bourgeois” writers that provide fodder for their professional pursuit and academic promotion. In the lecture titled *The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies*, the author made a clear distinction between the “genuine productivity” of imaginative writers and “the parasitic kind which is the critic’s” (Soyinka, 1980: 4). Yet critics help writers to hone their tools, improve their art, and explicate it to the reading public. Certainly, paradoxical and uneasy is the relation between writer and critic which, like a marital relationship, should be always symbiotic and cordial but, sadly, is often fraught with bitter quarrels and resentment, arising from egocentrism, familiarity, frustration caused by inadequacy of attention, lack of empathy, petty rivalry, misunderstanding and suspicion.

Having preyed prodigiously on Soyinka’s creative output and expounded on his profound explorations of the subject of paradox, I think it fit and proper to pay homage to the author, the analyses of whose writings have built up a curriculum vitae that has brought me thus far in my teaching career and literary research. Criticism does not preclude praise and honour should be given to whom it is due. Of course, praise in a paradoxical context cannot but dovetail with criticism.

I propose to explore in the present lecture manifestations of paradox in such diverse fields as literature, nature (human and material), epistemology, politics, gender relations, and religion. Since every entity – be it a divinity, a human being, an idea, an object, or a word – is paradoxical, it follows then that the lecture can only scratch the surface of the topic and leave the audience to ponder on how one thing works with and cancels out another, how things resemble and differ from one another; how the real is constantly being idealized and the ideal is constantly being realized; how our dependence on nature increases the more we seem to master and conquer it; how our ignorance snowballs the further our knowledge expands; how after our power-driven and pride-propelled separation from Mother-Nature we return, like the prodigal son, to beg for her forgiveness and acceptance; how either sex, even in hermaphroditic animals and synoecious plants, is incomplete and limited and therefore needs a supplement to procreate; how contradictions, challenges, trials and tests constitute an impetus to historical progression; how our imperfections often cause accidents and accidents in turn lead to new discoveries and novel inventions; how living is dying; how time gained is time lost; how growth is decay; how death nourishes life; and how as this lecture progresses the population of the world is increasing with new childbirths and decreasing with fresh deaths.

Paradox, ladies and gentlemen, is the great problematic that humans have been wrestling with since the inception of creation and the genesis of time and space. Simply put, the insoluble problem hinges on how to build without destroying; how to live without ageing, without corruption, disappointment, disease, pain, senescence, or death; how to love without suffering heartaches; how to realize the vision of oneness and paradise inscribed by Saint John the Divine in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, and by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: and how to attain perfection through the negation of negation either by grace or love, as Jesus Christ teaches, or by work, as envisaged by communists.

Before proceeding to anatomize the matter, it is expedient and necessary to first settle the question of definition. Homage is used in the

title of the lecture in its ordinary sense as “adulation”, “encomium”, “eulogy”, “glory”, “laudation”, and “praise” and connotes approval and celebration. A paradox is a statement that contains a contradiction and yet is true. A trope of the inherently contradictory, the difficult and the obscure, paradox also connotes the absurd.

The lecture celebrates occurrences of paradox in Soyinka’s works and in writing in general, that is, archiwriting, as conceived of by Jacques Derrida. Its thematic and stylistic orientation is towards absurdities, ambiguities, disagreements, disorder, dissimilarities, dissonances, disunity, equivocations, incongruities, ironies, and oxymoron. A paradox could manifest in deeds, deities, objects, phenomena, persons, places, processes, relationships, thoughts and statements. Paradox works simultaneously on two levels. On the surface and seemingly transparent level, it appears to be contradictory, confusing and untrue, while on a higher philosophical and translucent level, it resolves itself, eliminates confusion and is comprehensible. Even if resolved, a paradox does not thereby dissolve its contradictory nature.

Paradox is so corny and pervasive that human beings do not take cognizance of it until they encounter it either in speech or writing and then it shocks them out of their complacency into a keener awareness of the duplicity of life and the duality of reality. All pairs of opposites are paradoxical viz: creation and destruction, beginning and end, male and female, birth and death, heaven and earth, body and spirit, fullness and emptiness, hot and cold, good and evil, rise and fall, strength and weakness, day and night, light and darkness, paradise and hell, black and white, knowledge and ignorance, literacy and illiteracy, water and fire, land and sea, noise and silence, God and Satan, *ad infinitum*. We live in paradox, and life itself is one gigantic paradox.

The paradox of language implicates binary opposites of the communicable and the incommunicable, comprehension and misapprehension, limpidity and opacity, determinacy and indeterminacy, finite and infinite, direct and indirect, silence and speech, synchronicity and diachronicity, male and female, living and nonliving, *langue* and *parole*,

orality and literacy, perfect and imperfect, absence and presence, *et cetera*. A game of endless substitution, language unites and divides people, confers an identity on native speakers, causes alienation in foreign users, and often breeds confusion and strife where it is an imposition.

Babel figures at once the human aspiration to construct an earthly paradise and the futility of the entire enterprise, owing to the problematic of language. Without communication, neither can human beings coordinate work nor create culture and civilization. Alas, language, the medium of communication, is an imperfect tool, an epicentre of confusion and misunderstanding. It is not only contaminated but also has holes into which users fall and hurt themselves and their auditors. Hence perfection eludes creators of culture and becomes a tantalizing dream that draws them and simultaneously retreats the further the builders progress. It is a droll thing to watch men who can neither overcome themselves nor break the bounds of language, the tool of discourse, nor control their own wives and children struggle to rule, recreate and perfect the world. Even though their strife stems from failure to recognize that the entelechial principle is lubricious, it is nonetheless a paean to the will to power, which itself is bifurcated.

Olber's paradox is a puzzle on why the sky is dark at night when there are innumerable brilliant stars in space. Although astronomers have solved the riddle, their explanation does not eliminate or whittle down a wee bit the accurate observation that both brightness and darkness fall from the air at sunrise and sunset respectively (Nash, 1956: 39-40; Joyce 1973: 216-217), a paradox that suggests the inseparability of good and evil, for their source is the same. Blindness and insight characterize every user of language, every text, and every interpretative act. The expulsion of Satan from heaven brings troubles and woes to the earth, while the descent of Jesus Christ redeems the world; and both archetypes are sons of God.

Truth and falsehood are conjoined in the liar paradox invented by Enbulides a Greek philosopher of the sixth-century B.C. In the paradox, Epimenides, a Cretan, declares: "All Cretans are liars" (Wikipedia, List of Paradoxes, 10/29/2007, P. 1). If the statement is true, then he is telling a lie; and if he is lying then he is saying the truth. The liar paradox is an

affirmation of the impossibility of absolute truth and the arbitrariness and duplicity of language. It projects criticism as a boomerang and portrays every literary critic as a honest searcher who trades in falsehoods. To paraphrase a Yoruba proverbial expression that illustrates the paradox, if one points an accusing finger at another person, the remaining four fingers are directed at oneself. Pertinent is another Yoruba proverb that interrogates the possibility of full self-apprehension and total self-presence: "*Ìpàkó onípàkó là á rí, eni eléni ní í rí teni*" (We see the napes of others; it is other people who behold ours).

Revelatory of the union between motion and stasis, progression and stagnation, and civilization and savagery, is the paradox of an arrow in flight. At any point in time it is always in a particular spot and is never in motion. Yet the arrow is in motion at every instant from the beginning to the end of its flight, in spite of the fact that its motion is never present at any moment of presence. There is motion in stasis and civilization in barbarism, and *vice versa*.

A corollary of the contradiction in motion is the paradox of transition. A moment of transition in time, the accretion of which is by depletion, is never present, even though a transition from one instant to another must have taken place at a particular moment. Without the past there would be no present, and without the present the past would not exist. Syngenesi inserts the future in the present. Each dimension of time lives so that the others might live. Nevertheless, the element of selfishness in each member of a generation, which accounts for a great proportion of the crises and miseries in the world, like fear, is paradoxically one of the forces that preserve the human race.

