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COMMITMENT
TO
CRITICISM

By Richard Taylor



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by

Richard Taylor
Professor of English Literature

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To my colleagues and students
in Asia and Africa
who taught me to question
received ideas



Because words have meaning; that is, reference to objects and action outside their own existence as spoken or written symbols, and because literature uses words as its artistic medium, a unique situation exists which greatly complicates critical activity. A poet of the Sung dynasty in ancient China expressed the idea perfectly.

Art produces something beyond the form things
Though its importance lies in preserving the form of things;
Poetry gives us thoughts beyond the domain of art,
But is valued that it exhibits the characteristics of art.¹

The proposition is fairly simple; there is a relationship between our experience of the world around us and an artistic representation of it. The representation preserves something of the form of things as they are, but somehow transcends their natural and random existence in the physical world. Art reforms experience in order to provide an analysis of it or a comment upon it. The musician, for example, selects sounds and arranges them into a pattern which creates new relationships among the constituent elements and awakens in the listener a new awareness to the possibilities of sound patterning. Music, however, does not normally refer to anything outside itself although it is possible through stylized imitation for music to suggest emotions, states of mind and even physical phenomena such as a thunderstorm or the flight of a bumble bee. Literature, on the other hand, cannot avoid referring to experience outside the work of art (to objects, actions or abstract ideas) because the words which constitute its artistic medium are bound to retain the conventional meaning of normal usage. Literature presents us with thoughts which go far beyond the structural inter-relationship of parts within the work. It offers a whole universe of ideas which have a direct relationship to our actual experience of life. A poem which celebrates ethnic identity, a play which examines present-day political realities or a novel which exposes the moral corruption of modern life may evoke in us a direct and personal response because of an independent preoccupation with the subject. Yet the Sung poet is perfectly right in emphasizing the fact that literature is valued in so far as it exhibits the characteristics of art. The aesthetic qualities of a work of art are at least as important in literary criticism as the

validity of the author's vision or perception of human experience. It is, after all, the literary quality of the work, its mode and form of expression which captures the reader's imagination and engages an audience beyond any prior preoccupation with the subject.

The nature of literary criticism and role of the critic is largely dependent on an acceptable definition of literature itself. One view which has been fairly widely held is that literature is the expression of intense and personal experience in a unique and original form which collectively reflects the values and aspirations of a given people in a particular time and place. An individual work externalizes and eternalizes the writer's perceptions of both the self and the world outside. The critic's role is to interpret works of literature to the public at large; not merely to describe or explain them, but rather to comment on and evaluate the quality of both the author's literary composition and his vision of, or insight into, human experience. In his or her quest for excellence and truth the critic should function as an educator, not as a popularizer or purveyor of culture. Serious criticism is evaluative, not descriptive, and the responsibility of the critic is to engage the artist in a public debate for the mutual benefit of all concerned. One of the more important arguments in this dialogue concerns the question of taste, the reader's apprehension and acceptance of style and structure as they change and evolve.

The reading public is not always quick to recognize aesthetic excellence in current literature. Its sensibility, however refined, is at best sluggish, and sometimes becomes outraged when faced with something new and unexpected, with innovations in either form or style. It is the function of the critic to challenge public taste, to create an environment of understanding and appreciation with respect to aesthetics and to make current the criteria by which the particular idiom of a writer can be measured. The critic must be a knowledgeable and sensitive judge of literary expression, a mediator rather than an arbiter of taste; but more importantly the critic himself must see, and help the public to see, the relationship between the subtleties of literary expression and the urgent concerns of the community which are being represented through a complex structure of words.

In approaching literature one must accept that it is a primary act of the author's imagination which transmutes the form of things as they are into art, into a stylized image of reality which gives us thoughts beyond the domain of art.

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are".

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then. "But play you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves.

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are".

