

ABIOLS IRELE'S THE AFRICAN IMAGINATION: WRITING AT DEGREE ZERO

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The writer, Roland Barthes says in *Writing Degree Zero*, inherits a social language that goes a long way in defining his thematic concerns and mode of signification. In a situation where the writer has no substantial fund of *scripted* social discourse but oral traditions abound, an enormous problem arises as to the mixing of oral and literate legacies. The delicate balancing skills needed to operate the two traditions of orality and literacy are often the causes of a crucial tension in modern African thought and discourse and the modes of address this enduring problematic elicits. The mutual engagement and disengagement of both oral and textual forms of expression within the same nexus is essentially constituted along the margins of high theory where the reproduction of texts by texts has been a predominant principle.

However, the resolution in marginalized literatures of this tension between orality and literacy, between high theory and textual logics, can be obtained when the discourse of textual production and reproduction of texts by texts in bodies of work like African literatures are read for a the continuous link that binds orality to literacy. Abiola Irele's latest book of essays, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (2001) explores with great subtlety the foundations of the orality/textuality dichotomy within the different modes of African imaginative expression and the unexpected triumphs that have emerged from this long and disruptive dialectic. The book can actually be read as a sustained meditation on the problem of producing inscribed discourse within a context of severe epistemic contradictions and reduced collective agency.

For Irele, the entry of the colonial/postcolonial subject into modernity, into the Euro-American archive, *sans* scripted text, marks the beginning of a particular form of alienation. First, the introduction of colonialist literacy signals the radical questioning of a tribal culture, undermines its totality, and confronts its closed up cosmology with other forms of expression, inscription, and subjectification. Second, the entry into the modern library inaugurates a season of hesitation for the colonized coming from a background poor in *inscribed* discourse. This discursive nexus invariably forces on the colonial/postcolonial subject the tyranny of destructive silence. Unlike the potentially active and subversive "hyperreal" silence occasioned by the explosion of postmodernist systems of communication and advertising theorized by Jean Baudrillard, silence brought about within a colonial situation by the absence of a tradition of written inscriptions is doubly negative.

Abiola Irele's book addresses this silence both theoretically and practically. Irele highlights not only some of the most notable accomplishments of the African text (literature) within the continent and in the diaspora, he also situates this particular intellectual achievement within its precise context. In Africa, he says, we are continually assaulted by unending cycles of woes and degradation. Politics has been downgraded to war in its very lowest form, and we cannot talk of the political field without wincing with disgust. The political field has become a veritable theatre of disaster and cannot be spoken of without embarrassment even though theorists such as Jean and John L. Comaroff, together with Achille Mbembe, are beginning to find ways of performing this difficult task. In the contemporary global market, the political and the aesthetic fields overlap and are at several instances inextricably linked, and success in the political field by a particular nation, region or continent reifies and empowers its aesthetic field. Although there is not much to speak about that is truly original about African political and economic practices, Irele keeps finding means to valorize what is indeed sublime within the African aesthetic field without waiting for the much-sought restoration in the political field to take place first. Thus Irele's work stands alone.

Having spoken about the context (or the lack of it) within which Irele's work might be read we ought to discuss some of its central issues. The first striking fact about the book is that even within the American academy where poststructuralism has become a strong tendency, and given his customary cosmopolitan orientation, Irele continues to valorize African modes of artistic production even when it may be injurious in terms of career aspirations to do so. He, for instance, continually stresses the importance of oral modes of expression when other academics would prefer to dwell on more marketable topics such as post-modernism, globalization, and the cyberspace. In highlighting the relevance and creative potential of less valorized domains of discourse, Irele introduces us to some crucial aspects of contemporary human culture. Rather than viewing orality as a degraded unprofitable mode of expression, Irele demonstrates how it has become the pivot of a whole range of contemporary African forms of textual expression.

Two of his essays in the volume particularly illustrate this view. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is essentially a subversion of European metropolitan world-views and its mode of signification and language. Its recontextualization of Igbo proverbs and habits of speech within a metropolitan language (English) and frame of reference, the conflation of forms to be found within an oral and literature cultures created a distinctive literary practice all by themselves. Irele traces the trajectory of this mode of creation, together with its lingering impact on African literature, in "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." "Study in Ambiguity: Amadon Hampaté Bá's *The Fortunes of Wangrin*" explores the dilemma of the colonial/postcolonial subject during the period of disruptive transition. This essay explains the nature of Hampaté Bá's distinctive genius in his deft traversing of the seemingly unbridgeable di-

vide between orality and textuality. Hampaté Bá begins by drawing on the epic traditions of the griots of West Africa, which he then blends ingeniously with traditions derived from Western textuality. The end result is the creation of an entirely novel mode of discourse. To Irele, Hampaté Bá, “produces what by normal canons of judgement would be considered a mix and even indeterminate genre of the narrative” (p. 86). Irele demonstrates why this very indeterminacy is the source of the work’s most remarkable attributes.

In a situation where a long established tribal culture is under assault from colonialism, new beings, discourses and commodities emerge from the transitional phase. And this transitional phase, with all its swift and sudden cultural reversals and rapid upturning of established tables of values, creates room for the most pronounced kind of opportunism, a situation where anything goes. Some of Africa’s most accomplished literary artists have traced the beginnings of socio-political anomie in images of regression that offer more profound insights than the theoretical formulations of numerous social scientists.