Cultures live one another's death. In Homi Bhabha's view, "all forms of cultures are continually in a process of hybridity" (qtd. in Rutherford 1990: 211). They borrow elements from one another. Words such as "barbaric", "primitive" and "savage" which have generated acrimonious ideological debates between the African intelligentsia and European colonialists are utterly ambiguous. They could mean in a positive sense "original" and "unspoilt" and in a negative sense "crude" and

“undeveloped”. The paradox of the blind leading the blind, which is represented by Kurtz’s painting of “a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch” in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1973: 36) inverts the infuriating master-servant hierarchical order inscribed in most colonialist texts. It is given to a servant to announce the death of all-conquering Kurtz, the archetypal conquistador in the novella.

The paradox of poetry consists in comparing two things that are dissimilar and seeing a similarity between them. It involves the juxtaposition of illusion and reality, calling things that do not exist as if they were real, and using what is real to create a world that is unreal. Cleanth Brooks avers: “the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (Brooks 1949: 1). To Jonathan Culler, poetic discourse is “ambiguous and ironical” and all successful poems have “tension and paradox” (Culler 1975: 162). Poetry could be appropriated as the work of Esu who, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is “the epitome of paradox” (Gates 1988: 30). If Esu’s sexuality and vengence are indeterminate and insatiable respectively, the significations of poetry are ambiguous and upended and its appetencies for the convoluted and the involuted are infinite.

Scientists, who use language denotatively, perceive poets as magicians who use words to mystify their audience, imprison reason, and cause confusion and hallucination. Poetry is denigrated as either fudge or mumbo-jumbo. Sympathetic detractors deem it an opiate, which is salutary, for it brings relief from pain and sends insomniacs and other sufferers to sleep. It is apodictic that poetry is a conscious violation of the normal order of language, a creative and playful transgression of grammatical laws, the ultimate goal of which is accessibility to a higher truth that is not verifiable. Fictional truth, which is derided as nugatory, is ironically higher than scientific truth precisely because it is irrefutable, while the latter is more valuable, because it could be applied to solve practical problems such as provision of clothing, food, medication, shelter, transport, and water.

However, as scientists subject the laws of physics and their provenance to critical investigation and the multiverse theory increasingly

gains ground, the truth of science, like the existence of God, is taken on faith. In spite of the vast amount of knowledge science has made available, it is amazing that there is still no answer to the question of the stuff or composition of matter. Michael Turner, Richard Panek reports, calls the antigravitational force behind the endless expansion of space "dark energy" because "it consists of data our five senses can't detect other than indirectly" (Panek 2007). We live in a dark and elusive universe that is turning illusory. Nonbaryonic matter is not only currently abnormal, dark, invisible, and unknowable, it is ghostly! If that be the case, a poet has reason to exult in the madness and undecidability of words and revel in contradictions, ironies, obliqueness and paradoxes.

It is common knowledge in literary circles that Soyinka appropriates Ogun as his Muse and explores the myth of the God in his imaginative writing. What is not quite clear is the justification for the choice of a deity whose essence is a paradox. He wrote in the seminal essay "The Fourth Stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy)": "Ogun is embodiment of Will, and the Will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man." (Soyinka 1978: 150). The ubiquitous force of paradox rends every action so that whatever it produces is inherently split. "Without acting, and yet in spite of it, he [that is, the acting person, not excluding a foetus giving its bearer kicks in a womb] is forever lost in the maul of tragic tyranny" (Soyinka 1978: 146).

It does follow that action and inaction are simply another pair of opposites and constitute an insoluble paradox. Neither doers nor thinkers can banish in any finite sense the suffering spirit of humanity and proffer a final solution to all cosmic and existential problems. Thought itself is fractured. Were it not so, there would not be warring world-views and diverse schools of philosophy, and philosophers themselves, like imaginative writers, would not appear as neurotics whose vocation, which is supposed to serve as a therapy, ironically exacerbates their lunacy. Friedrich Nietzsche in Preface for the Second Edition of *The Gay Science* conceives of ideas as insanities and symptoms of a sick body. (Nietzsche 1974: 33-34).

If human life is tragic, it is, first and foremost, because its paradoxical essence is indissoluble. Secondly, it is because pain is more preponderant than pleasure, while humans prefer the latter to the former. If they had the power, they would abolish pain and perfect and perpetuate pleasure. Happiness could be likened to few scattered islands in an ever-expanding ocean of grief and sorrow. Although the division of society into classes, ethnic groups, individuals or races is painful, it is not as agonizing as the split within each person. "The weightiest burden of severance", in Soyinka's view, "is that of each from self" (Soyinka 1978: 153).

Thinking of an essence that is untouched by the power of paradox, one image that comes to mind is Obatala, the Yoruba God of creation, a symbol of soul purity. But, according to Yoruba cosmogony, Obatala has a slave called Atunda whose ontological punishment for an unnamed infraction is the Sisyphean task of rolling a boulder up hill. It slips out of his hands anytime he is about to reach the hilltop. One day, tired of this drudgery, Atunda who is near the hilltop crushes the head of his master who is in the valley below with the boulder. The mere fact that Obatala keeps a slave violates his moral purity and the oneness of the beginning that he symbolizes (Adekoya 2002:17). Besides, according to his myth, Obatala gets drunk with wine one day and starts moulding albinos, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and humpbacks – all accidents of creation. So perfection eludes his creative hands. Still desirous of the elusive ideal, he bans his followers from touching wine. He, like Jehovah, who orders an angel with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life after the Fall, is wiser after an act of creation and its tragic error. Although revolutionary action liberates Atunda from the oppression imposed on him by his master, it does not totally banish tedium and tyranny. However, it democratizes labour, inaugurates polytheism and intromits into the world the principle of multitude. It signifies, in the Yoruba world-view, the irruption of chaos and division into a seemingly perfect cosmic order that in reality is unjust.

Jehovah, the Creator of the heavens and earth, is also a destroyer, and the Bible testifies that it is a fearful thing to fall into His hands (Hebrew 10: 31). His creation is not only characterized by duality and marked by time duration but is also coterminous with chaos and disorder "Twenty-

six attempts”, according to rabbinical exegesis, “preceded the present Genesis, and all were doomed to failure...” (Neher 1976: 155-156). An approximation of Atunda, the biblical Devil challenges the absolute power and monolithic will of his lord and master. What the Jewish and Yoruba cosmogonic myths point to is the primacy of the creation-destruction paradox.

A compound of contradictions, Jesus Christ, the gentle Lamb of God, is also the terrible spirit that will judge the world and cast unrepentant sinners into the eternal infernal lake.

African traditional lore abounds in expressions that affirm the truth of paradox as world ontology. The Igbo expression “nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it” (Achebe 1975: 93) is one excellent example. Another is the Yoruba epigram “*Tibi tire la dálé ayé* (The world was created... a paradox of good and evil). Perhaps the most illustrative of the principle is the Yoruba epigram cited by Soyinka in the essay “Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype”: “*Bí o s’enia, imale ó sí*” (Soyinka 1978: 10). That is, without humanity, there would be no divinity. The implication is that all Divinities, whatever names they bear, are human inventions. Lack of understanding of this logical proposition that deconstructs the origin of religion led some overenthusiastic people to abandon their Gods and Goddesses in haste, as does the community of Aninta in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (Achebe 1965: 28), a novel supposedly written in defence of precolonial African cultures but which portrays the triumph of Christianity over African traditional religion in Igbo society.

A fragment of Yoruba cult poetry poses the problematic of paradox in form of an epistemological puzzle thus:

Eni tó bá jáwo ní í wonú gbóbi,
Eni tí ì í sawo kò gbodò wo gbóbi;
Òkú ògbèrì kò sì gbodò kú sí gbóbi,
Nítorí awo ò ní gbókúù ògbèrì jáde nínú gbóbi.
Òkú sì wà nínú gbóbi tí kí í sawo,
Awo kò sì ní gbókúù ògbèrì ní gbóbi;

Olókùú kì í sù í sawo.

Báwo ni ká ti sé

Only initiates enter the forest of kolanuts,

The uninitiated must not enter the forest of kolanuts;

The uninitiated must not die in the forest of kolanuts,

Because initiates would not carry a corpse of a noninitiate out of the forest of kolanuts.

Yet there is a corpse of a noninitiate in the forest of kolanuts,

And initiates would not carry a corpse of a noninitiate in the forest of kolanuts;

The owner of the corpse is not an initiate.

How do we solve the problem?

