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THE SEMIOTIC TRIANGLE

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Principal Officers of the University, Fellow Students of Literature, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Faced with the desolate cry of a child at the point of death, Literature can do nothing; however, it can portray that child in indelible words for generations to remember...., yes, for generations to remember, and take heed.

It is in this spirit that my lecture titled "**The Semiotic Triangle**" is dedicated to our quintessential poet-activist and only Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka.

The ever-evolving universe can be perceived as a complex semiotic scene, a condensed parabolic text with its compressed imagery, disruptive syntax and semantic configurations. Brimming with indecipherable iconic motifs, saturated with symbols, and a sign-system existing in a spatio-temporal continuum, the awesome universe is mystery crystallized. Like a richly textured, monolithic, close-knit verse, the *uni-verse* at once fascinates endlessly, perplexes and eludes us as it resists the violence of desire, yielding its unassailable treasures through the ages, to the thoughtful initiate, to the shrewd eye, or to the resourceful and perceptive interpreter who scans it to unfold the coded cosmic setting and to unravel some of the unexplained mysteries behind the veil of creation.

It is fascinating to observe that in its essence, the literary cosmos has marked affinities or close correspondences with the phenomenal universe, the temporal answering to the eternal, the finite to the infinite, the universe offering itself, as it were, as the paradigm, the prototype of which all other texts are mere expressions in words, mere images and shadows. Or indeed, if one still prefers, all literary texts are variants/transformations of the Archetypal Text. In fact, the self-generating universe can be said to approximate to, or to embody the *langue*/competence of which each literary text is the *parole*/performance or the ritual enactment. It also flows from this that, to such a large extent, all spheres or departments of knowledge are derivative, they are integral parts of the Macro Book inasmuch as they all find their convergence in the unfathomable language of the universe. And it is tempting to add that, in the final analysis, every devoted artist strives to rival the wondrously intricate tapestry of the Lord of creation by exploring all the resources available in order to invent polished, timeless artifacts or myths.

From the foregoing, it is made evident that, in a sense, as signifying systems, the material universe and literary texts share certain underlying features. In structural terms, they are dynamic, self-

regulating, self-transforming; they obey certain intrinsic laws; they generate new signifieds almost endlessly and their constituent parts form an integrated, coherent whole. Put another way, they are both emblematic, pluri-dimensional, auto-referential, purpose-oriented, programmed, organized by an aesthetic mind or author, and peopled by creatures, real or imaginary.

Moreover, they stimulate a sense of awe and mystery, a sense of puzzlement and wonder; they elicit delight too, and have decoders to contemplate, appreciate and study them. All of which attests to the fact that they both present a typology of semiotically related patterns.

And it is no coincidence that, according to biblical narrative, at the dawn of creation, God offered Adam the singular opportunity to conduct an inaugural naming ceremony. Manifestly, writers and readers actualise the same scene today. The Cosmic Creator desired man's cooperation and collaboration; in the same sense as it is the role of the reader or critic, as he searches in the unpredictable twilight zone between the signifier/*signans* and the signified/*signatum*, to give meaning to the seemingly esoteric system of the literary text, to be a participant in the aesthetic game, to decode the cryptic messages of the writer; i.e. to see order in complexity, unity in diversity. In other words, the critic is the officiating priest in the literary temple constructed by the writer.

Of course, a sensitive writer who is dedicated to his art invests much of himself in his text. Emerging from the chaos of birth, born in the inviolable sanctuary of desire, in moments of sustained labour and disciplined consecration, the poetic text is a miracle, a delight, an intimate distillation, a fulfilment.

The poetic text is also an offering, an offering to the reader on whom ultimately **its constellation** of meanings and even its life span depend (The words reader and critic are used interchangeably here). In essence then, just as the universe in itself has no meaning without an observer, so it is with the text; as a social phenomenon, as a product of the imagination composed of signifiers, the text has no *raison d'être* without a readership; it explodes into life thanks to the critical reception given to it, and it may die due to cold indifference on the part of the reading audience; clearly, it engages the writer/producer and the reader/purchaser/consumer in a constant "dialogue" by establishing a connecting bridge between them. And it is this rather sophisticated inter-relation of writers, readers and texts that is termed "The Semiotic Triangle".

In order to make all of us part of the semiotic triangle, here is one of my poems published in 1979 and which is an offering to you all. I wear the mask and you are critics of the masked performance.

MILLIONAIRING CAMPAIGN

here they come again
the predatory gods
mushrooming more than in the dew-drenched dawn
(we thought the baptism had tamed them)
(we thought the hurricanes were all over)

here they come again
mercurial totems
belching and bullying us
with their calabash - tummies
loaded with wads of siphoned
raina bills
(they came first in the last grim hurdles
they toiled for the spoils we're told)

here they come again
sonorous masqueraders
sniffing the glimmering fertile dawn
barking blunt clichés and hoarse incantations
strutting to redeem the
13 uniformed years!

jaundiced brains effervesce
buzzing with millionairing gimmicks
as we listen
apprehensive of apocalyptic rains

but their hearts' impulse
let no one forget:
"after the roar
yolk for the worms
and shells for the people
after the leap
fillet for state banquets
and offals for the *talakawa*
as it was in the beginning
so shall it be
world without end..."

to this ritual pulse
dance their tummies
let no one forget.

The Writer at the Moment of Creation

If it is true that we are living in a logocentric world shrouded in enigma, if it is true that literature, as a parable of the issues of life, as a crystalization of man's conflicts with the cosmos, embodies the world, it is equally true that, by and large, imaginative writing, as an act of worship, offers gleams of the mystery of the Eternal.