Irele is very much concerned with the socio-political conditions under which African texts are produced and how these relate to the question of ideological development. For instance, his chapter on J. P. Clark — Bekederemo discusses extensively the colonial situation and the configuration of historical forces that gave rise to the emergence of modern Nigerian literature. As a piece of cultural criticism, it portrays the personal and collective points of departures together with the structural limitations (both internal and external) that the modern Nigerian literary artist had to surmount to attain discursive agency and independence. Figures like Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark – Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka are the primal exemplars of this socio-aesthetic matrix.

Failures in the political field may also have affected the visionary gifts of some African literary artists ,as Irele seems to suggest in the final essay, “Parables of the African condition: The New Realism in African Fiction” where he turns his critical lens on Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth My Brother*, Yambo Ouologuem’s *Bound to Violence*, and Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*. These novelists, in various ways and with differing degrees of success, attempt to deal with the growing failure of African nation-states, but the degradation of African political existence, it seems, have adversely affected their artistic insights. In Irele’s view, *Bound to Violence* suffers from a “shallow sensibility” and does not merit the lofty reputation it enjoys. (Appiah, for instance, wrote a generally positive appraisal of the novel in his book, *In My Father’s House* [1992]). Regarding Soyinka, he says, “*Season of Anomy* fails to satisfy . . . primarily because it does not offer a cogent elucidation of its ostensible political theme. Further, coming from a writer whose dramatic works convey so vivid a sense of specific life, the vagueness of the novel’s references – as indeed the inadequate organization of the elements of the narrative – cannot but appear as something of a disappointing performance” (p. 233).

We have to conclude by stating that *The African Imagination* and the quintessential products of African creativity that Irele makes his concerns elicit comforting value in circumstances where the nature of African politics destroys the subjects whose development it is supposed to aid. In other words, when life fails turn to art. Having said that, Irele's discursive trajectory raises some crucial theoretical issues that have been alluded to in the orality/textuality dichotomy. Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) differentiates between the types of knowledge generated by pre-capitalist societies and post-industrial cultures. The computerization of existence in post-Fordist societies has entailed the development of a complex network of institutions to produce, classify and disseminate knowledge. Undoubtedly, the individual within this intricate network of institutions and mechanisms of knowledge plays a restricted role. In contrast, knowledge generated by traditional cultures adopts a much different trajectory in the sense that the mechanisms for its transmission are now mostly devalued. Manthia Diawara, in his article, "The Song of the Griot" analyses how the logic of the global economy has led to the commodification of what had previously been a sacred calling and also, perhaps, a devaluation of its historic import. The vocation of the griot, like other forms of historico-aesthetic expression such as *fújì* and *jùjú* music in Nigeria, has succumbed to the imperatives of monetization. Irele's discussion of orality does not address this development. Rather, it recuperates what is most noble in oral forms of artistic expression and focuses on how these attributes have been crucial to the formation of modern African literature. His analyses of the works of Chinua Achebe, Hampaté Bá, and Wole Soyinka emphasize how the element of orality is indeed central for understanding the unquestioned distinctiveness of their most groundbreaking works.

Now this epistemological stance introduces a new paradoxical twist in Irele's thought. In his previous essays, (see his augural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan and published in 1987) Irele had argued for the need for the African postcolony to avail itself of the gains of Western modernity. In embracing the forms of alienation engendered by the disruptive event of colonialism, he said, the African subject's choice is not unique in world history. His position was that after all human cultures are never completely independent and continue to borrow from each other. That stance generated a lot of debate in African intellectual circles. Irele has now emerged from that cycle of thought in which he now posits a form of Africanity that has emerged not from a self-absorbed contemplation of the numerous failures in the political field but from a studied interest in the restorative qualities of oral culture as typified by the achievements of Chinua Achebe and Amadou Hampaté Bá. This new point of entry opens up a way for him to talk about Africa outside the embarrassing field of politics and to speak on behalf of the continent with an appreciable sense of dignity.

In addition, Irele's recontextualisation of orality/textuality axis obviously forces us to rethink the notion of the author. In his famous essay, "What is an au-

thor?," Michel Foucault explores the various historical biographies of the author-function. Texts and authors, he argues are defined by specific contextual circumstances. The author-function mode to be found in the constitution of religious texts is different from the one that exists within the scientific community or the artistic field. By extension, texts and authors are in part the inventions of specific fields of activity. Roland Barthes, in an equally famous article, "The death of the Author" suggests that the diminution of the role of the author is the result of the reader gaining more freedom and autonomy. These views have had a significant impact on poststructuralist theorizing.

However, the contextual impasse faced by the author within the Western episteme is markedly different from the kind faced by the postcolonial author. Confronted with the silence generated by the oppressive architecture of metropolitan modes of expression (*langue*), the postcolonial author either retreats further into the abyss of silence or adopts a form of broken speech (*parolé*), which marks the beginning of his insertion into the margins of modernity. Irele's contemplation of the orality/textuality matrix has defined a unique kind of author who defies the silence caused by the trauma of the colonial event and proliferates expressive forms that subvert the centre/periphery distinction, at least in its conventional formation. Silence thus provides multiple opportunities for expressive/explosive freedoms.

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