The fragment foregrounds a paradoxical situation involving two elements, viz. initiates and the uninitiated, who could be interpreted in cultural, economic, gender, political, racial and social terms as high and low forms of existence, primitive and modern industrial modes of production, male and female sexes, government and the governed, the Blacks and the Whites, and capitalists and workers, respectively. That is to say that the two elements represent the various categories into which humanity has been classified. The conundrums or riddles posed by the verse are multifold but could be reduced to two. First, how does the corpse of a noninitiate who is forbidden from venturing into the forest of kolanuts get there? Second, why would initiates not carry the corpse of a novice in and out of the kolanut forest? To tackle the two posers, it is necessary to state that the fragment exemplifies the deceptive surface limpidity of African traditional oral poetry and therefore could be used to refute the argument made by the triune authors of *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* that African oral poetry is all simplicity and transparency. Any critic who sets about analyzing the verse on the basis of such a specious notion would not do justice to the piece.

For one thing, the forest of kolanuts symbolizes mystery and connotes uncertainty, the unknown, a field of knowledge, cult language, and paradox. If knowledge is paradoxical¹, it implies that uncertainty casts a dark shadow over social life; and if there are things that are unfathomable to human beings, especially the elite class, then the division into the initiated and the uninitiated is fallacious and puerile. The unvoiced thesis of the verse is a negation of absolutism. Their individuality notwithstanding, the initiated and the uninitiated share the same destiny, for their differences meet at the golden section of paradox that binds all extremities. The fragment figures paradox as play of difference and sameness. Death dissolves and derides all human divisions. The law that bans the uninitiated from entering the kolanut forest is indicative of the human penchant for dividing up things. Do lawyers not facetiously call themselves the learned and regard others as merely educated! Do scientists not denigrate artists as parasites who contribute little or nothing to economic production! Do imaginative writers not contemn literary critics whose language now competes favourably with theirs in sheer bravado and creative playfulness? The presence of the corpse of a noninitiate in the forest of kolanuts is not only a violation of the law of division but also functions as its refutation. Decoded, its cipher signifies that there is an exception to every law and that law is never complete and ever violated. In Yoruba folktales, the tortoise, an archetypal figure of a trickster, is fond of breaking laws.

Since the initiates could do nothing to bring the hubristic deceased to justice, it follows that the corpse of the uninitiated renders the law of the learned null and void. Death equates in this respect payment of all debts, penalties and awards for damages, errors and infractions. The best the initiated could do to protect themselves from contagion and prevent the outbreak of an epidemic is bury the corpse, which is precisely what Antigone does to her brother's dead body in outright disobedience of King Creon's cruel order in Sophocles' eponymous play (Sophocles 1947: 126-162). Burial rites are not so much a deserved honour done the dead

¹ All knowledge is of good and evil. Good because it is the source of culture and technological and scientific advancement. Without it, human life would be short, brutish and nasty. Yet knowledge is a gangrenous disease that infects body and soul the further it spreads. It breeds division, which is the genesis of all human anguish and strife.

as a survival strategy by the living. The law that prevents the uninitiated from entering the kolanut forest, or dying there, is blind to the mystery of death and to the fact that both initiates and noninitiates are one in the face of death. It is sheer stupidity to legislate against dying, and yet every culture is an essay to defeat death.

Transposed into a capitalist context, the division of humanity or society into the rich and the poor, capitalists and toiling workers, is not only delusive but illusory. The propertied and the knowledgeable have not been able to unravel the mystery of death. Medical and scientific knowledge could delay but has not defeated death. It is, like all other forms of knowledge, a partial truth. Rich or poor, White or Black, saint or sinner, egghead or coconut-head², all human beings find equality only in Death; the Great Leveller. Existential paradox, one of the mysteries being guarded by the proud initiates, is of a lower order than the mystery of death which, ironically, is just one end of the birth-death polarity. The death of the uninitiated in the forest of kolanuts flings dust of derision and mockery in the faces of the initiated that pretend to possess knowledge but cannot solve the riddle of death. Instead of worrying their heads about the how's and why's surrounding the presence of the corpse in their domain, they should be diligently struggling to unlock the mystery of death.

However, the verse utilizes cult language which understood at deep level, projects the hidden idea that sacrifice offers a partial remedy to the problem of intractability of death. Kolanut in the fragment metaphorizes sacrifice while the forest of kolanuts euphemizes divination. Ritual sacrifice is a strategy for pacifying angry forces that threaten life in the gulf of transition that is the world. There is no problem in the cosmos to which *Ifa* the Yoruba art of divination does not have a solution of appeasement or atonement.

If the initiated in their ignorance – what a paradox! – refuse to carry the corpse of the noninitiate in the forest of kolanuts and bury it, it is they, not the deceased, who will suffer the tragic consequences. So it is in

² Slang in Nigerian English Pidgin for a dullard

the best interest of the initiated, the capitalists and the Whites to use their knowledge, property and wealth respectively to support the *hoi polloi*, the toiling masses, and the Blacks. But, given the incompleteness of every entity, the problems highlighted in the fragment are insoluble. The charitable do not give enough, owing probably to fear of bankruptcy, or the crippling disease of selfishness. Self-preservation is the first law of nature. A Yoruba proverb puts it well: *Tí iná bá ñ jóni jómo eni, tara eni la kókó ñ gbòn* (If fire is consuming us and our children, we first put out ours). The logic is simple: if we did not first quench the fire consuming us, we would not be able to put out the fire burning our children. Sometimes in fire outbreaks parents would have dashed out of a house engulfed in fire in obedience to the survival instinct before remembering that their children are trapped in the house. The limitation implies that both initiates and noninitiates need to know themselves and each other thoroughly for them to accept the paradox of existence, which renders the human condition patently imperfect. More research is required on dark forces that act on human beings and compel them to behave in ways that run counter to normal expectations. Knowledge gained from such studies might not improve social life significantly but could at least help human beings to understand themselves better and forestall red herrings.

A Yoruba proverb *Aḍiè bà lókùn; ara ò rokùn, ara ò radie* (A fowl perches on a rope; neither the rope nor the fowl is at ease) captures the essential problematic presented in the verse, which is expressive of the perplexing human condition, its perpetual stress, strain and tension – all traceable to the virulent force of division, a cancer that metastasizes in contact with knowledge and power. Since extremes meet, our knowledge is checkmated by ignorance; our insight metamorphoses into blindness; and our power changes to weakness. The corpse of a novice confronts initiates in the forest of mystery and throws up a monumental challenge that makes a mockery of our nano knowledge, one of the prime sources of our predilection for schism.

Leaving folklore and orature temporarily, let us move now to the realm of written literature, which is another fertile field of mythology.

A bold asseveration of principles of pollulation, growth, increase, life, oneness, progress and reproduction in all areas in the humanities and the sciences, Soyinka's writing is one big statement on the paradox of culture and civilization. It is, therefore, not surprising in the least that he is also a poet of death, the mysterious phenomenon that kills creators of culture.

The long poem "Idanre", the center-piece of his imaginative writings, foregrounds the pervasive creation-destruction paradox. To understand in-depth the principle of paradox that is at work in the poem is to gain an insight into Soyinka's creative imagination and make inroads into his writings generally. Not to comprehend it thoroughly is to miss his message and fall into the company of chroniclers who preoccupy themselves with counting hours, days, weeks, months, seasons, years, centuries and millenniums that shape the loop of time when insight into an instant of time, one moment that approximates eternity, would do.

A prophecy and a summation of history, the paradoxical vision etched in "Idanre", the unchanging dialectic of action, change, space, time, and will, is the big idea Soyinka disseminates to the world in diverse genres and myriad texts. As he reveals in an interview granted Biodun Jeyifo, the antinomies in his writing are "a reflection of the human condition" and "the antinomic tension is not something to be contained; in fact it's at the very heart of my creative existence, the acceptance of the tragic face of life..." (Jeyifo 1985: 33, 34-35). Such is the centrality and significance of paradox in Soyinka's writing that he makes it the test of art. He asserts: "he is a profound artist only to the degree to which he comprehends and expresses this principle of destruction and re-creation" (Soyinka 1978: 150).

