Soyinka and the Canon's Mouth

STEPHEN SLEMON

Like the other essays brought together in this special issue of *Modern Drama*, this article originated in the remarkable conference on "Wole Soyinka and Contemporary Theatre" organized by Anthony Adah, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, and Leslie Katz at the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto, in October 2001. I found the conference exhilarating, but also challenging, and this for two reasons. The first is that the conference brought together a host of distinguished scholars with genuine expertise in Yoruban, or Nigerian, or West African literary and intellectual cultures, and in the performative arts. I, on the other hand, am not a "Soyinka" scholar: I have little familiarity with any of Soyinka's several African, or African-American, or African-diasporic, or theatre-studies constituencies. My disciplinary training is in a field that, at least for the moment, calls itself postcolonial critical studies: scant training, indeed, for the big stage of this conference. The second reason that I found the conference challenging has to do with a point of structural asymmetry. An event of this kind is deeply unusual in my particular area of work. I know of only two explanatory models for the extraordinary act of group formation that takes place when readers, spectators, scholars, students, and critics come physically together, many of them from a great distance, under the toponomic rubric of a single literary writer. One explanatory model pertains to those gatherings where participants arrive seasonally at a constantly changing but always agreeable international location – probably a tourist resort – in order to hear entertaining critical speeches, and consume period banquets, and maybe wear character outfits drawn from the specific fictional creations of a beloved literary writer. Colleagues in my home Department at the University of Alberta regularly participate in this kind of gathering – the writer is Jane Austen, and the group calls itself the "Jane-ites." And every now and then my sister-in-law takes a holiday among that odd collectivity that comes together annually to inhabit the fictive universe of the British writer

Barbara Pym. The discursive contract behind this modality of group formation, obviously, is the commitment to pleasure. The other explanatory model for understanding the phenomenon of physical collectivity around the single authorial figure, of course, is the scholarly conference. The discursive contract behind the scholarly, single-author conference is not pleasure – though the conference may occasionally rise to the level of the Soyinka conference and actually prove to be fun. Rather, the contract is the commitment to canonization. Whatever else it does, a scholarly gathering of this kind cannot do other than confirm the canonical status of a single author function. My topic in this article is the asymmetry between the particular act of canonization embedded in the conference that underwrites this special issue of *Modern Drama*, and the disciplinary pursuit of postcolonial studies in its present configuration. The single question I want to pursue here is this: What is it that the discipline of postcolonial critical studies performs when it canonizes "Wole Soyinka"?

I want to begin my answer to that question by stating briefly what I think *was* being canonized under the name "Soyinka," not by postcolonial studies but by its disavowed disciplinary ancestor: the discipline of Commonwealth literary studies. Commonwealth literary studies was first institutionalized at Leeds University in the early 1960s (see Press; Maes-Jelinek, Petersen, and Rutherford), this because from the mid-1950s onwards a collection of remarkable international writers and scholars – the most dynamic of them being Wole Soyinka himself – had come to Leeds under the Commonwealth Scholarship program. The collective influence on that department of those seemingly powerless undergraduate and graduate students effected the most radical change in disciplinary configuration that English Studies has ever experienced, and by the time that William Walsh, Joseph Jones, Bill New, and Bruce King had published their unifying monographs on the Commonwealth of anglophone literature in the early 1970s, "Soyinka" had risen to the stature of the Commonwealth canon's mouth. By this I mean that both Soyinka as author *and* the Soyinkan dramatic works as texts had been ceded the imaginative power of speaking for, or fictively reflecting, not only a specific social group but also, paradigmatically, all those other groups[1] whose experience under colonialism was one of cultural distortion, imaginative reaction, and survival. Because of this, those other groups could now stake a claim to political representation within the discipline on the grounds that, in the theatre of narrative valuation, there was now one voice – a voice that both represented and exceeded them – which the orthodox gate-keepers of English Studies could no longer pretend not to hear. The social contract behind this Commonwealth mode of canonization was inalienably a liberal one. It was "inclusion[ist]" (Guillory 9), in that it assumed that canonizing a representative of a minority group rose to the level of group political representation. It was romantic, in that it preserved the fiction that literary judgement exceeded social contingency. And it was idealist, in that it assumed that the canonized

texts were "repositories of cultural values" (22) and that curricularizing these texts implicitly promulgated their textually sedimented values. In this canonical formulation, Soyinka's critical statements were commonly employed to explain the social work of his dramatic texts – a common reading being that the representation of Yoruban ritual in Soyinka's dramatic works itself constituted an enactment of Yoruban ritual practice. And Soyinka's social and political statements – for example, his famous "tigritude" riposte to Negritude (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Empire* 123), or his celebrated "neo-Tarzanism" mauling of the *bolekaja* critics ("Neo-Tarzanism") – were repeatedly cited as the neo-orthodoxies of Commonwealth critical thought.

