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JOURNEYING THROUGH HELL: WOLE SOYINKA, TRAUMA, AND POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA

ANNE WHITEHEAD

In *The Harmony of Illusions*, Allan Young questioned whether the category of trauma, which first emerged during the nineteenth century, could be referred back through historical time and identified in, for example, Pepys's diary, Shakespeare's plays, or the epic of Gilgamesh as certain literary scholars have claimed. Young concluded that this was not possible, that none of these pre-nineteenth-century texts refer to what we now know as traumatic memory because this form of memory was not available to their writers. For Young, our sense of identity is shaped as much by our conceptions of what memory is as by the memories that we have. Trauma, like other forms of memory, is a historical and cultural product, which is not to deny its reality or the suffering that is associated with it but rather to locate that reality in the individual and collective investments that are made in it and in people's beliefs and convictions. In sum, Young argues, "This disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these effects and resources" (5). The emergence and diagnosis of trauma attracted the attention of clinicians and researchers throughout the western world. Its influence rapidly spread through the Americas, Britain, Australia, Europe, and Israel; and it was used in turn to describe and to shape treatment of responses to extreme events in many different situations. Young reminds us that trauma is not a universal category found in many different places and times but rather a discourse of memory that emerged at a specific time—in the late nineteenth century—and that is embedded in and inseparable from the particular concerns of western culture.

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Building on the work of Young, a group of professional aid workers articulated in *Rethinking the Trauma of War* their growing concerns regarding the uncritical export of trauma discourse to non-western societies. Based on their own experience of helping adults and children to rebuild their lives after the devastation of war, the contributors to this volume underline that because the concept of trauma derives from a particular (western) cultural orientation to suffering, its relevance to non-western communities may be limited; that trauma, in other words, should be regarded not as scientifically neutral but as culturally specific in its concepts and interventions. The volume highlights three particular assumptions that are inherent to and embedded within current trauma discourse. First, this discourse operates on the basis of a strongly individualist approach to human life, with a marked emphasis on the disengaged self and on intrapsychic conflicts. However, this notion of the self may not be valid in many non-western cultures, which are predicated on alternative notions of the self and its relationship to others. Secondly, it is assumed that the forms of mental disorder that are described by western psychiatry map unproblematically onto those found elsewhere. However, in non-western contexts, it is likely that the idioms of distress vary considerably; the emergence of a particular symptom does not necessarily mean that it has the same meaning or significance across different cultures. Finally, the emergence of a professionalized trauma discourse has tended towards the handing over of memory to experts to pronounce on its meaning and significance. The assumption that the West represents the center of expertise, which is exported to non-western war zones, risks ignoring local concepts of suffering, misfortune, and illness and eliding those discourses of loss and bereavement that may fulfill the role for the local community that in western cultures is provided by the trauma discourse. While they do not critique the relevance and efficacy of trauma discourse in the West, the contributors to the volume provide a compelling argument that its dominance in approaching the suffering of non-western societies can silence local perspectives on what is important and blind us to alternative ways of helping.

Although the critique of trauma discourse articulated in *Rethinking the Trauma of War* emerges from those engaged in emergency relief work, the issues that are raised also have significance in a literary context. Postcolonial texts invite readings in terms of trauma because they are concerned with articulating the ongoing after-effects of colonial domination and violence in contemporary society. Postcolonial writers often emphasize that the encounter between western and non-western societies remains a traumatic one, because the processes and systems of empire continue to inform and shape the present. However, the question arises as to whether using the category of trauma to interpret a postcolonial text represents a western-dominated approach that may not necessarily be relevant to, and that may in addition silence aspects of, the text itself. The assumptions of trauma discourse highlighted in the preceding paragraph can be rephrased in the literary context as follows:

first, do postcolonial texts articulate the effects of trauma in terms of the individualist self, or do they emphasize alternative notions of the self and its relation to the wider community? Secondly, does the category of trauma map straightforwardly onto the postcolonial text, or does something in that text itself remain resistant to it? Finally, can we see the postcolonial text as a site for articulating local, non-western concepts of suffering, loss, and bereavement or alternatively of recovery and healing? In this paper I seek to demonstrate, by addressing these questions, that the inscription of trauma in postcolonial literature is both responsive to and reflective of the concerns of non-western commonalities. My analysis will focus specifically on the representation of trauma in postcolonial Nigerian literature by investigating selected works, both fictional and non-fictional, by the celebrated writer and activist Wole Soyinka.

Soyinka represents a prominent voice in what has become designated as the “second generation” of Nigerian novelists, namely those writers publishing in the immediate aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. A large part of Soyinka’s creative output has been dedicated to a vigorous critique of the postcolonial leadership in Nigeria and the prolongation by that leadership of the destructiveness that colonialism caused. My paper will attend to three of Soyinka’s works in particular. My central focus will be on the novel *Season of Anomy*, first published in 1973, which addresses the trauma of the events leading up to the Civil War. I will frame my reading of the novel with interpretations of Soyinka’s prison memoir *The Man Died*, initially published in 1972, and his recent political commentary *The Burden of Memory* (1999). In his texts Soyinka uses the motif of the journey through hell, and the myth of Orpheus in particular, to articulate the traumatic encounter with a violent and repressive postcolonial regime. I will argue that Soyinka also makes expedient use of the trope of katabasis (descent into hell) in order to restage the encounter between western and non-western cultures. His interweaving of Yoruba myth with western myth asserts the values and self-apprehension of the African world and thereby resists colonization by western “theories and prescriptions” (*Myth x*). Soyinka also notably estranges western discourse, renders it unfamiliar to us, by mingling it with Nigerian cultural and storytelling practices; in this way, he reveals that the western perspective is not the only, or indeed the central, source of knowledge and understanding.