In the opening paragraph of the essay "The Fourth Stage", which is a necessary prose companion to the poem, he declares:

'Tragedy' is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources. There, illusively, hovers the key to the human paradox, to man's experience of being and non-being, his dubiousness as essence and matter, intimations of transience and eternity, and the harrowing

drives between uniqueness and oneness (Soyinka 1978: 140).

The oneness of the beginning symbolized by Obatala having been shattered into smithereens by Atunda, the fragments of which constitute the Yoruba pantheon of deities, Ogun ventures into the gulf of transition in search of a solution that can recover for the divinities and humanity the original oneness and unity. He seeks and finds knowledge in the secret veins of matter and with it fashions a weapon with which he conquers the abyss of separation, creates a path that the deities take to forge a reunion with humans. The knowledge sought and found by Ogun is scientific, while the weapon fabricated through it is symbolic of iron technology and cultural improvement.

Alas, the weapon, like the knowledge that creates it, is paradoxical, and the source of the duality and fracture is no other than the nature of nature (matter) itself. Elements of earth that generate energy, like human beings who work them, exist in time and are subject to the laws of time, namely those of succession and cessation. Cyclic, paradoxical and ternary in motion and movement, they are born, burn themselves up as they release energy (dinery) for building culture and, like their users, fall into the womb of earth from where they were exhumed in the first place to await a rebirth.

Recession, the return of all elements to their sources, *Mahapralaya* in Hindi, Soyinka argues in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, is necessary for the "needful renewal" of "our life-sustaining earth" (Soyinka 1973: 96). Replenished, earth is able to yield more abundantly of her substance. This paradox of loss and recovery, the trope of ritual sacrifice, is one of the great mysteries of life. If human beings eat up all the harvest, they will starve and face extinction. Ergo, they deny themselves, save some of the harvested crops, sow seeds at the appropriate time and reap fruit a hundredfold on which continuity of life depends. A fiesta of life, its paradox of gore and glory, a celebration of munificent Nature, brings the communion rite inscribes in *The Bacchae of Euripides* to a close, as the blood springing from Pentheus' head decollated by his own mother changes into wine and

all the characters in the play move to the fountain, cup their hands and drink. The paradox is pointedly portrayed in "Idanre" thus:

growth is greener where

Rich blood has spilt; brain and marrow make

Fat manure with sheep's excrement (Soyinka 1969: 65).

The Weapon³ of conquest is effective in crop production and warfare; that is, it is life-sustaining and life-destroying. Ogun uses it to fight and defeat the enemies of his people and in a moment of drunken fury and possession, a dirty ploy designed by Esu as a penalty for Ogun's hubris and discovery of the knowledge of metallurgy, turns it on his own followers, a tragic instance of self-destruct. As Soyinka lyricizes the destructive effectiveness of the Weapon in the battle section of "Idanre":

This blade he forged, its progress

Never falters, rivulets on it so swift

The blood forgets to clot

There are falling ears of corn

And ripe melons tumble from the heads

Of noisy women, crying

Lust-blind god, gore-drunk Hunter

Monster deity, you destroy your men! (Soyinka 1969: 75)

It is a negation of culture and, added to the apocalyptic vision scripted in the poem, points to the possible cataclysmic end of history. Perhaps the pace of space exploration should be speeded up so that a few human beings could be moved to one of the habitable planets up there before the blow-out or desiccation of the earth.

Given the aggressive and adventurous spirit of its inventor, it is ineluctable that the Weapon of reproduction of culture and technological

³ A metaphor for all ideas and materials that construct culture.

advancement should transform in the end into an instrument of wanton destruction. Genuine researchers are enamoured of experimentation that is risqué and derive great pleasure from making new discoveries, and extending frontiers of knowledge in all fields. Who knows, a nuclear destruction of the planet earth might open the door into a new dimension of nature which at present is hidden from knowledge. Most astounding discoveries and inventions were products of the military industrial complex before being turned to civilian purposes. Examples are aircraft, radio, television, and nuclear power (Nadel 1978: 265-266). Every creative act is a challenge and carries a risk and a penalty.

The Ogun myth is revelatory of the paradox of scientific knowledge and technological improvement and paradigmatic of Janus-faced human and historical progression. A culture hero and a philistine, Ogun builds and destroys the bridge of nexus. Shamed by his flagitious act of murder and destruction, he bids the earth to swallow him. His seven essences as barber, blacksmith, farmer, hunter, pathfinder, poet, circumcision surgeon, tapster, and warrior approximate the diverse occupations in which humans engage. Each activity is inherently split and produces both positive and negative effects on nature and human society. Environmental pollution with its corollary global warming, the number one problem that currently confronts humanity, is the consequence of industrialization. The lesson for the fearful who are wary of cutting-edge research that carries high risks, such as stem cell research, is simple enough: it is impossible to make omelette without breaking eggs.

Bifurcated, Ogun's attributes constitute the human paradox that translates into being and nothingness. Soyinka reels them out in the essay "Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype": Ogun is 'protector of orphans', 'roof over the homeless', 'terrible guardian of the sacred oath'. He stands for a transcendental, humane, but rigidly restorative justice (Soyinka 1978: 26). It is necessary to state that the epithets are lifted from Ogun's praise poem, a fragment of which reads as follows:

Rich-laden is his home, decked in palm fronds
He ventures forth, refuge of the down-trodden.
To rescue slaves he unleashed the judgement of war
Because of the blind, plunged into the forest
Of curative herbs, Bountiful One
Who stands bulwark to offsprings of the dead in heaven
Salutations O lone being, who bathes in rivers of blood.

(Soyinka 1978: 26-27)

Soyinka is not done with the attributes of his Muse:

“And Ogun is also the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbibor, a reluctant leader of men and deities. He is ‘Lord of the road’ of Ifa; that is, he opens the way to the heart of Ifa’s wisdom, thus representing the knowledge-seeking instinct, an attribute which sets him apart as the only deity who ‘sought the way’, and harnessed the resources of science to hack a passage through primordial chaos from the god’s reunion with man. (Soyinka 1978: 27)

Literature is replete with the idea that Soyinka celebrates the warrior God Ogun and the rebellious slave Atunda, who is given the hyperbolic title “First revolutionary / Grand iconoclast at genesis” (Soyinka 1969: 83). That interpretation is quite correct. However, I have added the important qualification that subtle ironic, sardonic and sarcastic undertones ring through the poet’s words of praise of the two archetypal figures. “Idanre” teems with images and symbols that express the movement of culture and history as patently cyclic and paradoxical. To “celebrate the stray electron”, as Soyinka does in the poem, is to accept with equanimity benefits of scientific development as well as fatal accidents of creation in both biological and technological terms. If, according to the Big Bang

theory of evolutionists, an accident brought the universes into being, it is plausible to argue that an accident can also ruin them.

After Ogun's tragic error, the massacre of his people who appear to him as foes on the battlefield, he comes to grief and acquires at last knowledge of the ambivalence of his Weapon and of truth and the futility of action. Filled with remorse, he leaves the world in obloquy and bequeaths an ambiguous heritage to humanity, whose only choice is to tread his forked serpentine path and reap the harvest of life and death:

And we

Have honeycombed beneath his hills, worked red earth
Of energies, quarrying rare and urgent ores and paid
With wrecks of last year's supers, paved his roads
With shells, milestones of breathless bones –
Ogun is a demanding god (Soyinka 1969: 82)

A failure, every attempt so far made in all departments of culture to recover the dubious lost essence of the beginning shattered in rage by Atunda is compared to "a cupped shell of tortoise" and "staggered / Tile tegument" (Soyinka 1969: 69). The tortoise, as a Yoruba aetiological folktale has it, overreaches himself, like Icarus in Greek mythology, falls to his doom and gets his smooth spherical shell shattered. Artificial blood, artificial limbs, hearing aids, computers, unfertilized eggs, pacemakers, robots and sex toys are wonderful creations and indisputable exemplifications of human intelligence but are nevertheless ersatz copies of originals and fall far short of perfection. They each have their resolution and function to partially meet human needs in the self-imposed task of reconstruction but ultimately do not give enough satisfaction. Every effort made to solve one problem creates another, or sometimes three or four additional problems, thus compounding the situation on hand. Alas, death, the final solution to all existential problems is the most dreadful, a paradox that makes Walter Shandy liken humanity to "a prisoner who dreads his liberty" (Sterne 1951:326).