In an article entitled "Canons after 'Postcolonial Studies,'" Salah D. Hassan draws from Jonathan Arac's work on the politics of aesthetic value in order to name the evaluative process that takes place when academic consensus locates a particular text or writer at the "apex of its field." Hassan's name for this evaluative phenomenon is "hypercanonization," and it takes place, Hassan writes, when a text or writer is suddenly overburdened with the mantle of cultural representation in "some kind of compensation for [a disciplinary] past exclusion" (298). To use Hassan's terms, then: Commonwealth literary studies hypercanonized Soyinka – both as a syncretic figure, an amalgam of influences, and as an "authentic" voice of Yoruban tradition. One of the effects of this hypercanonization was to seek a critical harmonization of Soyinka's writerly "multiple selves" (Wright 4) – for, if Soyinka spoke for the discipline of Commonwealth literary studies, what came out of the canon's mouth now carried the burden of disciplinary, and not just individual, coherence. Soyinka as literary writer, poet, playwright, prisoner, activist, broadcaster, social and political critic – these activities, the discipline claimed, produced statements that at times *seemed* "a rich mine of contradiction" (3). But actually, it was argued, all Soyinka's social, political, critical, and dramaturgical statements were "tributaries of the same single flow" (4). What unified these statements was Soyinka's inalienable location within "the Yoruba worldview" (1–22; see also Banham; Eldred Jones; Kronenfeld).

The liberal way in which Commonwealth studies hypercanonized Soyinka, however, did have this curricular effect: his canonization, with Chinua Achebe, as a "high art" representative of Nigerian culture *also* enabled the curricularization of *non*-canonical Nigerian writers, this because those non-canonical writers were not burdened with the mantle of complete or competent Nigerian cultural representation. In Bill New's "Commonwealth Literature" seminar, which I took at the University of British Columbia in 1975, we puzzled over texts not only by Soyinka and Achebe but also by Gabriel Okara, Amos Tutuola, John Pepper Clark, Cyprian Ekwensi, John Munyonye, Wale Ogunyemi, and the Onitsha Market pamphleteers. In the past ten years, the amount of Western scholarship devoted to Soyinka and Achebe – that is to say, scholarship that is indexed in the supposedly universal *MLA International*

Bibliography – has increased dramatically as Commonwealth literary studies fades away and postcolonial studies rises. Western scholarship on Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta has also risen marginally as the discipline grapples with its gender biases. But as postcolonial critical studies has come into its institutional ascendancy, Western critical publication on those other, non-canonical Nigerian writers we read in 1975 has dramatically fallen off.[2] Commonwealth literary studies, whatever else it was, at least had broad shoulders.

Postcolonial critical studies, in its present configuration, likes to forget its disciplinary ancestor, Commonwealth liberalism – this is one of the effects of its U.S.-Americanization over the past decade. But, as Soyinka frequently observes, ancestors are still with the living: it is only that they take culturally sedimented forms. My argument in this essay is that it is precisely in its performance of canonicity that postcolonialism remembers where it comes from, and precisely through its incoherence around the postcolonial canon that postcolonial studies struggles to forget. No canonical figure demonstrates this dual and divided principle of fractured continuity, of transitional disruption, more clearly than the *postcolonial* "Wole Soyinka."

For in the postcolonial canon, Wole Soyinka occupies a deeply fissured and contradictory location. As a literary and cultural *figure* – first African winner of the Nobel Prize, tireless explorer of the representational modes through which indigenous cultures can assert cultural values across the abyss of cultural differences grounded in political inequities, theatrical improvisor, *bricoleur* across traditional and modern forms, fearless practitioner of social satire, speaker of truth to power in all of its forms – as a figure, Soyinka remains hypercanonized in postcolonial studies. No one in the discipline is more deeply, more genuinely, revered. He remains the most discussed African writer in Western scholarship, as Bernth Lindfors has recently demonstrated. He remains the embodiment of postcolonial presence. But at the same time Soyinka is hypercanonized as a postcolonial *figure*, he is rendered surprisingly and radically absent from postcolonial studies as a critical *thinker*. As a practising intellectual, to the discipline of postcolonial studies, Wole Soyinka is seen and not heard.