Rewriting Hell

As Rachel Falconer has convincingly demonstrated in *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, the trope of the journey through hell is central to the contemporary western imagination. The western cultural tradition has long been fascinated with this journey as a transformative passage that is expressive of an encounter with the dead and the unmaking and rebirth of the self. From the classical tradition on, the descent into hell has been associated with coming to know the

self through undergoing a series of tests; the survivor of the ordeal brings back with him a potent wisdom, a narrative of the unimaginable. Looking across a range of post-1945 katabatic narratives, Falconer argues that the horrors of twentieth-century history have convinced many in the West that hells do actually exist and that survivors have indeed returned from them. By framing the experience of hell as a journey of descent and return, contemporary katabatic narratives emphasize that the infernal experience is one that has been survived even if the dark realm can no longer finally be subjugated or overcome. For Falconer, then, the contemporary descent narrative powerfully exposes to us “the infernal nature of...twentieth-century institutions, governments and histories” (5).

The western descent narrative that assumes a particular significance in Soyinka’s work is the myth of Orpheus. The most well known version of the myth derives from Virgil (*Georgics*, Book 4) and entails the hero descending into the underworld to ask for the return of his wife, Eurydice, who died after suffering a snake bite. Orpheus the poet wins over the guardians of the underworld with his songs, and Eurydice is returned to him on the condition that he does not look back. He fails to keep this condition, so he loses Eurydice once more; she dies again and is returned to the underworld. Orpheus himself is then dismembered and claimed by the underworld to rejoin his wife in death. Other versions of the story have more positive endings. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 10, for example, Orpheus leads a rich existence after the death of Eurydice, becoming a respected musician and shaman. It is, however, Virgil’s version of the story that predominates in western narratives; the death of Eurydice occurs twice over and is experienced by Orpheus as a calamitous event that cannot be undone, even through the power of poetry.¹

Soyinka has been criticized for drawing on the Orpheus myth in many of his works, and most explicitly in *Season of Anomy*, because he is adopting western narrative models.² He thus seems to set himself against Frantz Fanon’s rejection of western classical myth as irrelevant to the experiences of those from formerly colonized nations: “all the Mediterranean values... become lifeless, colourless knick-knacks...because they have nothing to do with the concrete conflict in which the people is engaged” (38-39). However, Soyinka uses western narratives not to replicate or reinforce western values, as Fanon suggests, but rather to articulate a new mythography that draws from the indigenous Yoruba tradition. Soyinka thus interweaves the Orpheus myth with the Yoruba narrative of Ogun, whom he has described as his patron deity. Soyinka was fascinated from an early age with the god Ogun, who was treated with great respect by his grandfather in Isara. Ogun, the patron god of hunters and soldiers, is capable of a powerful destructive violence; but he is also an artist and creator. Soyinka returns throughout his work to the god’s combination of creativity and destructiveness in order to question the social and political role of the writer.

In the Ogun story that exerts a particular hold on Soyinka's imagination, the gods descend to earth as a group, and find themselves separated from mankind by a marshland, which Soyinka has termed a "chthonic realm"—to Soyinka a place of death, dissolution, and disintegration (*Myth* 2). Ogun launches himself into the abyss and makes a road in order to provide a bridge between gods and humans. Through an effort of the will he traverses it and re-emerges on the other side wiser and more powerful for the experience. The Ogun myth thus provides parallels with Orpheus's descent into the underworld, but Soyinka emphasizes that Orpheus's quest was undertaken on his own behalf while Ogun's journey through hell is undertaken "on behalf of the well-being of the community" (*Myth* 3). Soyinka thus underlines the solipsistic character of the western protagonist and hero. In addition, Ogun's act of traversing the gulf that separates humans and gods is one that, for Soyinka, must be re-enacted periodically through rituals and ceremonies, which help to diminish the distance between the human and the divine. The rituals of drama take on a particularly charged significance in this context and act as a cleansing, binding, communal force. Soyinka has observed in *Myth, Literature and the African* the central role that music plays in ritual and drama among the Yoruba. He points out that, for the Yoruba, music is inseparable from myth and poetry and that the singer is "a mouthpiece of the chthonic forces" (148). Here, then, the Orpheus myth is once again recalled: Orpheus is a poet whose music tames wild beasts and charms the guardians of the underworld. Soyinka combines Orpheus's musical power with the Yoruba belief in incantation as the means by which men gain control over the forces of evil to suggest that the poet—or the writer more broadly—has an important social and communal role as healer. Faced with the frequent eruptions of violence in Nigeria, Soyinka repeatedly returns to and revises the myth of Orpheus in order to test the beneficent effect of the poet's art.