One of the key symbols in "Idanre" that signify the paradox of historical progression is the Mobius Strip. As glossed by Soyinka in the Notes on the poem, it is:

A mathe-magical ring, infinite in self-recreation into independent but linked rings and therefore the freest conceivable (to me) symbol of human or divine (e.g. Yoruba, Olympian) relationships. A symbol of optimism also, as it gives the illusion of a 'kink' in the circle and a possible centrifugal escape from the eternal cycle of karmas that has become the evil history of man. Only an illusion but a poetic one, for the Mobius strip is a very simple figure of aesthetic and scientific truths and contradictions. In this sense, it is the symbol of Ogun in particular, and an evolution from the tail-devouring snake which he sometimes hangs around his neck and symbolizes the doom of repetition. And even if the primal cycle were of good and innocence, the Atoóda of the world deserve praise for introducing the evolutionary 'kink' (Soyinka 1969: 27).

The 'kink' in the circle of the Mobius Strip, an escape valve, metaphorizes the possibility of novel inventions and liberation from tragic tyranny through revolutionary action, which are double-edged, for they elevate culture to a higher level and simultaneously intensify existential anguish. It is mind-boggling that, despite all the scientific inventions and violent revolutions the world has had, problems of alienation, depravity, and inequality refuse to go away. Besides, the cost of change sometimes outweighs its benefits, a disquieting disproportion lamented in two threnodic stanzas of "Fado Singer" that I am never tired of quoting:

Oh there is too much crush of petals
For perfume, too heavy tread of air on mothwing
For a cup of rainbow dust

Too much pain, oh midwife at the cry
Of severance, fingers at the cosmic cord, too vast
The pains of easters for a hint of the eternal. (Soyinka 1969: 47)

Reconciled, the account of human progression shows that the loss is greater than the gain and the imbalance cannot but create much unease in all who are conscious of the untold havoc being wreaked on nature, which boomerangs on humanity and endangers its very existence.

At other times, too, the circle of fate is broken, like water, only to reassert its inviolability. The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the reversion of Russia, the only Republic left of the vast socialist empire, to capitalism do not encourage revolutionary optimism. Rather, they caution against any infantile idealistic hankering after an impossible Utopian condition. Yet, Nirvana, Paradise and the womb are alluring dreams, the pull of which is just irresistible. Indeed, human beings would not be satisfied with anything short of Utopia or perfection. Kenneth Burke's definition of humanity is instructive. It goes thus:

Man is
the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-
misusing) animal inventor of the negative (or
moralized by the negative)
separated from his natural conditions by
instruments of his own making
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by
the sense of order)
and rotten with perfection (Burke 1972: 384)

The attraction of paradise is premised on the fact that human beings prefer pleasure to pain and peace to the strife and tumult of life. Walter Shandy's posers on the subject are revealing. He asks:

Is it not better, my dear brother Toby, (for mark-
our appetites are but diseases) – is it not better
not to hunger at all, than to eat? – not to thirst,

than to take physic to cure it?

Is it not better to be freed from cares and agues, from love and melancholy, and the other hot and cold fits of life, than, like a galled traveler, who comes weary to his inn, to be bound to begin his journey afresh? (Sterne 1951: 326)

Muslim fundamentalists who serve the cause of jihad and act as suicide bombers are sick of the woes in the world and yearn for unbroken bliss and pleasure in the promised paradise. The guerdon of marriage to young virgins, who are fast becoming rarities in our lust-lost world, is alone enough attraction to lure one into self-sacrifice in the name of religion that preaches nothing other than peace. The Christian West needs to understand the economic plight of the underdog nations of the world from where suicide bombers are recruited and do something to ameliorate the appalling condition of life there. That approach, rather than warfare, is likely to work and save souls of many American soldiers who want to live and enjoy their own piece of Uncle Sam's pie. But, as for exponents of nuclear war, theirs is an implacable death-wish; and the world, let it be said, is death-driven, but fear serves as a counterbalance to the powers of twenty-first century savages who are hell-bent on contracting time, enacting the Apocalypse, and declaring doomsday.

Perhaps it is good and salutary for humanity that the dream of Utopia is unrealizable, for once the work of transforming the world into a paradisiac state was finished and all conflicts and contradictions were resolved, rest itself would assume the form of labour; recreation would resemble suffering; freedom would be indistinguishable from imprisonment; and pleasure would transform into pain. If a solution was found to death, boredom would make the immortals long for dissolution.

Three Yoruba proverbs emphasize the problem of selfishness as a primary weakness of human nature, which paradoxically is a source of its strength. They are: *Kò si eni tí wón ma gbé gori esin tí kò ní sèpàkó lùkéluké* (There is nobody mounted on a horse whose head would not

move majestically); *Tí a bá fún wèrè lókó, òdò ara è ni yìò kobè sí* (If we give a mad person a hoe, he/she will make ridges on his/her side); and *Kò sí eni tí wón ma tewo bòdí è, tí ò ní rá mí* (Every arsehole harbours shit). If self-preservation is the first law of nature, how will proletarians who seize power from the bourgeoisie be protected from constituting themselves into another privileged class during their dictatorship? The problem then is how to find honest-hearted souls who will translate the vision of world communism from fiction into fact. Nobody is good enough to make choices for others all the time.

To petulant socialist ideologues and revolutionaries who refute the truth of paradox, I recommend a nifty nostrum: the corrective art of self-criticism, which might not erode or shake their faith in the perfectibility of humanity but will certainly teach them a lesson in the face of all-conquering death that makes a mockery of every ideology and struggle and their propagators and doers, respectively. In Laurence Sterne's words that weave the trammels of human nature: "the radical moisture is nothing in the world but ditch-water and [...] the radical heat... is burnt brandy ... we know not what it is to fear death" (Sterne 1951: 368). Skeletons of those who had overcome the fear and sacrificed their lives for the liberation of the proletariat in the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 must be squirming in their tombs in the 1990's as Russians put the motor of their revolution in reverse gear and relished the vomit of capitalism. That reversal, too, is change! The permanence of change gives cause for hope and despair. "The billows of change and variation: roll apace", Marcus Aurelius Antoninus muses, "and he who ponders them will feel contempt for all things mortal" (Rendall 1898: 134).

Let it not be thought that it is cowards who shy away from action and death. Those who commit suicide are probably the true cowards who lack courage to face life's difficulties and so take the easy way out, as does Sango, the Yoruba God of lightning. Its dread notwithstanding, death is the best friend we have, for it eases us out of anger, grief, labour, pain, sorrow and strife and gives us rest. Hence Soyinka celebrates death continually in his writing. In the concluding lines of "Post Mortem" he pleads:

let us love all things of grey; grey slabs
grey scalpel, one grey sleep and form,
grey images (Soyinka 1969: 31)

Slavenka Drakulic avers that “the colour of normality is grey” (Drakulic 2007). The rites of the living that constitute normality are a mixture of desire and disappointment, wedlock and divorce, birth and death and other existential paradoxes. Even those who bid the world goodbye find that death is not a gentle affair but a tough physical exertion, and Dylan Thomas need not admonish them not to go gentle into that good night (Thomas 1982: 207-208). As the Yoruba lyricize it:

Jówéré, jòwèrè

Struggle, struggle

Eni ma kú a jòwèrè

Whoever is in throes of death
must struggle

Jòwèrè, jòwèrè

Struggle, struggle

Coming into the world and leaving it are characterized by excruciating struggle.

The truism of the Yoruba proverb that, after a long time, the leaves that are used to wrap soap turns into soap manifests in the relationship between Soyinka and his Muse. They resemble each other in attributes and accomplishments. Soyinka who celebrates Atunda’s revolutionary action, endorses Ogun’s knowledge-seeking instinct, and praises Samora Machel’s decision to take on the challenge posed by the puissant military machine of apartheid South Africa that denied the autochthonous black population participation in governance in *Ogun Abibiman* (1976) is the same author who abjures revolutionary violence in the poem “My Tongue does not Marry Slogans” in *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems* (Soyinka 1988b: 50-56) and satirizes the socialist experiment in the former USSR in the eponymous poem in *Samarkand and Other Markets I have Known* (Soyinka 2002: 49-59). The mother of all ironies, the same Soyinka whose creative writings are excoriated by some Nigerian Marxist literary critics as mythopoeic obfuscations deconstructs all religions and perceives them

as symptoms of a high fever in the opening lines of "Twelve Canticles for the Zealot" (Soyinka 2002: 43).