Decidedly, the desire to create, embedded deep within the imaginative consciousness of man, stems from God. It is well to remember that the Eternal Logos spoke into being the inscrutable universe with its bewildering profusion of kaleidoscopic structures and resonances, with its infinite tones and nuances. In the same way, the writer uses words, that is the seed of creation, to represent rhythms and visions of life, decay and regeneration. This is why the ability to use words creatively is a unique experience which may be seen, at least in some measure, as a holy privilege. In short, as a mode of investigation and identity, as mediation and fusion, the literary enterprise stands as a mimetic dance; it serves as a metaphor of man's restless quest for the divine, as a distant echo, as a microcosmic expression of the supreme act of creation. It seems legitimate to affirm that each time a writer conjures imaginary worlds, he re-enacts, mythically, this dynamic divine gesture.

It also seems safe to conjecture that, to a significant degree, the ability to give birth to imaginary worlds, characters and dramatic situations through the medium of verbal artistry promotes the creative writer, as it were, to the class of the Supreme Creator. For indeed, imitating the ingenuity of his Maker, the writer weaves his intricate world of words and symbols for his pleasure; and thanks to his art which metamorphoses experiences into the permanent, he eternalizes himself by transcending the frost of time. Furthermore, the depth of his seminal mind is difficult to fathom, except by intuition or divination. Operating like his Creator, he may call those things which are not as though they were, and he can indeed imitate the primal work of creation by commanding: "*fiat lux!*", and the light leaps forth, blazing through the universe of the text.

None the less, unlike the Supreme Creator, the writer is not one with the word. As such, he may have to undertake a long and tortuous pilgrimage by learning to retrace his steps from Babel to Eden, in an attempt to retrieve the primordial source, to arouse in him an almost sensual savour for words, and to explore the aesthetic delight procured by the resources of language. After all, what is literature but a celebration of language and of the imagination, a memorable blossom, an exhilarating adventure into the universe of words and emotions.

Painfully aware of life's agonies, the writer, as guardian of our dreams, is also haunted by the desolating transience of life. And who more than the poet knows that verbal *sortilège* or magic revitalizes and offers a certain kind of deliverance? Yes, the poet knows, he knows that words are invested with mystical or rather spiritual power, that as a representative mythic impulse, as an affirmation of essence, as a quest and a recuperation of nostalgic innocence, the process of writing not only fertilizes the exploratory imagination, but also has a purifying effect on the psyche.

True, in large extent, reality provides the basic material for a good deal of the poet's imagination; nevertheless, he has to transcend that surface reality and explore the essence of things, i.e. plumb the depths of intricate inner structures lurking behind appearances. Ask Romantic, Symbolist and Surrealist poets, ask verbal ritualists like Baudelaire, Aimé Césaire, Mallarmé, Okigbo, Rimbaud, Soyinka or Valéry, and they will tell you that the creative power of the holistic imagination which enables the poet to discover the transcendental and the immanent in the material, to travel untrammelled above the breathtaking speed of light across the vastness of the void, to explore the splendours of pastures and unblemished spheres quite distant from the compass of this stale, dismal world, and even far beyond infinity, has the virtues of regenerative fires providing the dynamic for transforming diversity into system, and chaos into grace.

For at the priceless moment of alchemy when words fuse together to form new clusters and acquire fresh meanings, that is when pain is transformed into pure gold as a result of the intense glow of the oracular imagination, poetic language stretches words beyond limits to translate the subtleties of life; at that wholesome moment, the intuitive writer, just like the masquerader, becomes part man and part a god; in other words, with his imaginative genius at work, he is himself plus an indefinable operating factor which we may term Alpha. At that level of abstraction and integration, after anything from the mundane to the sublime has arrested the poet's fascinated attention and stimulated the working of his imagination, ignited, propelled by ineffable vibrations and suffused with the inner radiance of genius, his being flows instinctively along the lonely path of subterranean currents to envision a wealth of hidden echoes, analogies and associations, to contemplate dazzling vistas and landscapes of complex worlds quite remote from our immediate reach and grasp, well beyond rational understanding.

Immersed in that realm of synthesis and harmony, in that visionary region of fluid associations, of elusive impressions and timelessness where the intangible becomes substance and reason seems temporarily suspended, in his symbolic quest for the Ideal, for the Absolute, the

poet, now a seer, a visionary, and more, a god by metamorphosis, sees the invisible in his imagination, hears supernatural words as he fellowships with the complexities and mysteries of life, even with the subconscious and lush, unexplored life of plants and rocks, as well as the unutterable language of seamless seas and galaxies.

Listen to William Wordsworth:

"(...) - that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things".

("Tintern Abbey")

We can see: miraculously, the poet attains monolithic oneness with the universe and with Essence. And from this flow into subterranean effulgence spring freshness, new utterances, novelty, vitality, spontaneitywhich are prime qualities of a good work. Thanks to these sensitive explorations, to these new modes of perception and illuminating flashes of insight gleaned at the confluence of reason and silence and woven into the fabric of the poetic text, our vision becomes enlarged, enriched, rejuvenated, for we rediscover man and the world around us.

That it is not mere facts but emotion which energizes the writer and triggers creative outburst becomes an incontrovertible fact. Yes, in this myth-making enterprise, the author of emotional depth knows, deep down, that as a response to an inner force, poetry explores the uncharted labyrinths of language and thought and plunges us into the unusual, into intimate structures of feeling. In consequence, literature becomes revelation, deliverance, reconciliation, transformation.

This leap into imponderable vistas further explains why there is more in a work of genius than the author's original conception or declared intention. As a corollary to this, and in view of the role of the unconscious or of the unpredictable in literary creation, or with the added dimension that the writer may be possessed by the urgency of his imaginary world, it becomes virtually impossible for him to explain the full richness of his text after the hallowed, solemn glow of efflorescence has dissolved. In any event, those invaluable but fugitive moments of ecstasy are not always easy to recreate, alas. Given the

intuitive, the spontaneous and somewhat irrational aspects of the absorbing creative process, it may also be difficult for any author to predict the exact form the finished product may take. Indeed, during intense moments of creation, some characters may literally take the pen from the writer so as to depict their own situations. Invariably, the text takes shape and flows following the impulses as well as the caprices and vagaries of the poetic imagination.