Soyinka's use of the Orpheus myth is thus nuanced and complex. He seeks to demonstrate that Yoruba culture can contribute meaningfully to world culture, that it can form a part of modern consciousness and does not have to be abandoned in a globalized aesthetic economy. At the same time, the incorporation of Yoruba belief systems into Soyinka's writing does not represent a return to tribalism; his is, in the words of Ato Quayson, an "exuberant re-writing of Yoruba mythological discourse" (98). Soyinka's reworking of the Orpheus myth is also suggestive for thinking through the relation between trauma and postcolonialism. The Ogun myth contests the privileging of an individualist self who is disengaged from others; Quayson thus observes the importance in Soyinka's scheme "that Ogun sacrifices himself to affirm the community's sense of corporate identity" (70). More broadly, Soyinka's affirmation of Yoruba culture indicates that, faced with the traumas of violence, civil war, and repressive regimes, Nigerians have local ways of absorbing and responding to grief and conflict and envisaging modes of healing. The emphasis in western

versions of the story is on Orpheus's catastrophic turning back, but Soyinka locates its significance elsewhere: in the importance of ritual and in the healing social role of the poet or musician.³ His texts are thus resistant to western expectations and readings, even as they implicitly invite them. In what follows, I will trace the various alterations to the Orpheus myth, and its continual growth and elaboration in Soyinka's work as he responds to changing political events in Nigeria and continually calls into question the most appropriate form of political and creative response.

The Descent into Hell

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, an intense political rivalry developed between the country's three main regions, each of which was dominated by a different ethnic group: the Hausa in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. Each competed against the others for economic and political advantage, and dissatisfaction with the government was soon widespread. In January 1966, a group of mostly Igbo army majors attempted a military coup against the government of the Federal prime minister Balewa. This resulted in the coming to power of Ironsi, supreme commander of the armed forces and an Igbo who was not involved in the original conspiracy. The takeover was initially popular among a populace disillusioned by the corruption of Balewa's regime, but fears soon surfaced of Igbo domination, and outbreaks of violence in the north resulted in the massacre of hundreds of Igbos. In a military counter-coup in July 1966, northern officers captured and killed Ironsi, and Lieutenant Gowon took over government. October 1966 witnessed a pogrom in the north in which thousands of Igbos were killed and their property seized. In May 1967 Gowon proclaimed that Nigeria would consist of twelve states, only one of which would be predominantly Igbo. In response, the eastern region seceded from Nigeria, and, on 30 May 1967, Ojukwu declared the independence of the republic of Biafra. Five weeks later, Nigeria attacked Biafra; in the ensuing civil war, starvation and disease were widespread in the eastern region until Biafra finally surrendered in January 1970.⁴

Soyinka was prominent as a political activist throughout this period. He was first arrested in 1965 for attempting to take over the Ibadan radio station, in protest against elections held in western Nigeria, accompanied by violence. Soyinka was brought to trial and eventually acquitted, but the incident placed him at the center of public attention in Nigeria for several weeks. In the months following his trial, Soyinka campaigned through the Nigerian press for peace initiatives to stem the rising tide of violence in the north. He was re-arrested in August 1967 by the Federal Military Government, for his contacts with secessionist Biafra and for campaigning against the supply of weapons to both sides in the war. He was detained without trial for twenty-seven months until October 1969; during this time, he was mostly held in solitary confinement in

Kaduna prison. He described his experience of imprisonment in *The Man Died*, a memoir that has been praised by Nadine Gordimer as “the most complete work of prison literature ever written in Africa, and—to my knowledge—written in modern times in the world” (41).

Throughout his memoir, Soyinka explicitly figures his prison experience, which represents his own traumatic encounter with the Nigerian state, as a journey through hell. He draws in part on Dante’s *Inferno*; his narrative is framed as a descent into evil, and as in Dante, hell is conceived as having many layers, each defined by a different form of punishment. Soyinka descends from his interrogation in Lagos to the prolonged torture of his solitary confinement in Kaduna. His prison cell, filled with the howling of the harmattan wind, distinctly recalls the icy punishment of the lowest circle of Dante’s hell. However, if those in Dante’s hell receive the punishments that they deserve and that have been determined for them within a scheme of divine justice, Soyinka suffers a capricious and arbitrary punishment which he has done nothing to merit and to which he has been consigned without any form of trial.

Although Soyinka evokes Dante, the Orpheus myth provides the central narrative of hell in his prison memoir. As Dan Izevbaye points out, the jailers of Kaduna are represented in terms of animal imagery; Polyphemus, Hogroth, and Caliban are all depicted as “creatures of brute flesh...lacking in song” (152). Soyinka accordingly assumes the role of Orpheus, and the text calls into question whether his creative impulse has any power to charm these infernal creatures or whether it is itself overwhelmed by them. The memoir affirms that art retains its power even in the very depths of hell, but its agency is surprisingly associated not with Soyinka himself but with the group of Igbo prisoners who are held beneath him in the most inhumane conditions. Reminded of the recent massacres of the Igbo in the north, the prisoners join together in a nocturnal song that Soyinka describes as seeming to come from another world. The song binds all of the other prisoners into a community with the Igbo: “it involved us all, strangers to their homes, in one common humanity.” Soyinka explicitly identifies the music with chthonic forces; it came from “somewhere deep down in earth, from crushed soil” (111). Soyinka thus draws on the Orpheus myth to assert, through the incantatory voices, the power of song and ritual to combat the forces of evil. His emphasis, however, is not on the solitary protagonist but on the community of the prisoners, which is primarily communicated in the text through the sound of the human voice.