VI

A tune beyond us as we are,
Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar;

Ourselves in the tune as if in space,
Yet nothing changed, except the place

Of things as they are and only the place
As you play them, on the blue guitar,

Placed, so, beyond the compass of change,
Perceived in a final atmosphere;

For a moment final, in the way
The thinking of art seems final when

The thinking of god is smokey dew.
The tune is space. The blue guitar

Becomes the place of things as they are,
A composing of senses of the guitar.²

But, if a primary act of imagination transmutes experience into artifact, then it follows that a corresponding act of imagination is required of the reader who perceives in that image the full resonance of its ideas and the intricacies of its craftsmanship, as well as its relevance to the real world in which we live and have our being. The critic is important to society, not because he is a teacher of technique and style, not because he is a mere interpreter of its subtleties and suggested meaning, but rather because he is primarily concerned with the relationship between imagination and experience. Like the artist, the critic is preoccupied with the relation between aesthetic composition and perennial problems of the human condition such as social justice, morality, psychology and spirituality; but he is more actively involved in analysing and articulating the process itself, the interaction between image and experience which produces a meaningful statement. In examining and evaluating a literary work critics explore the multiple possibilities of meaning or significance. A complex structure or scheme has been created in which every element functions and interacts with every other. The scheme may not be immediately self-evident and its coherence and meaning may

only be demonstrable after considerable study, yet an equally important step remains to be accomplished, to deduce and evaluate the social and moral implications of the writer's attitude towards both the world he has created and the real world. The New Critical or Formalist approach to literature along with its latter-day version, both of which rely on linguistic analysis, offer a variety of excellent critical tools for examining the literariness of a work of art, but they are not in themselves sufficient for a complete understanding of literature.

In its internal coherence and movement [the work of art] establishes an essential correspondence with our inner states in their collective dimension.

[Literature] exists not for itself but [rather] to establish a corresponding relatedness to a reality outside the work itself.³

The serious critic looks beyond the literariness or aesthetics of the work to deduce the author's general outlook and attitude towards human experience, the depth and validity of his or her vision. Ultimately, the critic must come to terms with the truthfulness of that vision, its implicit as well as its explicit values and the inherent implications of both vision and values if carried over into real life. After all, the criticism of literature is not a direct criticism of life, although a criticism of life is implied in it. The representation or image of life experience which we call literature is somehow different from our actual experience of real life.

In coming to terms with the author's vision the critic must be objective, and here I speak of the disinterested academic critic whose preoccupation is with literature itself and not with its effect on life. It may be true that a developing nation cannot afford such intellectual detachment and in that case the study of literature as such is, at best, a secondary or indirect activity in practical nation building. The literary critic whose commitment to society outweighs the commitment to artistic integrity, might more profitably rethink his or her priorities and engage more effectively in achieving social justice through direct means. Authors, on the other hand, have both a particular view of reality and a desire for artistic excellence in expressing it. The business of critics is to analyse and evaluate what authors have written. That is not to say that critics should not have strong views of their own, but that they should be able and willing to appreciate the effective expression of contrary views before attacking them as irrelevant or invalid with respect to the actual realities of human experience. It goes without saying that the matrix of reality, its core and substance, varies widely with the diverse views and

experience of individuals. But the critic must be willing to appreciate versions other than his own if he aspires to be a critic of literature rather than a critic of life. What is required, I think, is a commitment to criticism rather than to a cause.