Writers and the World of Their Texts

The pretensions of French Classical poets or of Flaubert and his disciples notwithstanding, the writer is manifest in his text, however impersonal, masked, diffuse or neutral his presence might seem. There is an intimate relationship between him and his work; he cannot divorce himself from his creation. In the sense that he creates an imaginary universe of his own, no doubt patterned after his fancies, after his ideological leaning or after his conception of how life is or should be. He feels free to do in that literary world what he cannot do in real life, a world in which he can take out his frustrations on his characters or sublimate his unresolved desires and emotions.

Which is to say that, to a large extent, literature can serve as propaganda, because political, ideologically motivated, potentially subversive, ontological and typified by a sense of idealism. There is little doubt that literature does not operate in a vacuum; it is therefore not peripheral nor tangential to culture; as a unifying cultural factor, it is at the very heart of culture, and plays a vital role in the dissemination of ideas and underlines our common humanity. A mode of imaginative discourse, literature is a rich repository of a people's cultural, political, social and intellectual climate. All in all, the literature of a people is a duplicate of their society. A valuable quarry which is, regrettably, *terra incognita* for many people.

In the main, our writers who are informed by an acute consciousness of the dialectics of history conceive literature as a depiction of the truth of life, as a preserver of history, as a potentially subversive force, as a "miraculous weapon" of self-affirmation. For them the text is no longer ornamental, it is no longer a mere arena of dazzling permutation of words. But rather, because born of history, it confronts history and serves as a battlefield for the explosion of accumulated tensions, as a vehicle for the resolution of the burden of history. Consequently, obsessions with socio-political preoccupations, a pervading polemical tone and a combative spirit are central to contemporary black writing, giving it a flavour that is so distinctive since its emergence. From its budding seasons to its explosion into full blossom, our literature has

been a long, desolate "walk in the night". That is, an exploration into landscapes of plunder, pain, violence and confiscated history. Hear the refreshing, oracular voice of Maya Angelou as she hammers out her stubborn hope with clenched teeth:

"Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and hope of the slave.
I Rise
I Rise
I Rise."

(Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, New York,
Random House, 1978, pp. 41-42)

As agents of change, as interpreters, as the conscience and memory of the community of suffering, our writers who were wholly in tune with the burden of the people played an emphatically subversive role during the colonial era with its inherent fear inoculation and numbing onslaught. A role comparable to that which contributed decisively to the French Revolution. If they addressed a wide range of compelling realities, it was of course in a desperate effort to undermine, or to break out from, the apparently impregnable colonial machinery. Their works stood as symptoms of a crisis of identity, and as searchlights on the depredations of history. Since there can be no authentic rebirth without a sense of history, their voices took on a caustic tone as they redressed racial intolerance and exploded the distorted European perception of Africans, castigating also the inhibiting and debilitating impact of prolonged foreign imposition on our bruised psyche. The content of their literary works was therefore tacitly predetermined by the primacy of political exigencies. Thus, the individual writer's poetics was subsumed within the enforced, prevailing African aesthetic

scheme.

As a result, any imaginative writing divorced from the parameters of the avowed literary project, or conceived outside the mainstream of literature as propaganda was taxed with frivolity and political irrelevance. As encapsulated in Mongo Beti's incisive and provocative investigation into *L'Enfant noir*. Armed with the strength of his knowledge as a luminary, Beti was unequivocal; it appears he did not forgive Camara Laye whom he took to task for demonstrably detaching himself from the crucial issues of the time, issues which were urging themselves on African writers; that is, the political imperative of the problematic of colonial intrusion with its resultant pain of life. For the outraged and politically conscious Beti, it was categorically clear; and he insisted, in keeping with his cherished ideals, that to be representative the writer must be motivated by a vivid sense of the moral weight of his obligation toward his society. In other words, there must be a significant relationship between the writer, his text and political reality. Since it was at variance with the practical preoccupations of the day, since it failed to reveal an awareness of our bewilderment and to give voice to dominant concerns with the unwholesome atmosphere of colonial life, Camara Laye's first novel, Beti argues passionately, ran counter to the objectives of his literary contemporaries whose works were governed by political underpinnings. It is equally significant that, presumably following Beti's trenchant outburst, Camara Laye's later novels do not stand remote from actuality. Thus, unable to escape from the tyranny of our highly prized "commitment", the author of *Le Regard du Roi* and *Dramouss* promptly espoused the main spring of the African novel.

That an awful sense of grief lingers in the heart of every accomplished literary artist intimately associated with the discordant, tragic edge of human destiny is beyond dispute. And, inevitably, African writers deeply concerned with the intractable problems of their societies, have an agonized consciousness of our bruising humiliation. For is it not one of the supreme, unmitigated paradoxes of history that our vast continent, with its prodigious promise and resources, should be "turning and turning" in ever-widening circles until "things fall apart"? The whole continent is "no longer at ease", because in a perpetual state of spiritual coma, because "the centre cannot hold" and "mere anarchy is loosed upon" the dark world.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's fiction, charged with undertones of protest and significantly titled *L'Aventure ambiguë*, is a vivid portrayal of this unrelieved agony. A deepening sense of angst pervades this book in which a character's brutal contact with an alien Europe turns out to be a frightening crisis of experience and estrangement, culminating in the

fragmentation of the self. However, at the subliminal level of the text, the wrenching experiences of this character, who becomes mentally deranged, crystallize the anguished cry of Africa. Symbol of alienation and despair, the madman's tragedy most obviously epitomizes the continent's spiritual disintegration and dereliction. True, Kane's criticism seems low-keyed, but he writes engagingly, convincingly and with poise. The sobriety and polished and measured tone of his narrative heighten the poignancy of the tragic essence. A penetrating and solemn question asked by another character comes to us with new force and lingers in the reader's mind after closing this book richly imbued with a sense of our past and of our destiny: "what we learn, is it worth what we lose?" Chinua Achebe, our distinguished writer, who is remembered for domesticating the novel on the African soil, and for which we owe him an incalculable debt, seems to ask the same searching questions in *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer At Ease*, *Arrow of God* and even in *A Man of the People*, novels which bring to life our past experiences.