This absence of Soyinka is meaningful: it requires a disciplinary industry to produce it. As postcolonial studies has consolidated itself, a raft of critical primers, textbooks, anthologies, and introductions has come forward, all of it with the object of making postcolonial critical thought coherent, historically predicated, and accessible. And as the canonizing industry of postcolonial critical *thought* has developed, a productive absence has developed with it. The earliest textbook from the Commonwealth-to-postcolonial transition period in the late 1980s – Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* – is full of statements about Soyinka's intellectual projects. But in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, edited six years later by the same academics, the Soyinka index has shrunk to four moments of engagement, only one of

which is substantial. The 1997 primer by Childs and Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, contains just one reference to Soyinka: it is to a characteristically satisfying Soyinkan turn of phrase. Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, published in 1998, also has one citation to Soyinka. John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) has one citation to Soyinka; Bill Ashcroft's *Postcolonial Transformation* (2001) includes just one citation too. Ania Loomba's monograph on *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, in Routledge's New Critical Idiom series, contains no mention whatsoever of Soyinka. The most widely curricularized anthology in postcolonial studies, Williams and Chrisman's *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* reader, also makes no mention of him. Soyinka is not indexed in the Routledge resource dictionary called *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Ashcroft et al.). His name does not appear in Robert Young's magisterial new monograph, entitled *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*.

The single exception to this radical absence of Wole Soyinka in introductions to the emerging canon of postcolonial thought is Bart Moore-Gilbert's Verso monograph, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, but the exception proves the rule. Let me be clear about what Soyinka's absence from this institutional register means. In the documents I have mentioned, Achebe is generously indexed; so are Aijaz Ahmad, Althusser, Anderson, Appiah, Bhabha, Cabral, Césaire, Chakrabarty, Conrad, Dabydeen, Derrida, Du Bois, Fanon, Foucault, Gandhi, Gates, Gilroy, Hall, Harris, Hegel, Jameson, Kant, Kipling, Lyotard, Macaulay, Marx, Memmi, Nandy, Nkrumah, Said, Shakespeare, Senghor, Spivak, Suleri, Talpade Mohanty, Walcott, West, and Williams. These thinkers are in the postcolonial canon. Soyinka is not. Postcolonial studies closes intellectual ranks. But Soyinka is not in their ranks.

In the discipline of postcolonial critical studies, as it is now congealing, Soyinka is at once hypercanonized as a postcolonial figure and non-canonized as a postcolonial thinker. The reason behind this asymmetry – I am arguing – lies in the problem of disciplinary cultural memory. To the extent that postcolonial critical studies remembers its disciplinary lineage of Commonwealth literary studies, Soyinka remains hypercanonized – he is at once a central and yet a spectral figure to the industry. But to the extent that postcolonial studies forgets its ancestry, Soyinka has become a non-canonical figure: he is "out there" somewhere, but not within the pale.

But it goes without saying that even fractured memory has its continuances, and so it is more accurate to say that Soyinka is not so much *non*-canonized within postcolonial critical thought as *de*canonized from the discipline. Why this might be so is not obvious – but as I read through critical commentary on Soyinka's non-dramatic writing I found three possible justifications for this absence. None will suffice. The first is that Soyinka's social, political, philosophical, and literary critical writings are implacable, difficult, even impene-

trable. We must remember that most of the current textbooks on postcolonial critical thinking locate what Robert Young calls a "holy Trinity" of postcolonial critical thinking, and that the son and holy ghost of that trinity are Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The second justification for Soyinka's decanonization is that his continuing negotiation with various components of humanism – so agreeable to Commonwealth liberalism – is irreconcilable with postcolonial studies and its post-Marxist turn. We must remember that the Father of Robert Young's postcolonial "holy Trinity," Edward Said, also writes out of a continuing negotiation with humanism,[3] and that Said's project is in part to secure humanist intellectual labour for the project of genuine decolonization in a neo-colonial world.

The third justification for Soyinka's decanonization within institutionalized postcolonial thought is that his non-dramatic writing is too inconsistent in method for his intellectual position to slide easily into an organized and codified curriculum of learning. "His criticism [...] recognizes no disciplinary or cultural boundaries," observes Derek Wright (3). Its content is "slipper[y]," and it "hedge[s]" (Wright 177). Soyinka calls for the "evocation of an authentic tradition," warn Crow and Banfield (9). He abandons history for metaphysics, he subsumes history to tragedy. And even as he does so, he advocates social revolution. How, then, is that revolution to be critically understood?