There are various sects of literary critics. Each has a valid point to make and an effective method to be followed in criticising literature. Outside the case of the Formalist schools mentioned earlier, none is universally applicable. Each of them lends itself to the criticism of a particular kind of writing and leaves the critic who is dedicated to that cause alone no choice but to dismiss other kinds of literature as bad art or even non-art. As it happens, many of the schools of criticism were originally called into being in response to radical developments in literary taste. New criteria and methods were needed in order to deal with evolving forms, styles, and themes. Others came into being in response to social and historical pressures, the need to re-evaluate existing literature according to the intellectual and psychological requirements of the community at a given point in time. The best criticism selects and applies the critical method, or combination of methods, which is most appropriate to the literature at hand. Since views of social or psychological reality differ widely in any given society, no single critical method will suffice for all works of art. Social reality, within a given community is never homogeneous although there may be only one pertinent reality for an individual. The realities which operate in one's life vary according to social background, education, occupation and intellectual commitment. More importantly, they vary according to individual temperament or world-view. In any given community there are those whose outlook is objective, hard-headed, practical and pragmatic; at the same time there are others whose outlook is subjective, introspective, idealistic or mystical. A given author may be preoccupied with a single view to the near exclusion of all the rest; phenomenology, for example, literary form, mythic patterning, human psychology, morality, or socio-political determinism. So long as his or her composition gives us thoughts beyond the domain of art in a form which exhibits the characteristics of art, the critic has the duty to evaluate it as objectively as possible.

A Nigerian critic has recently complained that ritual and myth are socially irrelevant:

The truth is . . . [that] the world-view which made for animist metaphysics has all but disintegrated in the acceleration, caused by colonialism, of man's economic separation from Nature. However one may regret it, myth and history are no longer complementary, and to insist otherwise is to voice a plea for reaction.

No one would deny that man's economic separation from nature is accelerating, but there is no basis for the assumption that myth and ritual can only function in contemporary writing as literal or actual agents which affect social reality directly. In fact, myth and ritual are self-conscious and imaginative constructs which have been traditionally associated with the sublime in art. As structural patterns or images of alternative and inner experience, they are as valid today as ever before. It is not necessarily a cowardly retreat into an irrelevant past to celebrate values and ideological structures which are traditional in a given society, especially if they are being used to comment on or measure conditions arising from the newer developments in that society. The operation of myth and ritual is just as 'real' and 'valid' in contemporary Nigeria as factories and economic exploitation, and provide a needed touchstone within the social reality of a large number of people. After all, myth and ritual are conventions created by a community to rationalize and perpetuate its relation to and understanding of experience. As the experience changes so do the myths and rituals, or at least their application and meaning. It might be argued that in so far as such traditions are made relevant to contemporary developments, in so far as they are made new and serve to integrate the past with the present, they can be considered meaningful and good. For myself, I would even go so far as to say that a present-day preoccupation with myth and ritual as a negation of socio-economic or political developments is a perfectly valid and worthwhile enterprise so long as that negation reflects the experience and aspirations of a significant group of people. Literature is the reflection of a society's collective consciousness, and reaction is a natural part of human experience. It may or may not contribute to the ultimate good of the community, only time can tell that, but it exists and must be reckoned with.

Take for example, the literature of England and Ireland at the turn of the present century: the notorious Art-For-Art's-Sake movement. Here is a body of literature which experimented with form and technique according to the precepts of scientific method then in use, its procedures were advanced, certainly avant-garde, while its subject matter was wholly subjective and ideal, metaphysical and psychological. In socio-economic terms this was the dominant literature of a period which followed the greatest development in scientific investigation, manufacturing, and material wealth that the Western world had ever known. At that time Symbolism and Expressionism vied with Realism and Naturalism as alternative responses to contemporary human experience. The first sought to escape from the harsh reality and social injustice of the industrial revolution into an ideal world of form and texture, of spirit, emotion

and psychological states, while the latter sought to expose both the actual conditions under which the victims of that socio-economic situation lived and the determining, degrading, and destroying pressures that operated on them. The need to participate in such an escape tells us a good deal about the psychological and intellectual reaction of a significant portion of that community to their actual experience; just as much, I would suggest, as the less wide-spread attempt to participate in the direct exposure of that brutal and dehumanising experience. The best literature cannot help but reflect the prevailing, as well as dissident, realities of its time. The best critics evaluate what is written, they do not prescribe which realities are valid or exclude artistic visions of reality merely because the artist's view does not coincide with their own considered opinion.