Oyono's works, nurtured by our fairly recent colonial past, also bear witness to the same traumas as they offer a "striptease" of the white master. The author of *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* and *Une vie de boy*, probably for political reasons, is considerably subtle and oblique in his indictment of the colonial framework, whereas the diatribes of Beti his fellow Cameroonian and those of Sembène Ousmane seem uncompromising and therefore more overt and more scathing. Oyono adopts masked speech, he deploys ironic devices designed to conceal his intentions and to subtly demystify and subvert the aberrations of colonialism. With his unsurpassed relish for humour, and in the mode of satire, the author of *Le vieux nègre...* touches the profound as the chief character's devastating moments of crisis become a dramatic re-enactment of our collective nightmare. Circumcised with haunting pain, Meka is "all of us", for he reminds us too strongly of our unspeakable desperation; his naïveté and protracted anguish are the emblem of our vulnerability and of our humiliatingly recurrent sense of desolation. Like the African mask, the protagonist stands out at once in his uniqueness as an individual and at the same time as a representative or an embodiment of the communal psyche.

It can be seen from the world of the texts analysed briefly that literature provides rich opportunities and subterfuges for writers to debunk any obnoxious system. It stands to reason therefore that since the colonial system is a negation which may not be challenged openly, the colonized writer brings into play literary masks such as irony, satire, humour and other modes of discourse in order to negate, covertly, the first untenable negation. Masquerading as fiction, the text therefore

takes on not only a psycho-therapeutic or cathartic value, but more importantly a subversive force.

Yes, by virtue of the fact that literature sprouts from life's experiences, which serve as raw materials, it mirrors the structures of changing consciousness and hence serves as a socio-political barometer. Little wonder then that after 1960 the dominant mood and tone and emphasis of our literature shift from colonial indictment to disillusionment. If the image of the hydra-headed colonial monster haunts the first phase of contemporary African writing, post-independence texts are keyed to the all-pervading note of disenchantment. Disenchantment which shows in the very title of Armah's first work of fiction, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a novel which emblemizes the moral decay of our continent adrift in the sea. Common motifs run through the works of a whole array of novelists ranging from Achebe, Beti, Camara Laye, Dongala, Fantouré, Yodi Karone, Kourouma, Henri Lopès, Ibrahima Ly to Guy Menga, Monémbo, Ngugi, Sembène, Signaté, Soyinka and Sony Labou Tansi..., among others.

Most significantly, virtually all these authors are articulating a whole range of troubling concerns with the same desperation. That is, independence has become a fraud, a betrayal, an unfulfilled promise. In that it has failed to heal the hurt of history, it has subverted and left in abeyance all hopes of exorcising our bereft continent, by heralding an age of tyranny and unreason, an age teeming with swarms of plagues. As identified in the novels, the post-independence scene simmers with a recrudescence of internalized violence and is besieged with crippling contradictions: splintered hopes, mutilated dreams and smothered harvests, the spectre of economic disarray, organized plundering of public coffers, political opportunism, hideous self-deceiving demagogues and impostors masquerading as saviours, the malediction of perennial *coups d'état* with their sinister and far-reaching consequences, the perpetuation of a legacy of triumphant mediocrity, coupled with the unresolved problem of endemic, stubborn illiteracy, monumental irrationality, a social fabric riddled with insidious moral anarchy, unbridled greed and rank corruption, the jarring co-existence of unattenuated squalor, screaming poverty and a grotesque display of sumptuous, ill-gotten wealth, a "my mercedes is bigger than yours" mentality... The plagues are legion. A staggering array. An unending litany of nightmares inimical to the flowering of creative genius!

The Interpreters and Season of Anomy, Le Mandat and Xala, A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah, Dramouss, Les Soleils des indépendances, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Fragments and Why Are We So Blest?, Le Cercle des Tropiques and Le Récit du

cirque, Un Fusil dans la main, un poème dans la poche, Perpétue... and *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle, Petals of Blood, Kotawali, Une Aube si fragile, Le Bal des caïmans, Les crapauds-brousse, La Vie et demie, L'Etat honteux* and *L'Anté-peuple, Le Pleurer-Rire, Toiles d'araignées*,... and a flood of other texts which share the same streak, are tragic commentaries on our general quagmire. These metaphors of the harshness of our collective malaise relentlessly turn upon the same pivotal tone of oppression. Thus, from colonial times through the formative years of nationhood to modern times, African writers have sought to arouse a sense of awareness by conveying their abiding concerns. The crucial question that emerges from these images of experience delineated in the body of our literature is: which way out, Africa?

Few writers propound remedies to the burden of our distress by creating positive heroes. And it is noteworthy that before Sembène Ousmane appeared on the literary scene, our literature suffered a marked dearth of positive heroes. As a result, no serious and open confrontation between the oppressed and their oppressors. In *O pays, mon beau peuple!*, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, *L'Harmattan* and *Xala*, Sembène Ousmane establishes a new trend: an index to inevitable change, an apostle of revolutionary optimism and rejuvenation, he confronts history; he insightfully reconstructs social reality by giving it a wholesome and dynamic content, by creating redemptive heroic protagonists infused with symbolic essence, characters who transcend disconcerting realities to offer innovations and break anaesthetic fetters, thus becoming incarnations of revolutionary ideals.