The myth of Orpheus is referred to explicitly in Soyinka’s evocation of the ending of Marcel Camus’s *Orphée Nègre*, a description that is resonant of promise and new life: “the dance of spring by the two children, heirs to the evocative magic of sunrise, of seed awakening in the soil” (198). The passage in which this description occurs is, however, in stark contrast to the vision that it provides. It is framed by the nocturnal cries of a dying man, repeated “groans of anguish” (196), that can be heard across the prison and contrast

with the incantatory song of anguish performed by the Igbo. Unable to bear listening to such human agony, Soyinka forces himself through an act of will to recall other human cries that he had heard several weeks before; the cries of a baby born in the prison. This memory brings hope to Soyinka, articulated through his involuntary association with the birth of Christ: "*For unto us a child is born*" (199). This sense of promise is reinforced by Soyinka's memory of an encounter earlier that day with a boy in a mango tree, which recalled to him painful childhood associations. Through a further effort of will, he turned from these recollections to reach the positive memory of Camus's film. The ending of the passage returns to the cries of the anonymous man, which are unheeded by the authorities so that he is left to slowly die. The following morning, Soyinka asks his guard what happened to the man, to be simply told: "The man died" (200). Soyinka's recounting of the incident reminds us that others who suffered the infernal torments of hell did not survive the inhuman passage; he records the man's death, even if he cannot finally give him a name. The passage also suggests that survival is identified for Soyinka as an effort of will; if any hope is to be found in the depths, it is through a concentrated act of attention. This recalls the Ogun myth, for it was through a similar act of determination that the god traversed the realm of death and re-emerged on the other side. As noted above, however, this effort was undertaken not on his own behalf but in the interests of the broader community. Soyinka's imprisonment is likewise prompted, although not justified, by his actions of political protest against the Gowon regime; and crucial to his own survival is the encounter with others, both fellow prisoners and—in the rare instance—guards, who treat him with generosity and humanity.

Rachel Falconer notes that the important question arising out of katabatic narratives is whether anything of value has been gained from the descent into hell. A contrast emerges between those for whom the journey is meaningful retrospectively and those who can make no sense of it. The descent narrative thus tends either towards the making of the self or towards its dispossession, so the subject remains traumatized and haunted by the infernal encounter. In Soyinka, there is a notable emphasis on the self as strengthened by the experience undergone, both because of the assertion of will necessary to its survival and because he has been bound into a community of suffering with his ordinary countrymen. Through the Igbo song, Soyinka asserts the value of poetry and ritual in combating destructive forces and in bringing hope. He also affirms the value of local modes of articulation; the song is powerful because it is a communal expression of grief by the Igbo prisoners for the massacre in the north. The prison memoir represents a powerful personal testimony of Soyinka's traumatic confrontation with the Gowon military regime, but it is also a narrative of resistance to it. Soyinka was not the man who died—he was not destroyed by the tortures he underwent even though this was precisely their

intention—and his journey gives him compassion and understanding for those others who did not, or who could not, survive the infernal passage.

The Journey through Hell

Soyinka began writing both *The Man Died* and *Season of Anomy* in Kaduna prison, between the lines of books smuggled into his cell. The novel is closely linked to the memoir; both explore the oppressive power of postcolonial Nigerian governments, specifically the brutal nature of Gowon's military regime. The novel treats Soyinka's prison experience—Kaduna prison is renamed as Temoko—but it also explores the traumatic events leading to civil war in Nigeria, especially the violent massacres in the north. The narrative is closely structured around a retelling of the Orpheus myth, which is clearly signalled from the outset by the renaming of Orpheus and Eurydice with the Yoruba names Ofeyi ("he who loves this one" or "this love") and Iriyise ("dew on the feet"). As in the Orpheus myth, Iriyise is held prisoner in the underworld, and Ofeyi descends into hell to search for his lost love. The novel recounts his passage through a barren wasteland, representative of the northern region of Nigeria, where he undergoes a series of trials and terrors. The outlines of the Orpheus myth are strongly pronounced in Soyinka's version so as to draw the reader's attention to the story that he both revisits and revises, creating a specifically African retelling of it. Throughout, Soyinka's specific focus is on what represents appropriate action within a political state that is ruled by terror.

Ofeyi, the protagonist of Soyinka's novel, is Promotions Officer for the Cocoa Corporation that belongs to the Cartel: a group that represents four members of a corrupt and repressive government and that reveals the operations of neocolonialism in Nigeria. Like Orpheus, Ofeyi is a poet, a composer of songs, but he has sold out to the Cartel and is employed in writing "shallow... jingles" (19). His inspiration is his beautiful lover, Iriyise, and he asks her to perform for the promotion campaign as the Cocoa Princess. Throughout the novel, Iriyise is associated with regenerative possibilities and is symbolized as a "Queen Bee" (56), suggesting that even though she seems dead in the long winter of her abduction, she will nevertheless re-emerge in the spring.

In his retelling of the Orpheus story, Soyinka emphasizes the importance of ritual and its potency in bringing about change and transformation. The narrative contains five sections: "Seminal," "Buds," "Tentacles," "Harvest," and "Spores." These titles—at once vegetal, biological, and sexual—underline the theme of rebirth. Ritual is particularly associated in the novel with the village of Aiyéró. Ofeyi is dispatched to the village by the Cartel when it is identified as a potential market for cocoa products. Aiyéró represents the antithesis of the greed and cynicism of the Cartel; it is governed by humane politics, and all property is held in common. On his initial arrival, Ofeyi is resistant to life in Aiyéró, identifying the "stagnation that clings to places like this" (6);

he accordingly refuses the offer of the elders to become the “Guardian of the Grain,” a leader in the community. Over time, however, he finds the values of Aiyéró increasingly persuasive. The ritual slaughter of the bulls by Pa Ahime, the current Guardian of the Grain, makes a particular impression on Ofeyi and assumes a central symbolic role in the novel. The extended description of the ceremony relates the bloodletting to natural processes; it replenishes the earth, and binds and sustains the community. The regenerative function of the sacrifice, in which the beasts willingly give their lives to appease the ancestral spirits, contrasts powerfully with the unwilling sacrifices that are to follow in the purely destructive violence of the Cartel.