Nevertheless, Soyinka remains a mythopoeist whose political ideology is some indeterminate form of communalism that leaves individuals with enough freedom for self-expression and shuns the rhetoric of violence. His emphasis is not on cant but practice which is indispensable for effecting fundamental changes in economic production, political organization and social relations. There is no force in the world that can demolish the reality of individuality and neither is there an ethic that escapes the snare of paradox. For a society to achieve excellence all round, each member must be unfettered and empowered to transcend conation and realize their potentialities maximally, while productivity must be pressed into the service of the entire community. This paradox of I and Others, this synergy of forces, informs Soyinka's advance-and-retreat political philosophy. It saves him from all forms of extremism. For the Yoruba, a brave warrior is one who is wise and knows when to fight and when to retreat. A warrior who is good at fighting but knows not when to quit inevitably ends a war captive. Recognition of limits, therefore, is not a minus but a plus for a political activist, for it helps to maintain cosmic as well as psychic balance and ensure continuity of the human race.

A radical student of mine at Université de Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis, Senegal, labelled Soyinka a coward because he fled from Sani Abacha's death squad. The young rebel would prefer a Soyinka murdered by the despot's goons to a Soyinka who went into exile and launched a worldwide campaign against the barbarities of the Abacha regime. Certainly, the student is a combatant manqué who lacks discretion and thus would not stand long on the battlefield before being felled by enemy fire.

Derived from the long poem "Idanre", all the short lyrics in *Idanre and Other Poems* are riddled with contradiction and reinforce the poet's paradoxical vision.

"Dawn", the first poem in the collection, a fourteen-line sonnet composed of just one sentence, a microscopic representation of the long poem "Idanre", a summation of Soyinka's paradoxical vision, and an

expression of the Yoruba cosmogony as well as the Ogun myth of creation, celebrates dinergy and the bloody rites of dawn. The atmosphere of the lyric reeks of blood, viz: menstrual blood; the blood that issues from a broken hymen and a circumcised priapus; the bloodbath that accompanies childbirth, the blood shed in war; and the blood (sap) from a tree felled by a sawyer. Blood is life, and without its being shed life is impossible. Creation is likewise impossible without destruction, for it implies the use of force or violence, which causes a rent or strain in whatever it strikes. Even the consummation of love is bloody and brutal. Or, how does one explain sexual intercourse to a three-year old baby who wakes up in the middle of the night while her parents are playing the game of the two-backed beast and, assuming that they are fighting, starts crying and begging her father to stop pummeling her mother, whose orgasmic moans sound in her unfledged ears as a sign of distress and excruciating pain? Lovemaking is warfare; it is never wanting in biting, breaking, bruising and tearing and the blood, emotional strain, and physical drain that accompany them. Giant squid eat each other, especially during sex, and a female praying mantis sometimes bites off the head of a male partner during mating and eats it. Sexual violence that leads to loss of life is common in the human world. Gender war shall never cease as long as man and woman desire each other for mutual sexual gratification and biological reproduction and their love relationship is rocked by the force of paradox that changes a taste of sweetness to bitterness. "Dawn" works on several levels, namely artistic, biological, cosmogonic and obstetric. Its recondite imagery and contorted syntax notwithstanding, the poem is no mean achievement and deserves more praise than it has received.

There is a plangent evocation of life and death in "Death in the Dawn"; of the destruction of humans by their own invention in "Around Us, Dawning"; of the predatoriness of European colonialists on a civilizing mission in "Luo Plains"; of the paradox of Christ's throes and thrones on the cross of crucifixion in "The Dreamer"; of the confusing play of sanity and insanity in "The Hunchback of Dugbe"; of the mystery of one sacrificial death saving countless sinners in "Easter"; of life's myriads of ambivalences in "Dedication", in which the poet prays for his daughter to be both

aggressive and compassionate, pay the debt of birth and run naked to the night; the aleatory paradox of a birthday that becomes a deathday in "A First Deathday", in which the poet mourns the death of his sister Folasade on her first birthday anniversary; and the pain and pleasure of mother rites and the cruelty of beauty in "For the Piper Daughters (1960)".

The eternal return of a changeling who is given to "shaping / mounds from the yolk" in "Àbíkú" (Soyinka 1969: 31) expresses forcefully the duality of life and nature. It is a pity that early critical appraisals of the poem misjudge it as a perpetuation of a superstitious belief that has no scientific basis: the spread of ignorance. Thanks to the poet's explication of the *àbíkú* motif and disclosure of the inspiration for the poem in the essay "Climates of Art" (Soyinka 1988a: 257-258) and Ben Okri's intertextual exploration of the figure of the wandering child in the award-winning novel *The Famished Road*, most Nigerians now appreciate the power and protean nature of the *àbíkú* symbol.

All institutions, phenomena and processes in post-independence Nigeria are trapped, like *àbíkú*, in a magic circle and go through giddy motions. But the paradox of dearth and surfeit, accretion and depletion, and birth and death is characteristic of all matter. Indeed, every body - animal, human, material, stellar or vegetal - is an *àbíkú*, that is, born to die. If the world is not destroyed by nuclear conflagrations and pollution, it certainly will come to an end through lack of sustenance when the sun, the source of light and energy for the planet earth, burns itself up. Thus the conquest of the earth by humanity is a deceptive illusion. Nature's is the final victory.

Applied to the birth, growth and demise of human beings and civilizations, the line "The ripest fruit was saddest" is one of the insightful paradoxes inscribed in "Àbíkú". The ripest fruit is saddest because it is the next to fall down and die. The United States of America appears to be the ripest fruit on the tree of world civilizations at the moment and so it is not in the least surprising that expressions of angst about American civilization are the acutest and loudest, and most of them come from Americans themselves. The vehemence with which the country takes

vengeance on terrorists after the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the attack on the Pentagon in Washington on 11 September 2001 and the aggressive foreign policies pursued since the historic events bear witness and could be read as a desperate irrational reaction against what she perceives as an audacious attempt by mere cretins to challenge her hegemony and cause her fall. Vital tenets of her constitution and democracy have been violated. Ironically, the overreaction costs her the respect and support of many allies and her hitherto high moral ground in the comity of nations and probably marks the beginning of her backward slide into savagery on an epic scale. But the germs of decay in the American polity are located in the misuse of power, the abuse of cultural values, and the increasing denigration of the arts. Herbert Read warns: "a civilization that consistently denies the life of the imagination must sink into deeper and deeper barbarism" (Read 1972: 137).

Remarkable is the paradox of pleasure and pain that characterizes childbirth and the life of a drone in a colony of ants in "To One, in Labour". After performing his labour of love, without which the propagation of his tribe would be impossible, he dies. What work could be more hazardous than his! Yet the drone is derided as lazy.

The paradox of love and hate as it plays itself out in the relationship between Jesus and the Jews whose rejection of the redeemer opens the way of salvation for the Gentiles; of capitalist accumulation through self-denial and frugality and its incalculable damage to capitalists and workers; of the difficult relationship between the lonely I and the gregarious others and its metaphoric warp and weft; of little wisdom leading to a prolonged drought and of excessive knowledge tripping its possessor; and of total sexual abstinence and human extinction is finally resolved in favour of balance, a sense of moderation and proportion, in "By Little Loving". As encrypted in the poem:

The paradox of crowds set a marble wall
Where I fled for keeping. Loneliness feeds
On open faces – once by little seeing, fell
To the still centre, off the ruptured wheel

Of blood. And this, the accident of flesh I hailed
Man's eternal lesson – by little yearning to unwind
Cords of closeness (Soyinka 1969: 41).