Indeed, an aspect of the joy or pleasure of a writer, who is not at ease in this tired world; consists precisely in the ability to construct a world of fantasy, a world of his dreams in which, by the alchemical processes of the imagination, he can turn apparent impossibilities to possibilities within the framework of the text. For this reason, the relationship of the writer to his text assumes an intimate posture. Is it not significant that the epic journey to the moon was anticipated in Jules Verne's world of fantasy well over half a century before it was translated into reality?

Most African writers who are dissatisfied with the political climate of their respective countries adopt an obstinately pessimistic tone. However, Sembène stands out in stark contrast; for he seasons his texts with a stubbornly optimistic flavour; from colonial times, revolutionary optimism has been the prism/filter of his literary vision. Considering the fact that hope seems forbidden in Africa, he blends the language of facts with that of myth and fiction in order to project an imaginary world glistening with promise. *O pays*, ..., which owes much

to Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, offers a gripping picture of a text serving as sublimation, as release, as an outlet for the writer's traumas. This anguished text is one of the most disturbing of African novels, one of the most tender too. At a time when white terror depersonalizes the individual, mocks and frustrates innovative efforts and erodes the affirmative will of the people, Oumar Faye - an archetypal image of hope, a crusader for agrarian ideals, an advocate for inevitable progress -, reconciles his contradictions; drawing strength from his innate compassion for the community, he most daringly breaks accepted colonial taboos and mystifications; he has the temerity to mobilize his resources and rechannel the potential of the masses in order to challenge colonial repression as he strives to enhance the collective cause by inspiring economic rehabilitation. A quest fraught with hazards. Paradoxically, the ineluctable assassination of this positive hero before the full blossom of his ideals awakens the people's growing consciousness. Undoubtedly, in so far as he attempts to unburden the people of their feeling of inadequacy and inertia, Oumar Faye articulates his maker's preoccupations, experiences and cherished dreams. Author and character partake of each other. Apotheosized, the protagonist attains prophetic stature as an emblem of our collective consciousness.

Sembène designedly engages history; he creates characters and situations to enforce the virtues of socialist realism, and his resolutely Marxist ideology sharpens his revolutionary optimism as evidenced in his works. By reason of his customary forward-looking ideological focus and largeness of thought, on account of the inescapable force of his progressive perspectives, the richness of his evocations, and most notably for opening an era of redemptive promise, since he sees literature as healer, Sembène has established himself as one of the most far-ranging of African writers. He is distinctly the most consistent of our revolutionary novelists.

The same passion which fuels the sacred fire in *O pays*,... gives vehemence to *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* which represents another radical departure from compromise. In this masterpiece bristling with invectives and interspersed with polemics, Sembène seeks to inaugurate the rehabilitation of the downtrodden; he also celebrates the emancipation of women. For the first time in the African novel, resolute female characters are at the centre of momentous events, playing memorable and indispensable roles, alongside their male counterparts, in shaping the future. Traditionally, women are accorded passive roles, but with their unprecedented participation in the collective struggle, which is the turning point of their lives, Sembène

exploits untapped resources; as they emerge from their torpor and dulled senses, he seeks to shatter paralysing conventional modes and repudiate outworn but deep-seated, atavistic attitudes. Thus opening up blocked horizons and exciting possibilities.

Since the ordeal of the marginalized labouring class had been seared into his mind as a youth, Sembène, perhaps more than any other African imaginative writer, enters so directly into the burning issues of class struggle. His urgent advocacy for social transformation is strongly reminiscent of the central concerns of Charles Dickens. Creating a sense of hope for the people is of crucial significance to Sembène's thought, so crucial in fact that he transforms failure into success, thus displaying the resourcefulness of the writer.

Yes, *Les Bouts* ... offers a supreme example of a positive imaginative reconstruction of lived experiences. In the sense that the strike action embarked upon by the railway workers, with its rich potential for confrontation, failed in reality. By transforming the currents of history, i.e. by turning round situations which seem hopeless, the author invests this exemplary novel with an edifying ideological vision. He projects a revolutionary vision not only of women, or of working-class militancy, but of Africa at large.

The prophetic character of this perception is inescapable. For it is not fortuitous that the success of the strikers anticipates simultaneously the ultimate victory of freedom fighters as well as the future dynamic, heroic posture of women in the dialectics of nation-building. Thus, Sembène engenders socio-political phenomena in his works before they manifest in the natural realm. (Indeed, like biblical prophecy, a literary work may apply to contemporary situations in its immediate perspectives, but it may also have far-reaching ranges beyond the immediate.)

One wonders if Fantouré (*Le Cercle des Tropiques*, 1972), Dongala (*Un Fusil*...., 1973), Guy Menga (*Kotawali*, 1977), Ngugi (*Petals of Blood*, 1979) and Beti (*La Ruine*...., 1979), whose fireworks were published some twelve to nineteen years after *Les Bouts*...., would have extolled the prowess of female characters of legendary proportions, i.e. women awake to revolutionary ideals, had Sembène not so powerfully set the stage or paved the way. The celebrated Senegalese writer and film-maker seems to have given them their cue, for his influence is pervasive; unequivocally, the author of *Les Bouts*... is a forerunner, a pioneer in the exaltation of female heroism in African fiction.

Driven by a strong sense of political exigencies, our passionate novelists precipitate an avalanche of violence in their literary worlds with the aim of resolving disturbing socio-political issues. However, in the works of Dongala, Fantouré, Menga and Signaté, the surge of

vibrant hope is overwhelmed, punctured and submerged by pessimism, whereas revolutionary optimism permeates those of Sembène, as well as the Rubenist novels of Beti and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*.