Inspired by the way of life that he encounters in Aiyéró, Ofeyi initially seeks to use the facilities and methods of the Cocoa Corporation to undermine the Cartel. He composes songs and promotions that are deliberately ambiguous and subversive and seeks to deploy the Cartel’s propaganda machine against itself. Aiyéró offers Ofeyi a preexisting network, which has always diffused the values of the community to the larger society, and Ofeyi extends this network to the rest of the country and uses it to organize strike action and protest. In Ofeyi’s organization of resistance, and in his subsequent journey through hell, a supporting group of individuals help him wherever he goes so that his agency is embedded within a wider community or network. Of particular importance in this context is Pa Ahime, to whom Ofeyi continually looks for guidance and support. Ahime introduces him to the silted pool that forms the symbolic heart of Aiyéró, and it is here that Ofeyi—an outsider to the village—is bound to the community through recognition by its ancestral spirits. In the pool, past human suffering is transformed into the silt out of which new life grows; history is thus refigured as the mythical, and the surface calm of the pond conceals an energy and dynamism that is waiting to be released. Ofeyi aspires to attain Ahime’s ability to replicate the calm of the lake, camouflaging his actions beneath the appearance of normality, but he notably fails in this task. The Cartel quickly recognize Ofeyi’s resistance activities and respond by kidnapping Iriyise and hiding her away in the hope that this will deter him from further action.

As in the Orpheus myth, the search for the lover propels Ofeyi into the journey through hell; however, Ofeyi does not travel alone but is accompanied by his friend Zaccheus throughout his hazardous quest. The bridge that crosses into the imaginary country of Cross-river is designated by Soyinka as “the formal doorway to the territory of hell” (187). It is at this point in the narrative that the events described fall into a clear historical shape: set after the coup that brought Gowon into power, the killings in Cross-river represent the massacres of Igbo in the north that took place in October 1966. Before Ofeyi and Zaccheus reach the bridge, they come across a sign announcing “TO DAMN,” referring to the dam constructed by the Aiyéró men as part of the Shage project. Ofeyi turns off to visit the site only to find a “dead place” (167): all of the men have been brutally slaughtered and left there to decompose. He absorbs the true

import of the sign, which signals the territory as a threshold to the infernal region but also specifically damns Ofeyi himself, who unwittingly condemned the men of Aiyéró to their fate. The dam itself lies outside of Cross-river, and Soyinka emphasizes that, through the contagion of violence and corruption, hell is no longer contained within its borders but has spilled out to the surrounding area.

In the devastated landscape of Cross-river, Ofeyi pursues his quest to find Iriyise. Cross-river itself represents a grotesque dystopia; nature has been infected at the root, and only the tree of death can grow in this soil, with its diseased “lumps, swellings and distortions,” its twisted “abortion of limbs” (207). Throughout his journey, Ofeyi is repeatedly tempted by others, including Zaccheus, Lieutenant Sayi, the Dentist, and Taalia, to abandon his apparently suicidal course of action. These insistent deterrents, which succeed in swaying Ofeyi momentarily, emphasize his journey as an act of will and so situate him in relation to Ogun, whose passage through the underworld succeeded through his own determination. The journey reveals the atrocities—including murders, the stealing of land, depriving the people of dignity, and creating a climate of terror—that have been perpetrated by the Cartel. It thereby allows Soyinka to reveal the corruption of the political system and the collapse of the social fabric under the newly created Nigerian governments, in addition to representing the specific horror of the northern massacres. Ofeyi travels through five distinct places in his journey, which together demonstrate that the violence of the Cartel is targeted against difference on ethnic, religious, and tribal grounds. After first visiting the house of Chief Batoki, where Zaccheus saw Iriyise disappear, Ofeyi witnesses the terrible slaughter of worshippers at a church in Kaduna and then visits the morgue in search of Iriyise’s body. Here, Soyinka emphasizes Ofeyi’s conviction that Iriyise remains alive: “the ritual had to be undergone, no more” (221). At another church, significantly called “The Tabernacle of Hope,” worshippers hide in the crypt, and Ofeyi’s overwhelming sense is of people buried alive in the darkness. As in his prison narrative, however, confinement is rendered bearable by song that provides “stubborn hope” and the “warm essence of survival” (264). In his journey through this region, Ofeyi—like Soyinka in the memoir—is sustained by the ordinary men and women whom he encounters as well as by the continued support from Aiyéró in the form of Ahime and the Dentist. As in *The Man Died*, the passage through hell cannot be achieved alone; brief but significant encounters with others encourage the protagonist and enable him to go on.