The relativity of social realities is a vexing question as is the exact relationship between those realities and the individual in society. It is a major tenant of one critical school, and one often repeated, that:

Consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.⁵

No serious observer of life would doubt that social being determines consciousness, but is it really true that consciousness does not determine the individual's life and being? In *Paradise Lost* Milton's *Satan*, an everlasting real creation, says that he has:

A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time,
The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.⁶

W.B. Yeats, taking an extreme romantic position towards the end of his long writing career, included these lines in 'The Tower.'

Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul.⁷

The symptoms of psychosomatic diseases are no less real because they have no basis in organic malfunction or infection by parasite, bacillus or virus. Othello's jealousy is none the less operative because it is unfounded in fact. Men do act according to their beliefs, their particular view of reality, and societies can be influenced by individual consciousness. Even low-church schools of criticism which hold that literature is only valued in so far as it demonstrates ethical or political morality, actually exist to propagate ideas which are meant to condition the consciousness and behaviour of men. I would suggest that the relationship between the social realities of a given society and its artists or critics is one of reciprocal interaction, one in

which it is equally possible for the various social realities, as they actually exist, to be defined, explored, and exposed as well as for the author or critic to anticipate the development of these realities, to refine and educate public taste to accept new aesthetic forms, intellectual attitudes, and ideologies. The interplay of imagination and experience is the key to the process.

At its best, however, the socio-political approach to literary criticism has a number of original and important insights to offer, particularly with reference to the growing relevance of comparative literature. Marxism is based on a revolutionary understanding of history, an examination and exposure of the sociological and economic determinants of particular systems, but marxist criticism involves much more than an evaluation of the effect that the means of literary production, distribution, and exchange have on literature, more than mere estimation of a literature's social function within a given community.

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature' concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to *explain* the literary work more fully, and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history.⁸

Little violence is done to that statement by substituting the word 'culture' for 'history' so long as we remember that culture is also determined by the attitudes, ideals, and aspirations of a community as well as by social, economic, and political pressures. It has always been obvious that themes arise and develop in direct relationship to changes in the realities of a given society, and the study of literature has traditionally been based on the expression of a single ethnic, national, linguistic, or cultural group as it evolves and develops through time. Until fairly recently, however, ideas about literary form and style as they existed within one culture, were taken by that group to be absolute and universally applicable. Yet when one thinks that new criteria of values are needed to assess a radical development in literary forms and style within a society, it is untenable that critics of one community should superimpose their culturally-determined ideas of effective expression and excellence on the literature of another. Unfortunately, it happens all the time. Western critics (that is: European, New World, Australian, etc.) whose culture is predicated on Christian morality, materialism, rationality, and individualism are guilty of woeful errors in judgment when dealing with literature other than their own, unless they are able to understand and appreciate the relevant cultural values and aesthetic

precepts on which they are based. Traditional Oriental literature, for example, has been popularly dismissed by Europeans, or misunderstood, because it is characterized by a Buddhist detachment from life and a yearning towards spirituality which gives rise to a sequence of floating, shifting perceptions and projections of isolated emotions and states of being instead of the logical plot progression and character development so highly prized in the West.

European critics, I believe, have made the same mistake with African literature and have often levelled the accusation that it lacks character development and psychological insight. The point that such critics have overlooked is that even contemporary African society largely holds to a traditional view of communality in which the individual realizes his or her identity as a member of a larger group whose good takes precedence over that of any member within it. Fictional characters are acceptable to an African readership in so far as they are representative, and participate in action whose social relevance is of primary importance. Another unfounded challenge is that African literature lacks multiplicity or diversity of themes. The unspoken assumption of the Western critic who holds such a view is that art is a universal instrument of intellectual and individual speculation. On the contrary, African ideas of art, it seems to me, both literary and otherwise, are primarily functional and a work is considered valuable in direct relation to whatever social or communal good it advocates and produces. Western critics often imply that African literature is rather thin and lacking in interest because of the scarcity of invention or experimentation in form and style. They obviously overlook the fact that such aesthetic considerations, while accepted as important in African literature, are subordinated to function. Invention and experimentation do exist, forms and styles evolve and develop, but they are not yet discernible as a primary concern of African literary aesthetics. In any case originality does not seem to be anything so highly prized for its own sake as it is in Western literature, and this perhaps offers a clue to some of the positive, rather than negative, misconceptions of non-African critics.