As already acknowledged, independence has been a deception of our great expectations, since unabashed despotic leaders dominate the political and economic scene, while the helpless masses patiently look on. The novel offers a spectrum of responses to this state of quandary. Since our writers too are unable to physically unseat the notoriously corrupt ruling class/caste, some of them in desperation, notably Achebe, Beti, Fantouré, Sembène, Signaté... organize their *coups d'état* with the pen. Thus, they take part in the revolutionary struggle by proxy. That is, through the mediation of their positive heroes. In other words, as acts of poetic justice, their literary texts constitute positive emotional and imaginative responses to our chronic dilemma.

Xala, a sensitive interpretation of our collective angst, reverberates with a devastatingly sardonic force. The novel offers a provocative and dramatic solution to the phenomenon of unrestrained greed and institutionalized corruption epidemic sweeping across the continent. The anti-hero, El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, a grasping, unscrupulous, opulent businessman, and Nanga in Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Koomson in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are siblings of the chaos of history, masterpieces of the Age of Greed and Embarrassment. They typify a breed of predatory zombies blithely draining the common people.

On the eve of taking a third wife, a nineteen-year-old girl, the central character in *Xala* discovers to his utter dismay that he is impotent. In the course of his agonizing search for healing, he learns that an indigent relation whom he had imprisoned unjustly after defrauding him by expropriating the family land, and who is now forced to earn a living as a beggar, has cast a spell on him, to the effect that he is struck with impotence. Like a virus, the impotence also contaminates his business which irredeemably takes a plunge to disaster.

In fascinated revulsion, we watch as the characters act out their sudden confrontations before our eyes, and as the disconcerted, but hitherto unchallenged, arrogant and irascible El Hadji abandons himself, in the last resort, to a degrading rite of purification: in a weird, gruesome, allegorical scene, the scum of the earth, i.e. a horde of vengeful human outcasts living on the edge of life, and acting as catalysts to the inexorable dénouement, cover him with saliva, after he has yielded to their uncompromising terms by stripping himself naked. That is, symbolically too, of all his excesses, of all his masks. Curiously, he is not outraged, his unctuous sense of affluence

evaporates. In a climactic, dreadful moment, the novel attains its full effect as the oppressed miraculously take on the role of our collective voice, and of Nemesis, to overwhelm the oppressor. Thanks to this inversion of roles, the dispossessed beggar, now a *deus ex machina*, adds a decisive physical triumph to psychological victory. Once again, the unenvisioned, the unlikely, the undreamed-of becomes possible. Thus, *Xala* sounds a note of hope amid pervasive despair. We can safely affirm that literature defines the relation of man to his world and proffers antidotes to some of our problems.

It may be well to say that on the surface, that is on the syntagmatic or horizontal plane, the story is deceptively simple and appears to exemplify the playfulness of the writer. However, as an hermeneutic code, the text displays a plurality of interlocked meanings at the paradigmatic or vertical level of discourse. As we probe beneath the seeming transparency of the narrative, we discover the symbolic richness which flows like an undercurrent, constituting the very heart of the novel.

Yes, *Xala* is epigrammatic; as a semiotic scene it is loaded with literal and metaphorical meanings. A close reading unfolds that the central figure's discomfiture symbolizes that of remorseless, emasculated African leaders unable to control the economy of their impotent continent and to fulfil the expectations of the governed. He is also the very impotent personification of the *nouveaux riches* who are anaesthetized to the welfare of the masses. The inference is that El Hadji's reversal of fortune, his visceral, humbling experiences and retribution may be said to represent a most solemn warning to the oppressors of the inarticulate poor; implicit here is that the same oracle lies in wait for them all. And herein lies the fundamental ring of this haunting political allegory: a concerted mobilization of the people's consciousness can turn the tables, leading to the eventual overthrow of ruthless despots steeped in corruption. (*Un Fusil...* and *Kotawali* to some extent, convey the same hard moral lesson.) The text becomes fulfilment by offering solutions to nagging problems, instead of merely mirroring reality. Indeed, the word "xala", meaning impotence in Wolof, is brought into full being as it is invested with its full weight and wealth of connotations.

The intelligent reader has to be aware of these various layers at which the text appears to be operating. But, of course, to the cursory reader, these covert interpretations may seem to do violence to the apparent "innocence" of the text.

This sardonic exposure, together with the ironic suggestions, the compelling figurative mode and the symbolic reversal of roles presaging the imminent victory of the masses of the people, echoes through *La*

Ruine... which is another searching reappraisal of our post-independence syndromes. Beti, like Sembène, does not exhibit the unrelieved sense of pessimism displayed by most African writers. Incidentally, like El Hadji in *Xala* the oppressive ruling chief in Beti's *La Ruine...* groans secretly under the weight of his impotence. This recurrent theme is rich with symbolism in both novels.

But how strange that there are no revolutionary characters in Beti's early fiction! It is with the works of maturity of his second literary period, i.e. with the Rubenist novels which have political tyranny as the butt of the author's invective, that we have another instance of literature at the service of revolution. In his energetic narratives which confirm his stature as a revolutionary writer, Beti reveals himself as a passionate voice, as an apostle of violence, as an anarchist-creator offering drastic, if rather tragic solutions to the perpetuation of tyrannical rule in Africa. Hence the mediating function of his works, i.e. transforming apparent impossibilities into possibilities.

Beti, who has been living in self-imposed exile in France for more than three decades, finds refuge from his disenchantment with the political regime in the Cameroons only in his imaginary world. And he seems to project himself, his attitudes, expectations and consciousness of struggle more onto his characters as revolutionary optimism confers a radical dimension to his literary imagination.

In *Remember Ruben*, a novel which has the resonances and temper of *L'Harmattan* and *Le Cercle ...*, Beti who has persistently refused to tone down his vitriolic stance, mythicizes actual facts as he draws from the past; he throws into bold relief tempestuous positive heroes who display the dynamics of revolutionary action by storming reactionary political strongholds. Abena, a percipient revolutionary seething with the violence of a tropical wildfire or the irruption of an explosive thunderstorm, is perhaps what Beti secretly yearns to be.