Implied in the lesson is the elusiveness of perfection, owing to the errantry of the wheel, that is, the possibility of accidents and errors. The further an anchorite withdraws into himself the deeper goes his consciousness of his dependence on society. The obverse is equally irrefutable: the bigger a city or society becomes the larger the social rent and the profounder the problems of alienation and individualism. The individual and society, like the two legs of a compass that constantly trail each other, are inseparable and their bond is broken only by death, which philosophers of cyclic time do not accept as offering a permanent escape or release from the tyranny of life. Friedrich Nietzsche reflects on the matter:

You think you have a long rest until rebirth – but do not fool yourselves! Between the last moment of consciousness and the first appearance of new life lies 'no time' – it passes by like a stroke of lightning, even if living creatures measure it in terms of billions of years or could not measure it at all. Timelessness and succession are compatible as soon as the intellect is gone (qtd. in Stambaugh 1973:106).

African animism states simply that the dead are not dead. They only "pass into the universal energy of renewal", as the blind seer Tiresias puts it in *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Soyinka 1973: 11), and are present in unrecognizable forms in the air we breathe, the vegetable we eat, the wine we drink, and the crude refined to power our machines. If harvest is

of life and death, then every soul is a *chichidodo*⁴. It was with the thought of the paradox of harvest that Soyinka consoled himself in solitary confinement after the judicial hanging of five prisoners. As we have it in "Procession":

Passage. Earth is rich in rottenness [sic] of things
A soothing tang of compost filters
Through yeasting seeds, rain-sodden
And festive fermentation, a sweetness
Velvety as mead and maggots (Soyinka 1972: 43)

"Balance is the key", Soyinka concludes, through Tiresias, in *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Soyinka 1973: 30). It is a conclusion, or, a consolation, arrived at in a futile attempt to resolve all contraries in the warring universe symbolized by Ogun. Using the idiom of music in "Idanre", Soyinka portrays Ogun as a composer who constructs a harmony of cacophonous sounds produced by diverse dissonant instruments:

his fingers

Drew warring elements to a union of being
And taught the veins to dance, of earth of rock
Of tree, sky, of fire and rain, of flesh of man
And woman (Soyinka 1969: 68)

Perhaps the most laconic expression of paradoxical truth in Soyinka's writing to date is the three-word line "Rust is ripeness" with which the poem "Season" begins (Soyinka 1969: 45). An ingenious clause, considering its economy of expression, it is a translation of the Yoruba proverb *Ògèdè ñ bàjé, à ló ñ pón* (The banana is rotting, but we say it is ripening). A paradox of history and time, it deconstructs the myth of progress, as does the lyric "Around Us, Dawning, and signifies civilization as bastardization of values, confusions compounded, increasing moral decadence, ontological retrogression and spiritual atrophy. Growth is imaged as decay, and progression as regression. The more science and

⁴ A bird that hates excreta and feeds on maggots.

technology fills the world with light, increases human efficiency and creates greater comfort and leisure, the deeper becomes the human angst and fear that the world will be destroyed by the increasingly powerful weapons of war made possible by the same knowledge.

That reapers who harvest the crops of the field are in turn harvested is one of the incomprehensible paradoxes of nature. It is, to put it mildly, a mockery of scientific knowledge that not only fosters skepticism but also erodes the nobility and spirituality of humanity. Science widens the wound it seeks to heal. Although some exponents of intelligent design rely on science to prove the existence of God, they ultimately remark the incompleteness of scientific knowledge, assert the unfathomableness of the numinous, and rest their case on the foundation of faith, which evolutionists refuse to accept because they consider it shaky and at variance with their research findings. But, pray, what is the source of laws of nature if creation is accidental? Scientists take much for granted in their field, while believers are simply escapists who would not be guided by the physical.

Marxists celebrate scientific knowledge which they see as the key to the aporia of history, the solution to all problems, but one can know the cure to one's malady and yet refuse to take the medication. They also emphasize praxis. Action,

like scientific knowledge and Ogun's Weapon of conquest, is both creative and destructive. It can go awry and produce unintended results that might be more complicated than the original problem that provoked it in the first place. Everybody acts according to their caprices, desires, fancies, wills and wishes, which may run counter to their physical, moral, and spiritual well-being. To wish something that is exceedingly harmful to oneself in full consciousness of its deleteriousness is a great paradox indeed. Or, how do we explain the fact that highly knowledgeable people still smoke cigarettes and have unprotected sex outside wedlock in spite of a deluge of cancer and AIDS awareness campaigns across the globe! Zarathustra encapsulates the existential paradox in the statement "the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself" (Nietzsche 1971: 176).

Human imperfection leads to accidents, which constitute impediments and an impetus to development. A Yoruba proverb puts the paradox thus: If we do not fall down, we do not learn a better way to pack and tie our bundles of load. The Challenger and the Columbia spacecraft disasters have contributed significantly to space science and space exploration by compelling engineers to search deeper for better materials and improve their knowledge of fluid mechanics.

Soyinka's attitude to science is generally ambiguous. He welcomes change and warns humanity of its sting. It is when he forgets to deploy paradox, his most effective weapon, that his vision breaks down and his writing becomes disappointing, as in "The Most Expensive Anchorman in U.S.A.", which is contaminated by the virus that corrupts most travellers' tales: the shock of discovery (Soyinka 1988b: 41-44).

The heal-kill paradox of science is foregrounded in the play *Madmen and Specialists* (Soyinka 2007), where it takes the eidetic image of two complementary but contradictory berries, which represent Bero and his sister Si Bero. A medical doctor, Bero treats wounded soldiers on the war front and, overwhelmed by too much wastage of lives, loses his humanity, changes his vocation, and becomes a tyrannical intelligence officer who uses torture to extort truth from rebels, renegades, and other enemies of the State. He initially imprisons his father and later kills him, not just because the old man puts dangerous thoughts in broken bodies of convalescent soldiers and exposes the military leadership as cannibalistic and wasteful, but because he dares to parody medical profession, precisely surgical intervention, as indistinguishable from butchery.

Expressions of paradox in the play include: "Probe the wound or it will never heal" (20); "one thing cancels out another" (30); "You can cure with poison if you use it right. Or kill" (17); "They [good and poison berries] grow together most of the time" (17); "You don't learn good things unless you learn evil" (17); and "disasters bring out the very best in man – and the worst sometimes" (33).

Medicine hurts to heal and tends to rob its practitioners of the emotion of pity, for they seem not to have regard for their patients' shame,

or hear their cries, or feel for them as they examine their naked bodies and private parts, take their medical history, plunge needles in their buttocks and open up their bowels with scalpels. Perhaps, if medical practitioners allowed themselves to be emotionally affected by the cries, pains, and tears of their patients, their work would suffer, for then they would be overwhelmed with so much pity that dressing sores, giving injections, and cutting bodies would be practically impossible.

Self-righteous priests, who take confession and are let into people's dark secrets, manifest the same cold attitude of emotional detachment. Pride-soaked, they think erroneously that they possess the knowledge that can salvage the perverse world from perdition and are immune to the corruption and racketeering that make a mess of it. Some are outright callous and wicked. Aafaa, who as priest is expected to be gentle, is the most perfidious and violent character in the play. His rodomontade is simply insufferable. Inversely, Blindman is the most visionary and insightful of all the mendicants paraded in the play. He goes around with a lamp, not that he may see, but that the whole world can see whoever tries to rob him. Si Bero (the good seed) solicits and receives the help of two old women who initiate her into herbal lore and use their knowledge of witchcraft to protect the medical doctor (the evil seed) on the battlefield. Her work of healing is ruined by her brother's apostasy and obduracy. Paradoxical, witchcraft is represented in the play as knowledge that can be used to protect and destroy life. Both the good and the bad seeds come from the same loins, Old Man, who, like Jehovah, is an ambivalent character.

The drama projects the war-wrecked world as utterly absurd and thematizes the use-abuse paradox that defines all cultures. Electricity is used to electrocute; water-boarding is an instrument of torture; slaves are made to chew bits; and chemicals, toxins and nuclear power are deployed to exterminate enemies in war. Old Man's Philosophy of As mocks the idea of progress and projects history not only as cyclic but as a terrible dis-ease. Wordplay in the drama is pushed to the height of giddiness and language is used to punch holes in all concepts, ideologies, institutions, philosophies, practices, religions and systems created and engaged in by humanity.