One of the first works of African literature to burst on the scene of the English speaking world was Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard* which charmed a wide readership through the originality of its language and the exotic nature of its world-view. The broken and ungrammatical English of that work delighted Western critics because of its freshness and spontaneity. In it the words and phrases of a worn-out literary language were renewed and revitalized. Tutuola's English seemed to be consciously re-formed into a perfect vehicle for the expression of a wonderfully naive and innocent

fictional world in which the actual and the supernatural, the modern and the traditional are integrated into a single vision. To the Nigerian reader, however, Tutuola's language is often an embarrassment. It is not correct and offends against aesthetic expectation. Within that culture the execution of a work of art is valued in relation to the quality and refinement of its craftsmanship, not necessarily on its aesthetic relevance and expressiveness. Traditional views of artistic creation, on the other hand, allow for the incorporation of new material in an established and fixed form; no objection is made to the idea of a television-handed ghostess or a director of medical services in the deads' town. That kind of imaginative innovation is as natural in Africa as it is startling and wonderful to the European who has been conditioned for generations to sort out and compartmentalise all forms of experience. Actually, the real attraction of Western critics to Tutuola and to much of the first wave of African literature lies in just that imaginative and exotic world-view. The vision of modernism and traditional life experience as an integrated whole, of an antecedently spiritual universe within calling distance, so to speak, was infinitely reassuring to a culture whose separation from nature and its traditional values had become almost total. Criticism as well as literature is the product of a particular cultural history and the fact must be taken into consideration more than it has been in the past.

Not only in the imaginative projections of Tutuola, but also in the realistic expression of political and cultural imperialism, Western readers find a corresponding image of their own plight and victimization, an image of cultural dispossession and alienation. Europeans turned their attention to African literature, not from a disinterested commitment to criticism or even to cultural understanding, but rather because of its relevance to their own preoccupations and needs, a possible source of influence and inspiration. However much Western critics celebrated the vigour of the new literature whose language was exciting and whose themes seemed relevant to their own situation, they invariably measured that literature against the aesthetic criteria of their own. Take, for example, the divergent critical opinions as to Chinua Achebe's best novel. Western critics name *Things Fall Apart* because of its formal basis in classical Greek tragedy, its developed characterization, and the depiction of excesses in traditional Igbo life which are seen to be at least partial justification for its downfall. African critics, on the other hand, choose *Arrow of God* because of its more immediately relevant social reality. Ezeulu is more representative of his community than Okonkwo, and there is a greater examination of the interaction between the Chief Priest and the culture which he is

charged to protect. Ezeulu's fall is that of the community, Okonkwo's is individual, however much it derives from cultural disruption. In such a case an ultimate value judgment is bound to depend on the aesthetic expectations and ideology of the critic. A different kind of example is found in the reaction of African critics to Joyce Cary's caricature of Mister Johnson in the novel of that name. I have not yet heard of any one being offended by the very similar figure of Lakunle, the egregious village schoolmaster in Wole Soyinka's *Lion and the Jewel*. The point that I believe Cary to be making through the confrontation between Rudbeck, the colonial district officer, and Mr. Johnson is the inanity and total inapplicability of British culture outside its own context. It should be obvious, at any rate, that all works of literature are best examined in the light of their own cultural values, both aesthetic and social, and the critic of an alien literature must necessarily have an intimate understanding of and sensitivity to the genius of its language and underlying cultural values. The interplay of experience and its imaginative projection in art trips us all up from time to time, and mainly because our unspoken and often unacknowledged assumptions about that experience actually give rise to literary conventions, styles, and techniques on the one hand as well as to the critical criteria with which we evaluate literature on the other.