The final location through which Ofeyi must pass in his search for Iriyise is Temoko prison, a re-imagining of Kaduna. Temoko is a maximum-security prison, and Ofeyi is led through innumerable corridors, gates, and yards until he finds Iriyise, held in the waiting room of the execution chamber, in a deep coma. At the gateway to Temoko, Acting Superintendent Karoun explicitly evokes Dante: “People outside think that this is a kind of morgue—abandon

hope all who enter here, something like that" (276). Accordingly, the prison is laid out in differing grades or levels of horror: Ofeyi is led from the outer courtyards through the Lepers' Yard to the Lunatics' Yard, which in turn encloses the Death Cells and the execution chamber. Iriyise is held prisoner at the very innermost circle of hell, and it is here that Ofeyi must reach if he is to rescue her. Deceived by Karoun, he is himself imprisoned alongside Iriyise; and it is only through the intervention of Zaccheus, the Dentist, and Chalil that he is able both to escape with his own life and to release Iriyise from her captivity. Again, Soyinka reinforces the vital importance of the community in surviving the infernal realm rather than Ofeyi's individual achievements and actions.

Until this point in the narrative, Soyinka remains close to the Orpheus myth, but the ending of the novel most strongly marks his departure from it. As noted above, Orpheus wins Eurydice from the underworld by charming the powers that reign there with his song. A key stage in his journey is thus represented by his encounter with the god Dis. In *Season of Anomy*, Zaki Amuri is the all-powerful tyrant of Cross-river, the Head of the Cartel in that region, and he is represented throughout the novel as the center of the evil that spreads throughout his territory and beyond. He holds an oriental court, surrounded by languid young boys, and a young man lies spread-eagled before him in an act of contrition and ritual humiliation.⁵ At the heart of Tomoko prison, Ofeyi witnesses the prisoners in the Lunatics' Yard holding a court of justice that recalls Amuri's, with a turbaned figure at the center and another prisoner prostrate before him. Although no explicit comparison is drawn between the two scenes, the parallel suggests that Amuri also holds a lunatic court and is concerned only with a parody or perversion of justice. Ofeyi notably does not encounter Amuri in the course of his journey through Cross-river, but it seems highly doubtful that he could have persuaded him to release Iriyise from her confinement with the power of his words, as Orpheus was able to do for Eurydice. In the contemporary rewriting of hell, the infernal power can be survived, but it cannot finally be tamed or subjugated.

It is also notable that Ofeyi does not look back at the close of the novel and thereby lose Iriyise once more. Soyinka thus replaces the tragedy of the Orpheus myth with a more positive ending that focuses on the possibility of healing and the fulfilment of the quest. The closing sequence begins with the conversion of Suberu, the former prisoner and prison guard who holds Ofeyi and Iriyise captive. In a highly poetical speech, which draws extensively on images from the oral tradition, Ofeyi persuades Suberu to leave the prison with them rather than remain in bondage. Soyinka thus demonstrates that, even in the very innermost circle of hell, Ofeyi's words do have some power to charm and enchant. However, as noted above, Ofeyi's agency alone is not enough to rescue Iriyise or to save himself. At the end of the novel, Iriyise remains alive but in a deep coma, although the closing words signal that she will indeed

re-awaken: “life began to stir” (313). As Irène Assiba d’Almeida observes, Iriyise serves throughout the novel as a metaphor for Africa, and it is therefore important that she retain the potential to become an “active, full [agent]...in rebirth” (62). It is also central to Soyinka’s retelling of the myth that Ofeyi, as an Ogun figure, fulfils the ritual quest that he has undertaken, for it is through his action that regeneration can occur. However, although both Ofeyi and Iriyise remain alive, signalling that the hell of Cross-river can be survived, the power of evil and corruption remains overwhelming at the end of the novel; the forces of the Cartel have not been vanquished or overcome. It seems that, after the rescue of Iriyise, the Aiyéro men will regroup and continue to fight the Cartel, but it is also clear that the Cartel has no intention of relinquishing any of its privileges without a struggle.

The central question that is raised in the novel is whether the use of violence is justified in countering state violence. The journey through Cross-river persuades Ofeyi that force is necessary in some situations as he is faced with the threat to Iriyise, the massacre of his supporters, and the atrocities committed by the Cartel. The novel stages this moral dilemma in the confrontations between Ofeyi and the Dentist, who believes that the only way to purge Cross-river is the selective assassination of members of the Cartel. Ofeyi’s shift in viewpoint is registered most powerfully when he resorts to violence himself and kills a man during an attack on the house of “Semi-Dozen,” the mining engineer, by supporters of the Cartel. However, this does not represent, as some critics have suggested, a decisive vindication of the Dentist’s methods over Ofeyi’s: it remains uncertain whether the counter-violence reaches the inner circle of the Cartel as intended, while the atrocities committed against the lesser agents of the Cartel seem merely to replicate the violence of the Cartel itself. Although Ofeyi is caught up in the preparations for violence at the end of the novel and is rescued by the Dentist from Temoko, he does not conclusively assent to the latter’s methods and continues to question violence as the inevitable response in an oppressive state. To claim, then, as Abdulrazak Gurnah does, that the novel “debates and resolves” (78) the question of violence seems to simplify the issue. For Soyinka, the claims of violence are compelling; but they are also dehumanizing, of limited political efficacy, and difficult if not impossible to contain. Izevbaye has rightly pointed to the centrality of the Ogun myth in the novel, which means that *Season of Anomy* is not reducible to a “clear-cut conflict between violent methods and peaceful ones.” Ogun is both warrior and artist, and accordingly the two claims are held by Soyinka in “trembling balance”; what is stressed in the narrative, Izevbaye argues, is rather the “toughness required to cope with an uncongenial environment” (154).