Perpétue..., whose vital impetus emanates from the same source as *Remember Ruben*, is a corrosive narrative, a novel with a rather complex and startling personality. Flooded with violence, graphically suggestive of the grim, repressive climate that permeates post-independence Africa, the fiction unfolds in vivid tragic symbol the visionary transformation of our castrated continent. Beti embodies this central theme in the protagonist: Essola's is the loneliness of a voice set against a landscape of turmoil, grief and plunder. An embittered, enigmatic Rubenist consumed by a burning passion for vengeance, at radical odds with the reified atmosphere of his society and with the entrenched coercive forces, he unflinchingly commits fratricide. A dreadful mythic gesture symbolizing his ultimate desire to destroy the oppressive political structure.

The initial momentum generated in *Remember Ruben* also flows into *La Ruine...* This novel not only shares the polemic impulse, the exuberance and robust temperament which inform the first Rubenist novel, but also bears the stamp of Beti's characteristic stinging force. This allusive fiction, alive with humour and sequel to *Remember Ruben*, is rich in allegorical investment; it exemplifies Beti's ebullient, even iconoclastic spirit at its best. Surely taking a hint from Sembène Ousmane, Beti is bold in significantly embodying his indomitable will in Jo le Jongleur, and in female characters who, akin to their literary sisters in *Les Bouts de bois...*, compel our attention; in that they constitute the irresistible propelling force in the revolutionary assault that culminates in unmasking and unseating the counter-revolutionaries, i.e. the inane but recalcitrant ruling chief and his equally impotent and vindictive son. Again, the political reference is implicit here.

Beti's novel reinforces the idea suggested in *Xala* that the text has the potential to transcend impossibilities, to subvert the *status quo* and to open the door to fresh horizons. In both works, the unthinkable, the unanticipated becomes a blinding reality as the victims, altogether justified, act out our wishes and triumph over their erstwhile victimizers. Which is why, invested with prophetic insight, both narratives stand as an awful but salutary and graphic reminder of the reward of despotic power. Beti's political message, it can be seen, lurks beneath the veiled façade of his fiction which is suggestive of his desire to eliminate the usurpers of the Revolution. With their militant political posture, his three symbolic rebels, creations of his mythopoeic imagination - Abena, Essola and Jo le Jongleur - act as Beti's surrogates.

Decidedly, *Remember Ruben*, *Perpétue...* and *La Ruine...* are cathartic journeys through Beti's fabulous literary imagination. Born of intense passion, revolutionary projection gives these provocative investigations their incendiary tone. By creating these literary myths, by duplicating himself in his positive heroes, Beti the polemist seeks to represent his fantasies of the future.

As we have seen, as an expression of the matrix of desire, imaginative writing enables man to enrich the frontiers of knowledge by inventing new realities, new landscapes of feeling, new ranges of experience. All in all, writing is also a mechanism which enables us ostensibly to transcend realities, however intractable, by creating fantasies in which the transformation of prohibitions can be legitimized or authorized.

However, a double polarization is easily discernible in the body of our literature: pessimism versus optimism. First, the importunate voices of the apocalypse. From the privileged world of fantasy created by

Achebe, Dongala, Fantouré, Menga, Monénembo, Signaté, Soyinka and others, the reader is plunged into the opacity or the hard-core of reality which prevents fruition of hope, a reality in which the promised harvest disintegrates, giving way to the tyranny of chronic despair. A situation patently characteristic of contemporary Africa. Thus, the structure of fantasy is perpetually fissured, its investments overshadowed, annulled, undermined. From this constant dialectical movement we can infer that, in the last resort, literary texts are irreducibly thresholds.

On the other hand, the voice of optimism is represented most forcefully by Beti, Ngugi and Sembène whose mythic worlds go beyond the limits of mere social protest to serve as contrapuntal music to those works without hope of redemption. They seem to reject the idea of an unchanging society; as a result, they reconstruct an alternative world in which they articulate new realities. These three harbingers of hope foreshadow the future as they propound redemption through positive revolutionary action. Their optimistic epics which share the same literary kinship are epiphanies, rutilant outbursts, unparalleled triumphant moments, wellsprings of promise and exciting possibilities. As imaginative provocations, as allegorized political commentaries, *Les Bouts de bois...*, *Xala*, *Remember Ruben*, *La Ruine...* and *Petals of Blood* are prophetic of proletarian power; they come to us as a relief in a world of hopelessness and pain. Thus, the African novel stands out not only as an embodiment of our shattered illusions, but supremely of our undaunted affirmative will.

The Role of The Reader

The sensitive reader or critic reacts to the verbal game of stimulus - response by entering into the intimacy of the text, by flowing into the richness of the writer's emotions, by fusing with him, by being responsive to his intuitive genius, and by identifying with the characters' imaginative experiences, which, in any case, are our potential experiences. Thus, the reader acts in complicity with the writer, since he tacitly assents that the world of fiction can be taken seriously, perhaps in the same way as scientists believe in the mathematical fiction "infinity plus one", or again just as a vast majority of people believe in such imaginary ideas as straight lines or fallacies like "the sun rises in the East and sets in the West". Indeed, we are living in a world of illusions, and fiction is at times accepted universally as truth.

However, this sympathetic attitude or naive belief is crucial to a richer understanding of the mechanism of the artistic mind, or the organizing spirit which informs the text. Because if the reader is not

involved in the text, his analytical gaze will tend to be formal, dry and lifeless.