Another excellent reason for entering into the aesthetic and cultural conventions of a literature other than one's own is the wider perspective gained on the nature of literature itself. No community or culture can possibly evolve and develop its artistic awareness without the impetus of contact with other cultures which have very different artistic techniques or new and exciting world-views. It is small wonder that in an age of both instant communication and a global revival of interest in man as a social or political being literary investigation is steadily moving towards an insistence on comparative study. The closer together communities are, in character or historical intercourse, the simpler the process, and a comparative study of French and English literatures, for example, however worthwhile, is not very likely to enlarge one's apprehension of the almost infinite possibilities in the relationship between man's imagination and his experience to any startling extent. A far more valuable enterprise, however, would be a comparative study of the various literatures of Europe (Latinate, Germanic, Slavic, etc) which would ultimately enable critics to state what common factors exist among them, to characterize and explain the principle aesthetic precepts and the value system which can be called Western. Still more interesting studies are yet to be undertaken between Western Literatures and those which developed in other cultural contexts, studies which will

ultimately lead to the definition and comparison of Western, Oriental, and African aesthetics on the one hand and their poetics on the other. After all, critics are as interested in the formulation of the dominant conventions and principles of composing a work of literature as they are in the criteria of evaluating that literature and its relation to life. Comparative studies between literatures of dissimilar cultural background promise exciting discoveries about the universal nature of literature and they also promise a rich vein of inspiration, influence, and assimilation.

Ethnic literatures have always developed both as a response to conditions and realities within the culture and to those outside which have impinged on their consciousness. My own investigations into the influence of classical Japanese drama on the plays of W.B. Yeats is just such an example of cross-cultural intercommunication. In this particular instance, Yeats was groping his way towards a new dramatic form in response to the moral and intellectual pressures of his time. His vision of life experience centred on the relation between the natural and supernatural worlds, on heroic possibilities in human personality and on the nature and provenance of individual satisfaction or fulfilment. His themes reflect the dominant preoccupations of his time; disillusionment over the outcome of Victorian 'Progress' and a reaction against materialism. The mode of expression in which he experimented was a kind of poetic composition. His idea was to escape from the confining conventions of traditional dramatic form with its insistence on more or less realistic action, logical plot progression, and character analysis. Instead of a dramatic narrative, Yeats proposed the more direct presentation of emotions, attitudes, and ideas which is common to lyric poetry. The first eleven plays he wrote derived their form and dramatic method from a number of widely different sources: ancient Greek tragedy, medieval mystery and morality plays, and contemporary French Symbolist drama. In his search for an alternative form of expression none of the precedents that Yeats had turned to from within his own culture, either contemporary or historical, quite suited his subject matter; an impasse had been reached. In 1913 he was introduced to the Japanese *noh* drama of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and discovered in it a challenging conception of formal structure and expressive stylistic techniques which allow the human emotion recreated by the play to be expressed through music and dance at those climactic moments when words alone, however lyrical, fail. What knowledge he had of *noh* plays came from the garbled notes and unfinished translations left at the death of an American scholar whose information had been got at first-hand. Unfortunately there was little or no published

scholarship on the subject in any Western language at that time, and without being able to compare and assess the reliability of the Fenollosa manuscripts, it is no great surprise that Yeats's understanding of noh was both incomplete and inaccurate. It sufficed, however, to act as a catalyst, to inspire him to create a new form of brief and intense lyrical drama, combining poetry, music, mime, and dance, in which the heroic or supernatural quality of a past action is ritualised and recreated through the imaginative participation of the audience. For many years the strangeness and inaccessibility of Yeats's later plays had been generally attributed to the exotic influence of Japanese noh and I thought it important to ascertain exactly which ideas had been borrowed from the Fenollosa notebooks and which rejected. The manuscripts themselves had never been examined, nor had a critic of modern English literature attempted a study of classical Japanese drama in order to judge whether or not the features Yeats assimilated bore any relationship at all to the actual theory and practice of noh. Most importantly, it was especially necessary to define the extent of influence on Yeats from contemporary Western philosophies, aesthetic theory, stage techniques, and production methods as well as from noh.