I have made a declaration in an essay that "*Madmen and Specialists* places Soyinka in the visionary company of the great writers of the world" (Adekoya 1994: 174). The play is undoubtedly a masterpiece. "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (Pound 1954: 36). Contrary to popular opinion, greatness is not synonymous with grotesqueness. It does not consist in the deployment of big sesquipedalian words that often lead to errors of pronunciation and parapraxes but the ingenious exploration of intricacies of language as play. Language is used in the drama to wage a war of wits against despots and tyrants and to defend language itself against its perverters. Hence language functions in the play both as a stimulant and as a deterrent to violence. It arouses profound feelings of cynicism, nihilism and revulsion as well as deep empathy, humaneness and love. Contradictory, like the berries, it conflates sanity and insanity. It is both balm and poison.

To conclude, I summon Ogun who constructs a bridge of nexus over all gulfs of division and nullifies in his septuple personality the specious polarization of knowledge into the arts and the sciences. There is science in art and *vice versa*. The two fields are not mutually exclusive. Otto A. Bird focusses on their meeting point in the essay "The Sciences as Humanities" and comments:

Scientists frequently express complete disdain for expression and composition and much of their writing too frequently lacks verbal nicety and grace. It remains a fact, nonetheless, that science is a structure of words and reasons and, hence, a work of liberal art. As such, it has many similarities with the work of the humanities" (Bird (1976: 167).

Aesthetic considerations often take precedence when making a choice - be it of a car, an architectural design, a painting, or a wife. For example, the external shape of a car, which is the work of an industrial artist, first attracts a buyer before the engine capacity and other technical details are known. Many men marry beauty, or money, or property, only to discover later to their eternal dismay and regret that its possessor is a

churl or devil, which explains the prevalence of complaints of incompatibility in divorce cases. In the contemporary world, science contributes enormously to the enhancement of the quality of art and radicalization of theory of aesthetics. Cosmetic surgery is capable of transforming a gargoyle of a woman into a beauty queen! The borders between art and science shift and are increasingly blurred.

The knowledge of paradox can help people to gain balance and exercise control over diverse unknown psychosocial forces acting on them. It can develop students' ability to adopt dual or multiple perspectives on issues. Learners need the tool of paradox to interpret texts and transcend deceptive dichotomies, especially the division of culture into either art and science or material base and superstructure, a compartmentalization that at best is a partial truth, the product of the outer eye which often creates mirages, such as a stick in water that appears bent and the parallax of bushes in motion on both sides of a speeding vehicle. In contrast, the inner eye perceives every culture in the world as a combination of two kinds of truth, viz: the scientific and the fictional, the verifiable and the nonverifiable, the rational and the irrational, the objective and the subjective, the qualitative and the quantitative, *et cetera*. A paradoxialist sees with both inner and outer eyes and dissolves all binary opposites in a melting mould.

There is no branch of academia that could be deemed irrelevant and utterly useless in the education of humanity. Neither is there any that escapes the iron vice of paradox. If the Machine is dehumanizing and liberating, if science destroys matter into which it digs, art too arouses emotions and passions that it condemns. All specialities, like Schrodinger's cat, are both alive and dead. Their orientation, like the movement of witches, which detractors claim is widdershins, is paradoxical. The humanities entertain and train people to improve morally, socially and spiritually and become better citizens, more skilful administrators and more visionary planners by exposing their follies and incompetence. They often fail in the latter task. On their part, the sciences increase efficiency, complicate and multiply environmental and existential problems, and create more comforts and discomforts. Paradox does not encourage one to favour or reject either; but in practice people privilege one over the other.

Ideally, artists and scientists should shun misology, collaborate at every level, dialogue and work together for the general well-being of humanity. But, because they constantly tug at each other and wear off their sharp edges, they lose contact and communication and become deaf to each other. Deprived of stimulation and the warmth hitherto generated by the other, either catches its death in its isolated world till dust eventually turns to dust and matter means more than morals. The last word, however, should neither be death nor despair, for even decaying corpses make rich manure for vegetation. My pejorative dismissal of Paradise as a hippogriff and tunnel vision notwithstanding, the tantalizing dream remains a powerful anodyne. A comforting illusion, it gives struggling humanity hope and at the same time provides an impetus to scientific and technological development.

Far from being a misoneist, Soyinka is a vibrant poet-prophet who advocates change and uses his soteriological writing to sensitize his readers to soul-deadening habits that make the past, the present and the future wear the same paradoxical look and segue into one another. The unknown quality is never far from the ganglion of his creative universe and sets it on an even keel. He celebrates life in all its diversity and richness and plains piquantly of its miseries and woes. His best works are set in a neither-nor "Cat state" (a twilight zone), and the light that pierces through them is so great it causes invisibility.

An imbibor like Ogun, he is fully conscious of the ambivalence of wine. On the one hand, the liquid joy expands imagination, boosts inspiration, and eliminates shyness and timidity. On the other, it encourages arrogance, sin and vice, inflates distended egos, rifles reason, dulls wits, promotes crime, violence and garrulity, causes chaos and disorder, saps strength, fuels the fire of lust, hardens the liver, and kills sobriety. The strength of wine, like the vitality of life, resides in evil. There is no escape from the world wide web of challenges and trials, even for saints and teetotallers. Goodness in the end resides in balance, control and moderation. "The good that I would", Saint Paul confesses, "I do not; but the evil which I would not, I do... Who shall deliver me? (Romans 7: 19, 24). My answer is simple: there is no deliverance outside of the confines that define the Palace of Paradox. Does my conch sound a strange note? Yes, seasons

change, and so do I! To reinforce the argument, I recommend "When Seasons Change", Soyinka's verse summation of the dialectics and paradoxes of change, history, time and truth, which encapsulates in a concise form all that the lecture has attempted to articulate.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you most sincerely for your attention.

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APPENDIX

WHEN SEASONS CHANGE

When seasons change it seems
An age is passed, and all with it
And this old earth has sucked within it
Souls of all living. Time's spectres, they
Evade guardianship of predecessors
They thread their way through rocks
And creviced growths, old, silent vapours.
What seek you, cloud weeds in air
Whose thoughts are old, hoar-rimmed
As sunken eyes on the forgotten face
Of this my hermit earth? They wander on
In whispering parade, full of old hints
Old truths upheld in mirrors of the hour –
A solemn future casts a backward glance
Over drooped shoulders.

The mind

Is banked upon the bankrupt flow
Of wisdoms new. It soars in flight
Upon a dual lift of planes, shifting in cross-winds
A noble slave, air-borne on the cross
Of twin-adherents, equal lift and span –
Knowledge of a deep futility in all
Of far ideas and urgent action – this
The right wing, poise and balance
Wind-drag on – the left, fate, propulsion
Beating wind and homing on the beam
Responsive ever to the present call.
Hailstone summons on the dovecot roof
The drums are here again, flight courses

Tapped on questing minds. The lines are worn
And reading blurred in time's fingerstains.
Shed your hard tears; it is an old earth
Stirring to fresh touch of old pretensions
Throbs of dead passion, chilled rebounds
From sensations of the past, old hands and voices
The blows of battle and the scars, old fences
And the guarded opening of a gate
Old welcomes, the heat of comradeship
And cold betrayal, old sacrifices
The little victories and the greater loss –
Thus, purity of ideals, clarity of vision,
And oh, let innocence have brief mourning –
Old compromises.

Yet this progression has been source
For great truths in spite of stammering
Planes for great building in spite
Of crooked sights, for plastic strength
Despite corrosive fumes of treachery
And spirits grow despite the midwifery
Of dwarfs; spires, rooted in quagmires
Of the human mind rise to purer lights
And wing aloft a salvaged essence
Transcending death, legacy of seasons...

Ecstasies are brief; it is truth's season
And golden eyelets sink grey hooded
In the ashen hearth of truth. Now moves
A dead recession of the silent host
Whispering judgements, sucking spires
Down to dwarf kennels, liming minds
That took to wing, sighing sinews down
To atrophy: a damp of knowing smiles
At urges of the flesh to a self-release

In transcendencies.

Shrouds of seasons gone, peeled

From time's corpses, mouse-eaten thoughts

You flutter upon solitude in winds

Armed in shrapnels from the shell of vision

Veils on the altar of unplighted troths

Cobweb hangings on the throne of death

In solitude.

(Soyinka 1972 : 15-17)