Some texts exhibit a relatively high level of polysemic distribution which confers on them a considerable degree of opacity. Consequently, they solicit a multiplicity of responses from readers. The African proverb, "If you want to watch a mask dancing, you must not stand in one place", adds force to this fact. The underlying principle here, which also governs the aesthetics of cubism and which is even reminiscent of discoveries in quantum physics, is that reality is dynamic, complex, multifaceted, elusive and therefore relative. It is in a constant state of flux, in a perpetual process of deconstruction and transformation. There is no irreducible or permanent reality, except the spiritual. This idea has been exploited by André Gide, the epigones of the French *Nouveau Roman*, and notably by Armah in *Why Are We So Blest?*

The critic cannot fail to perceive that since the author makes a choice of materials, which in itself is significant, or even when, through the apparently decentred structure of his work, he renders aesthetically his fragmented visions of the chaos of reality (as evidenced in the first part of Soyinka's *The Interpreters*), he still organizes the chaos and gives it a form, which underscores the fact that as a construct, the reality thus portrayed is subjective.

Furthermore, the critic bears in mind that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, and since there is no ontological relationship between the signifier and the signified, the signified has no intrinsic value but a relative one. It follows that since the literary text is composed of signs, it has no absolute meanings, it only elicits fragmented insights from readers. In fact, deconstructionist poetics has exploded the myth of an accurate reader, or of Riffaterre's concept of "*archi-lecteur*".

In view of the relativity of reality and of pervasive subjectivity, the resourceful critic can, in his practice, draw from a wide spectrum of critical projects ranging from Marxism and Psycho-analysis to Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction. If he is innovative and shows a sense of new direction, he may evolve a cohesive, integrated approach, or a "melting-pot" strategy which will deepen his investigation by enabling him to explore the linguistic wealth or multivalence of the text, as well as the textual silences and the hidden texts within the work under study. Thus offering refreshingly challenging modes of textual readings.

Conclusion

The writer wears the mask as the principal actor in the semiotic

triangle. In practice, the text is not an immediate transparency, but a reverberation, or better, an interplay of signs and signifiers; it is a seminal flow, a masked dance, a known-unknown, in the sense that the shades of meanings invested in it are not static nor permanent; it undergoes a kind of systematic transformation as its content, coloured by various levels of reading, and with all its shibboleth, unfolds and deepens progressively. Therefore its relationships with readers are dynamic. The implication is that stagnation spells death for the text, because as soon as all its possible meanings are exhausted, its flavour wears off. Thus, the text may exhibit different "properties", depending on the perspectives of the readers; like the phenomenon of light, it may seem to travel in straight lines or in waves and to be composed of a stream of particles; again, like water, it may appear in its solid, liquid or gaseous state, also depending on the level of the reader. And just as there is only one-tenth of the mass of an iceberg visible above the sea, so is there more in a close-grained, multi-layered text than meets the untrained eye. And since it is woven in words, the text is *ipso facto* enigmatic to the non-initiate.

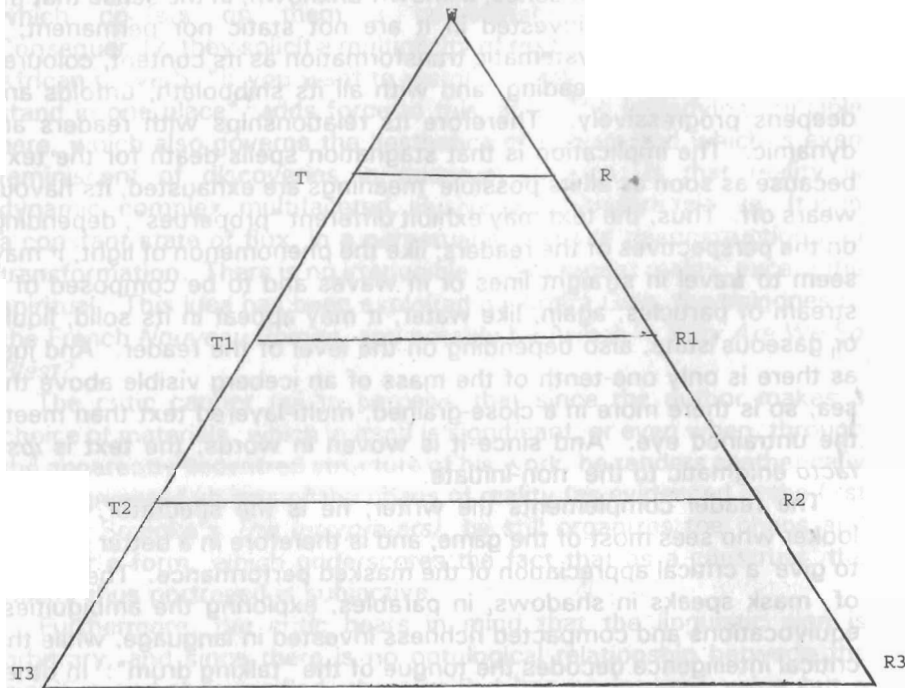
The reader complements the writer; he is the spectator, the on-looker who sees most of the game, and is therefore in a better position to give a critical appreciation of the masked performance. The wearer of mask speaks in shadows, in parables, exploring the ambiguities, equivocations and compacted richness invested in language, while the critical intelligence decodes the tongue of the "talking drum". In other words, the reader deconstructs the intricate web spun by the writer; because he cannot see behind the scenes, he strips the fabric of its different strands in order to understand the author's design. Therefore, his intelligence, imaginative insight, artistic sensitivity, emotion, wealth of experience, intuitive knowledge, level of maturity and understanding are factors which predetermine and enhance the richness of his relationship with the text. Since a critical perception can never be absolute, no single reading, however rich, can exhaust the total potentiality of a given text. Inevitably, each reader adds his discoveries to those of his contemporaries and predecessors, and, consequently, with time the text gains in depth and in density, thanks to the polysemous readings.

This delicate relationship between writers, readers and texts can be represented diagrammatically (see schema on p. 22).

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THE SEMIOTIC TRIANGLE



The semiotic Triangle

W = Writer

R, R1, R2, R3 = Readers

T, T1, T2, T3 = The Text and its
"transformations"

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