Soyinka’s exploration of the claims of violence notably recalls Frantz Fanon’s famous defense of violence against the colonial oppressor in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon contended that, at the level of the individual, violence freed the native from a sense of inferiority and restored self-respect;

at the collective level, it unified the people in a sense of national purpose and was all inclusive, thereby collapsing the barriers of regionalism and tribalism imposed by colonial power. Soyinka is concerned, however, with the use and function of violence in the postcolonial state. The governments of Nigeria replicated the separatist politics of colonialism and reinforced the divisions in the country so that it was eventually pulled apart in the secession of Biafra and the ensuing civil war. In this context, violence is directed not against the colonial oppressor but against other Nigerians, and Soyinka highlights how complex and troubled the issue has become. If Fanon offers a defense of violence as the necessary response to colonization, Soyinka remains justifiably skeptical of the extent to which violence can take on a healing or regenerative role in addressing the regional conflicts of the postcolonial nation-state.

In revising western myth, Soyinka also invites comparison with Homi Bhabha's work on the trope of mimicry, which is itself a form of repetition or remembrance.⁶ Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that there are two aspects of mimicry worth considering: mimicry as a practice encouraged by colonizers in an attempt to create an identity for colonized peoples—in which the colonizer requires colonial subjects to remember and repeat the norms of the occupying power—and mimicry as a signifier of ambivalence through which the binary relationship of the colonizer and the colonized is undermined. Colonialism creates subjects who are “almost the same but not quite” (89), and in difference lies potential subversion and resistance. Bhabha's interest in ambivalent formulations of colonialism provides, in contrast to Fanon, a tentative model for non-violent anti-colonial agency. Soyinka's novel is centrally concerned with the extent to which the formerly colonized subjects of Nigeria replicate in the postcolonial state the values and structures of the colonizers, but his narrative strategy evokes an alternative form of remembrance, that repeats while asserting difference and that can be used to analyze and potentially to undermine or contest the structures of (neo)colonial power. If the logic of the novel signals us, albeit hesitantly, towards violence as the preferred mode of resistance, its form is suggestive of non-violent modes of critique and response; in this way, the two contradictory impulses are held in balance and in tension by Soyinka.

In *Season of Anomy*, Soyinka's rewriting of the Orpheus myth echoes its treatment in *The Man Died*: the emphasis is on a positive retelling of the story in which the protagonist survives his trials and is strengthened by them for future conflict. Ritual is seen to have a central healing or regenerative role; it is primarily associated in the novel with the village of Aiyéró, which offers an idealized—almost mythologized—vision of rural life but which nevertheless does not represent a simple retreat into nostalgia. The community has adapted its way of life to the present and continually engages with external developments; indeed, they are willing to appoint the outsider Ofeyi to be the Guardian of the Grain. Aiyéró also represents the importance of community in Soyinka's

version; although Ofeyi, like Orpheus, decides to make his journey through hell alone, Soyinka draws attention to the supporting group of men and women who surround and help him. Soyinka's telling of the Orpheus story asserts a Yoruba mythography, and the story of Ogun accordingly underpins the narrative. Soyinka's incorporation of the Ogun myth emphasizes that Ofeyi's journey requires a sustained act of will on his part; it underlines that the rescue of Iriyise is not merely a personal quest but is undertaken on behalf of the community, for her re-awakening signifies the potential rebirth of Africa—and it allows for a complex exploration of the competing claims of violence and art. Although Ofeyi, when confronted with the massacre of his men at the dam, responds by turning to Ahime's "scalpel of light" (171), the novel calls into question the healing potential of counter-violence. Soyinka does not, however, offer art—the regenerative power of words—as a straightforward alternative: words are not powerless, as the conversion of Suberu conveys, but Ofeyi's strategy of resistance through language succeeds only in provoking the Cartel into abducting Iriyise.

Through his assertion of Yoruba myth, Soyinka also requires his readers to attend to a rupture of western narrative, to recognize the otherness of the discourse and the events that are at stake. Although the Orpheus myth initially seems to domesticate the story, Soyinka refuses to accommodate his narrative within a framework that is familiar to us. We are asked to put our assumptions into dialogue with, to test them against, and to question them in relation to a very different cultural formation. The novel engages in complex ways with the traumas of state oppression, ethnic violence, and civil war. Soyinka forces us to encounter a response to trauma that asserts the relevance of localized modes of belief, ritual, and understanding, thereby undermining the centrality of western knowledge and expertise. As he notes in *The Burden of Memory*, "most African traditional societies *have established modalities* that guarantee the restoration of harmony after serious infractions" (13; emphasis added). In so doing, the novel implicitly feeds back into western trauma discourse through a testimonial dimension that speaks of, indeed insists upon, a specifically Nigerian discourse and context. It is apparent that simply applying concepts of trauma to a text such as this will not take us very far; we need to listen closely to what the text itself can tell us about its own particular point of emergence, origination, and departure.