My general argument here is that Wole Soyinka's transmutation, through disciplinary change, from the Commonwealth canon's mouth to postcolonialism's canonical split figure is revealing not only of the structure but also of the contingency of postcolonial critical thought. There are consequences to this transmutation, and to locate one of them I want to turn to one of the most widely cited of Soyinka's essays: that entitled "The Fourth Stage," which appeared in 1969 in a festschrift for the renowned Shakespearean pedagogue G. Wilson Knight (Jefferson).

This festschrift appeared on the occasion of Wilson Knight's departure from Leeds University, and just on the heels of Leeds's spectacular transformation into the organizing establishment for Commonwealth literary studies. This was a moment of profound transition in the institution, and eventually in the discipline, and the festschrift marked that moment of change. All but one of the essays attend to those desperately valued writers of the core English canon – Shakespeare, Milton, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and – oddly – Kipling as a metaphysicist. Soyinka's contribution runs in another direction. The festschrift's title is *The Morality of Art*; its epigraph – from Wilson Knight's 1962 book *The Christian Renaissance* – reads: "Whether in art or life, submission and control are necessary: technique is the morality of art [...]." Soyinka's contribution sets out the architecture of Yoruban drama. "The Fourth Stage" is Soyinka's treatise on dramatic transition – on the vortex beyond the stages of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn, the stage upon which the Yoruba tragic protagonist recapitulates Ogun's mythic battle of

agential will against the abyss of dissolution in the project of establishing the conditions for a continuing cultural health.

I have two arguments to make about the structure and contingency of postcolonial critical thought, two arguments to advance against this present moment of postcolonial disciplinary congealment and the institutional regulation of postcolonial thinking, and, against the backdrop of Soyinka's essay on "The Fourth Stage," I want to make those arguments emblematically.

The first has to do with a reverberation that is sounding in a particular short passage in Soyinka's essay – this from one of the author's more "implacable" prose passages. The reverberation is with Wilson Knight's dictum: "submission and control are necessary: technique is the morality of art." That organizing dictum achieves this indirect rejoinder in Soyinka's contribution to the collection. "We acknowledge," writes Soyinka, "[...] the technical lip-service paid [in] African music to the tonal patterns [...]. [But] this goes deeper than a mere technical relationship, it is a clue to the conceptual unity of poetry and melody among the Yoruba, one which springs from the primal simultaneity of art forms [...]" (124).

One of the current debates in postcolonial scholarship concerns the question of intellectual provenance. Behind that debate is the enormous problematic of postcolonial agency. Scholars such as Trevor James have historicized Soyinka's dramaturgy as inherently a derivative one. "Born in 1934," James writes, "Soyinka was educated at Ibadan University College, where he met Achebe and Okigbo, and at Leeds where Wilson Knight's metaphysical interpretation of literature seems to have influenced him. This background and education colour all his work" (46). In reply to this kind of imperiocentric critical positioning, many postcolonial theorists – *The Empire Writes Back* writers, and I at other moments – have sought to ground postcolonial intellectuality to the counter-discourse of riposte. My first argument about postcolonial structural contingency is that the binary between these two predications – the one imperiocentric, the other counter-discursive – has yet to be adequately theorized in the discipline, and that in *one* of its positions, Soyinka's "fourth stage" essay – as a claim about English literary canonicity, as a rejoinder to Christian Renaissance reification, as a geopolitical rejection of a discourse of submission and technique, as a recognition of transition *within* orthodox English Studies, and as a gesture of cross-cultural mutuality, explanation, exception, *and friendship* – constitutes a grounded, and possibly exemplary, performance of postcolonial intellectual *negotiation*. The deep predication of postcolonial thinking in an agential negotiation with modernity and transition has yet, I am arguing, to be institutionalized in the discipline.

My second argument is one about untapped resources. After Spivak's subaltern, the second most canonized problematic within postcolonial intellectual thought concerns Homi K. Bhabha's argument about the cultural efficacy of the enunciative "third space" (36–37). Bhabha's third space is a place of utter-

ance, crossed by the savage temporalities of *différance* in writing, so that the production of meaning requires a splitting both in the subject of a proposition *and* in the subject of enunciation. This splitting, Bhabha argues, produces an annihilation of synchronic logic, an ambivalence in reference, and a crack in the mirror of representation. And so Bhabha's project is to deploy this "third space" of enunciation against the congealing processes of historical identification, of cultural knowledge and cultural homogeneity everywhere – indeed, it is to call down the possibility of positivist cultural statements. It goes without saying that Bhabha's "third space" is worlds away from Soyinka's "fourth stage." And given the nervousness in postcolonial studies over the return of the "native" – its legitimate fear of materialism's loss to the metaphysical – it is unsurprising that the discipline should choose to canonize this third-space problematic and to decanonize the fourth.