The next logical step will be to examine the aesthetic practice and cultural underpinnings of the so-called Modernist Movement in England Literature, let us say from 1870 to the present time. Having already studied the relationship between the structured imagery of the mystical-occult revival at the end of the last century (its symbols, icons, hieroglyphs, and mandallas) and the literary usage of the Symbolist writers in English, as well as the supra-positioning techniques and structural methods of the early Moderns which were confirmed, if not derived, from contact with Chinese and Japanese models, it seems reasonable to push the study further to include the mainspring of aesthetic theory in the scientific and philosophical idealism of the late Victorian age as well as the present involvement with African literature in English, French, and Portuguese. The thesis to be examined is whether a consistent mode of literary expression evolved and developed in poetry, drama, and the novel throughout the period; whether the aesthetic values as well as themes and attitudes of the various schools or movements are a direct response to the social realities and aspirations of the time and whether the relevance of cross-cultural contact with Oriental and African literature tells us more about the aesthetics and thematic exigencies of English literature than it does about those alien literatures *per se*. The basic assumption is that the modern period of English literature is a second phase in the development of romanticism and one in which aesthetic concerns provide a common

factor among the disparate world-views of individual movements. The fascinating aspect of the period, so far as I am concerned, is the confrontation of realistic or naturalistic views of human experience and modes of expression with romantic ones, which gives rise to opposed, but not mutually exclusive, approaches to criticism. The issues are still very much alive, and nowhere so lively as in the criticism of African literature.

The basic problem, however, is at least as much a question of defining African aesthetics as it is of defining the social realities of African experience and its world-view. Africa, south of the Sahara, contains a vast number of diverse communities and cultures. Even the present nation-states are made up of numerous ethnic groups, each with its own traditional forms of expression and an oral literature which is still very much alive and functions within each society as an expression of cultural identity. Not enough work has been done to say the very least, by way of collecting and analysing this material, let alone deriving relevant aesthetic principles, nor has much been done by way of comparing and contrasting traditional literatures and the differing social realities from which each sprang. Until this is accomplished we cannot identify a common base of human experience, of outlook and attitude towards the individual as a member of society, the community as a whole, or the physical and metaphysical universe, which is characteristically African. I suspect that this can be done, and that a general formulation can be made which will characterise and distinguish African experience and aesthetics from Western and Oriental ones.

The greater problem, however, is that contemporary African literature, whether written in foreign or African languages, is the result of a complex and as yet incompletely assimilated cultural background rather than of a monolithic and homogeneous one. More than any other, the criticism of contemporary African literature requires a comparative approach because of the composite nature of its culture; the confluence of traditional and modern experience, of African and Western aesthetic ideals. Because of the colonial past, its economic and cultural imperialism, there can be no mindless assumption that 'traditional' is African, 'modern' is Western. Current African experience and aesthetic ideals are a mixture of the traditional and the modern, an expression of interaction and often of conflict, sometimes of congruity and happy assimilation. Rather than attempting to identify social reality, literary critics should be analysing the actual works of African writers, identifying the nature of individual experience and the aesthetic means used to express that experience, evaluating the truthfulness or value of that representation. They should be

investigating which aspects of literary experience, that is, modes of aesthetic expression, are 'traditional' and which are 'modern'. It is unfortunately rare to find such disinterested and objective criticism as Kofi Awoonor's observation on *My Life in the Bush Ghost*.

It is in this work that [Amos Tutuola] achieves a fantastic unity between his folkloric sources and his own inventiveness which tends to be syncretic and dependent on his observations of Western or European institutions, norms, and practices.