Afterword: The Song of Orpheus

The myth of Orpheus is of lasting importance to Soyinka in part because it allows him to explore the role of the poet, or the writer, as a healer in the context of trauma. In *The Burden of Memory*, published in 1999, Soyinka turns his attention to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He expresses skepticism that the TRC can indeed heal society in South Africa; for him, reconciliation should be based not simply in the telling of truth, but

in the moral and material weight of reparation. More broadly, Soyinka worries that the TRC demands a quality of accommodation that is rooted in a specific view of a uniquely African humanism and generosity, which emerged out of the Negritude movement. Soyinka accordingly devotes the central section of *The Burden of Memory* to a critique of the Negritude poet Léopold Senghor, whose writing advocated such a “philosophy of wholesale remission” (32). The largeness of black generosity that Senghor promoted is, Soyinka notes, not only grounded in a problematic essentialism but is also hard to discern in the contemporary Africa of Rwandan genocide and Abacha-governed Nigeria. What, then, is the role of the poet when confronted with the traumatic realities of postcolonial Africa? Soyinka frames his response by relating his unexpected encounter in Paris, at a celebration for the ninetieth birthday of Senghor, with the historical musical instrument, the balafon. The instrument, which is a form of xylophone, was made toward the end of the twelfth century by Soumare Kante, the king of Soso, and was endowed with sacred properties. In the battle of Kirina, in 1230 or thereabouts, the instrument was won by Soundiata Keita and became a symbol of the Mandingo empire, which covered the area of today’s Republic of Guinea. He placed it in the care of his personal griot, Bala Fasseke, and his family remained its guardian over the next eight centuries. Today, the instrument remains under the personal charge of the Republic of Guinea, and it inspired many of Senghor’s poems.

The balafon appeals to Soyinka in part because of its “innate contradiction”; like the god Ogun, it is caught between “the contrary truths of strife and harmony” (191). It also holds his attention because it accompanies the griot; the poet, epic narrator, and custodian of history and memory for traditional African communities. Soyinka recounts that the instrument was surprisingly unassuming, given its illustrious history and sacred heritage. It was made of unpolished wood, with unadorned strikers, and the sound itself seemed an “anti-climax”; it was nothing out of the ordinary, and did not possess the mystic resonance that was supposed to emanate from the “flute of Orpheus” (192). However, combined with the voice and words of the griot, the music assumed for Soyinka a compelling harmony and power; it “enfolded the gathering in a mantle of humanity that excluded none,” and it spoke at once of “a loss too great to quantify” and of “human resilience” (192). Here, then, is the possibility of harmonization, of forgiveness and the remission of wrongs. But Soyinka remains doubtful: does this music charm us too easily, return us merely to the ready consolations offered by Senghor? Is it more concerned with forgetting, with a recovery of lost innocence, than with the burdens of remembering? Soyinka thus rejects such an aesthetic for his own work: “I possess neither the wish nor the temperament to abandon the continuing, combative imperatives of the dialectics of human history” (193). He does not forsake the music altogether, however, for it does provide glimpses of, and open up horizons for, a more humane and reconciled future. In assessing the

role of the poet, and thereby his own role as a writer, Soyinka finally opts for the path of Ogun before that of Orpheus; Orpheus's harmonies, particularly associated for Soyinka with the lyric poetry of Senghor, charm and seduce, but they can also potentially tranquillize and numb us in the face of trauma. For Soyinka, the writer-activist, whose own works often convey the urgency of an immediate response to political events, the strains of Orpheus are not without their own power of enchantment, but they need to be combined, as the complex dialectic that runs throughout his writing powerfully demonstrates, with the constant vigilance and the continued combativeness of the warrior-poet; his own patron deity, the god Ogun.

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NOTES

¹ Virgil's version of the Orpheus myth notably resembles the story of Tancred and Clorinda, which Amy Novak discusses elsewhere in this issue. Although Eurydice, like Clorinda, dies twice over, it is Orpheus-like Tancred—who constitutes the traumatized subject. Soyinka's version of the Orpheus myth reinscribes the protagonist as African subject, yet the gender politics of the novel—as of Soyinka's writing more broadly—nevertheless remain problematic. Iriyise may have a potential regenerative agency, but she takes on a fundamentally passive role in the novel, powerfully symbolized by her deep coma. She thus acts as inspiration for Ofeyi, conforming to his plans for her, and her abduction merely provides the motive for Ofeyi's heroic quest and journey.

² Such criticism ignores Soyinka's implicit engagement with Jean-Paul Sartre's famous and influential preface to an anthology of Negritude poetry titled "Black Orpheus." Sartre's view of the Negritude poets, which drew from Senghor more than other poets in the volume, tended to romanticize an essential and primitive black consciousness. Soyinka's use of the Orpheus myth therefore seeks, in part, to counter Sartre's Europeanized vision of Africa as the exotic unknown. For more on Soyinka's engagement with Senghor and the Negritude movement, see my discussion of *The Burden of Memory* in the final section of this essay.

³ One example of the centrality of Orpheus's turning back to western conceptions of literature is Maurice Blanchot's "Orpheus's Gaze." In this essay, Blanchot positions Orpheus's backward look as the founding act of writing: "Writing begins with Orpheus's gaze" (176). Literature is for Blanchot based on language that perpetually and inevitably thwarts the desire for presence and plenitudinous meaning. Although Orpheus crosses the threshold of death, he seeks in vain to return to an immediacy that cannot be restored. Eurydice's disappearance thus represents for Blanchot the futility of the quest for presence, and literature (Orpheus's song) is accordingly viewed as a compensatory surrogate. As a non-western writer, Soyinka asserts an alternative perspective and locates the significance of the myth elsewhere. Although the Orpheus story is still associated with trauma, it is no longer evocative—as in Blanchot—of the Lacanian unsymbolizable Real.

⁴ The information in this paragraph is indebted to the historical summary provided by Griswold, esp. 227-29.

⁵ As Gurnah justifiably points out, this brief glimpse of Amuri in the novel draws on problematic orientaling tropes of Islam in northern Nigeria (77-78).

⁶ I am indebted to Gemma Robinson for these reflections on postcolonialism and memory.

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