One of the great problems postcolonial theory is now grappling with, however, is how it is to restore the exigencies of location to postcoloniality, now that the nation everywhere is in fragments, the West has overwritten its other (and vice versa), and Arjun Appadurai's diasporic "sodalities" (8) are the new universal in the ubiquitous "global now" (2). My second argument is that there is a strange, and perhaps beautiful, intellectual symmetry between Bhabha's rendering of space as a temporality and Soyinka's rendering of temporality as a space. The two interventions invest very differently in imagined postcolonial futures, but both take as their object an arrest in the normalization of cross-cultural apprehension and certitude. The space *between* Bhabha's third and Soyinka's fourth location might therefore inform a kind of pedagogy to postcolonial thought that is not often foregrounded in the disciplinary textbooks.

My general argument in this essay has been that postcolonial institutional transmutation, beyond the place and time of its ancestor, entails a curious splitting in the processes of remembrance, the proximate effect being the simultaneous and contradictory hypercanonization and decanonization of Wole Soyinka, and the distant effect being a weakening of disciplinary self-knowledge about postcoloniality's predication in a negotiation with modernity. This argument is a mouthful, and not one liable to be canonized on its own, and so let me end by stating my case in simpler terms. Firstly, I believe that postcolonial studies is wrong to attempt to congeal the various modes and forms of postcolonial social thought into a postcolonial*ism*, and that the obvious lines of political and methodological agreement in the discipline are precisely *not* what the current primers, anthologies, textbooks, and guides in the industry ought to be tracing. I stand for an attention to the inconsistencies and incoherences in postcolonial thinking, not for their institutional unification. Those inconsistencies are useful allies in our search for more equitable postcolonial futures and our work for genuine political change. Secondly, I believe that Wole Soyinka's curiously split location within the postcolonial canon

presents a genuine conceptual problem for postcolonial studies, the answer to which is not a simple recanonization of Soyinka but, rather, a sustained and radical critique of nothing less than the postcolonial literary and intellectual canon itself. The conditions of possibility for this canon remain far too little discussed in the discipline. And thirdly – and here I take the hand, I think, of *one* of the intellectual ventures behind the "Wole Soyinka and Contemporary Theatre" conference, which structurally could not do other than canonize, but which could, and did, do a great deal more – I believe that one of the reasons postcolonial studies must arrest its manic careen into pure social theory at the expense of the "literary" is that what theory sometimes forgets, and what literature – especially dramatic literature – sometimes remembers, is the inalienable performativity of the postcolonial in its encounters with the pre-, the post-, the neo-colonial world.

These are some of the issues, I am suggesting, that are staked within the question "what is it that the discipline of postcolonial critical studies performs when it canonizes – and hypercanonizes, and decanonizes – that elusive, and interruptive, and continually challenging writer who resides within the signifiying figure of 'Wole Soyinka'?"

NOTES

1 Here and in what follows I draw on John Guillory's analysis of the liberal pluralist critique of the canon: "The author returns [...] not as the genius, but as the representative of a social identity" (10).

2 The MLA International Bibliography for 1963 to 1990 lists 539 articles on Soyinka, 445 on Achebe, 17 on Nwapa, 46 on Emecheta, 88 on Tutuola, 48 on J.P. Clark, 60 on Ekwensi, 13 on Munyone, 28 on Ogunyemi, and 31 on Onitsha Market writing. The MLA International Bibliography for 1991–08/2001 lists 207 articles on Soyinka, 287 on Achebe, 28 on Nwapa, 56 on Emecheta, 16 on Tutuola, 16 on J.P. Clark, 9 on Ekwensi, 3 on Munyone, 4 on Ogunyemi, and 1 on Onitsha Market writing.

3 This critical concern reads as follows: on the one hand, Soyinka calls for the "evocation of an authentic tradition in the cause of society's transformation process" (Crow and Banfield 9); on the other hand, as Biodun Jeyifo explains, "no matter how strongly they call for an indigenous tragic art form, our authors smuggle into their dramas, through the back door of formalistic and ideological predilections, typically conventional Western notions and practices of rendering historical events into tragedy" (26–27). As a consequence, Soyinka's "profound and distinctly African humanism" (Crow and Banfield 94) is rendered procedurally and politically inseparable from European humanism, a discourse Edward Said affiliates himself with specifically in his famous essay "Secular Criticism" in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Said's affiliation with humanism rests on humanism's inalienable "complicity in the history of European colonialism" (163).

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