All too much of the criticism of African literature in so-called metropolitan languages by both Africans and Europeans, has assumed the overwhelming influence of Western or European models. For my own part I would suggest that the richest vein for research into African literature is in the study of traditional aesthetics and the principles of composition in oral literature. From my own reading I have come to believe that African writing is not based on Western forms and aesthetic concepts, but rather that a very few formal devices have been grafted on to traditional modes of expression. For example, the novel is a Western form and did not exist in oral tradition, but almost every other aspect of modern African novels is perfectly in keeping with the conventions of those oral prose narratives which I have been able to find in translation; the social function of the subject matter, representative nature of the characters, linear and unitary quality of plot construction and brevity of composition. In addition foreign languages are universally refashioned to reflect African thought processes and values. However much the African novel may seem to approximate contemporary European models in their intense brevity and directness of expression, these are also attributes of the folk tale, and one rarely hears the attribution of direct influence by specific foreign authors; that is, outside the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero which came into African fiction with the early 'university wits'.

The case for poetry is somewhat different. It is obvious that Hopkins and Yeats, Eliot and Pound, to mention only a few, have had an undeniable effect on Anglophone poetry in Africa, just as the French symbolists and surrealists have on Francophone poetry. I begin to wonder, however, if this is not more a function of natural affinity, as in the case of the novel, than of actual influence. At the turn of the present century Western art, both visual and verbal, reached out for new forms and modes of expression, seizing upon the simultaneity of multiple perspectives and juxtapositioning of images or symbols found in Oriental models as well as the bold and expressive stylization of African sculpture to project abstract qualities and states of being. A natural affinity of ends and means led

to such cross-cultural borrowing and assimilation of influences. I would suggest that the same relationship holds for modern European and contemporary African Poetry. From what I read of traditional oral poetry in translation, and particularly that of West Africa, I can see that its basic method is a naming and celebration of things, places, people, and actions; an evocation of qualities and characteristics through an accumulation of associations, comparisons, and contrasts. The principle of composition is exactly that of the discontinuous image clusters, so common to modern European poetry in English and French. More work could and should be done by critics with the requisite training and experience to investigate both the aesthetics and poetics of oral tradition in Africa and to compare them to the methods and models of written poetry in all languages. Perhaps then we will recognize works like Agostinho Neto's 'African Poetry' as being naturally or characteristically African and Angolan rather than derived from the European and Portuguese.

Out on the horizon
there are fires
and the dark silhouettes of the beaters
with arms outstretched,
in the air, the green smell of burning palms.

African poetry

In the street
a line of Bailundu bearers
tremble under the weight of their load
in the room
a mulatto girl with meek eyes
colours her face with rice powder and rouge
a woman wriggles her hips under a garish cloth
on the bed
a man, sleepless, dreams
of buying knives and forks so he can eat at table
in the sky the glow
of fires
and the silhouette of black men dancing
with arms outstretched,
in the air, the hot music of marimbas

African poetry

and in the street the bearers
in the room the mulatto girl
on the bed the man, sleepless
The burnings consume
consume
the hot earth with horizons afire.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 Quoted by [Robert] Laurence Binyon in *The Flight of the Dragon*, The Wisdom of the East Series (London: Murray, 1911), p. 84.
- 2 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knoff, 1965), pp. 165 & 167-168.
- 3 Abiola Irele, 'The Function of the African Critic', an unpublished essay read at the Conference of the Association of African Literary Critics, University of Ife, December 1975, pp. 1 & 7. I tend to agree with several other point that Professor Irele makes in that paper.
- 4 Femi Osofisan, 'Ritual and the Revolutionary *Ethos*', an unpublished essay read at the first Annual African International Conference, University of Ibadan, July 1976, p. 8.
- 5 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The German Ideology and Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as quoted by Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 4.
- 6 The Poetical Works of John Milton, I, edited by Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), p. 12.
- 7 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* edited by Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 415.
- 8 Eagleton, p. 3.
- 9 Kofi Awoonor, *The Breast of Africa* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 238.
- 10 In *When Bullets Begin to Flower, Poems of Resistance from Angola, Mozambique and Guiné*, Poets of Africa 3, selected and translated by Margaret Dickinson (Nairobi: East Africa Published House, 1972), p. 64-65.