

Crisis of Representation in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*

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Speaking of Wole Soyinka's deployment of Ogun as a central trope in his work, the preeminent critic of Soyinka, Biodun Jeyifo, observes that "the 'tormented figure' of the god seems appropriate to the 'trouble-torn' personality of the writer," and that it is also "eminently apposite to a trouble-wracked, post-independence Africa."¹ Whether the analogy between Ogun and the writer works, it is extremely suggestive for our reading of Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, the very novel that Jeyifo singles out for harsh criticism. If Ogun is the god of creativity and of destruction, and if Ogun is also the individualist, acting on behalf of the community, the impulse of our novel in question is precisely to *reenact* the Ogunian feat of eking out a path of communal restitution, destroying aesthetic norms in the process. Accordingly, it should go without saying that the novel is certainly uncharacteristic of Soyinka's oeuvre, and, as it were, takes on a life of its own, fluttering out of the author's grasp. We may more accurately describe this novel as not representing, but rather, transcending the poetics and politics that are at the heart of Soyinka's work. This transcending includes, as I will argue later, escaping Tejumola Olaniyan's charge that Soyinka deprioritizes class in favor of individual will: "For Soyinka, the motive cause of history is not class or group but the lone individual hero who acts for and catalyzes the community: the Ogun, the Atunda."² While this charge may be accurate for the rest of Soyinka's oeuvre, I will argue here that *Season of Anomy* is not representative of Soyinka's work, and, in fact, abrogates individual will in favor of collective mobilization.³ Adapting Jeyifo, then, we might say that the "tormented figure" of the god is appropriate to the novel itself — that here it is the novel itself that is tormented, in its struggle to

break away not only from Soyinkan practice, but also from its own formal limitations.

Indeed, both of Soyinka's novels, *The Interpreters* and the later *Season of Anomy*, tend toward questioning of this role of individual will as the agent of social transformation — a role that is generally affirmed in Soyinka's prolific dramatic output. In following the lives of a group of friends, their drunken bouts, their individual love affairs, and their idiosyncrasies, *The Interpreters* launches a supremely witty critique of Nigerian society, steered by a corrupt, laughable, and self-hating elite. On one hand, the novel preempts any possibility of social transformation as coming from this elite: one has only to glance cursorily at Soyinka's excoriation of this elite present at Professor Oguazor's party to be disabused of any such notions. On the other hand, the novel also deliberately eschews presentation of its four individual protagonists as agents of any transformation. The journalist, Sagoe's, "dissertation" on the voidante's manifesto reveals not only Soyinka's mistrust of collective activity, but also of these new interpreters, the novel's protagonists. By the end of the novel, when the epic painting by one of the protagonists, Kola, is finally revealed, we find the Ogun figure "distort[ed]."⁴ Another of the protagonists, Egbo, describes Kola's Ogun as having been presented, not in his heroic aspect, but "frozen" in Kola's depiction of one single myth associated with Ogun, during which he, "at his drunkennest, los[es] his sense of recognition and slaughter[s] his own men in battle"; he is presented only as "a damned bloodthirsty maniac from some maximum security zoo."⁵ Though Egbo sees this depiction of a distorted Ogun as Kola's failure, the drunken Ogun also refers us to the drunken bouts of this novel's protagonists, in a self-critique of the Soyinkan practice of valorizing the Ogunian individual will and agency.

But this project of questioning Ogunian agency is only begun in *The Interpreters*; it is the later *Season of Anomy* that takes up this project in a sustained manner. For this reason, we will restrict our discussion here to *Anomy*, seeing in *The Interpreters* an embryo of the will to transform reality that becomes the hallmark of *Anomy*. It is noteworthy here that separating the two novels is the Biafran war of independence. If *The Interpreters*, written before the atrocities of the war, is trenchant in its critique of Nigerian society, it is also a playful text, a testament to the author's satiric prowess. *Anomy*, on the other hand, written after the civil war, has done away with "mere criticism" and now seeks solutions. In this sense, *Anomy* decisively marks the end of the honeymoon period of decolonization, when national turmoil reveals itself as too ghastly to provoke even the most cynical laughter, and manifests a shift towards an attempt at interpreting and changing reality. The bulk of the novel centers on the protagonist, Ofeyi's, attempt to develop a

workers' vanguard. When the novel speaks of land and people ravaged by the Cartel and the Mining Trust, the "state within a state," it also attempts to posit the question: who will oppose the monopoly of the cartel?⁶ Who is the agent of change? Indeed, this novel almost follows the unfolding of a conversation between two possible agents. On one hand is the agent posited by Ofeyi, with his vision of a workers' vanguard, leading and recruiting by edification, reason, and example. On the other hand is another character, identified as the Dentist, with his method of surgical removal, of decapitation of the Cartel's power, even though the Dentist is conspicuous by his absence from large portions of the narrative. In other words, the two possible agents are either mass mobilization led by a vanguard of the men from the village commune of Aiyero, or a band of an enlightened few waging guerilla warfare, and acting on behalf of the community. But, as I shall argue in the rest of this paper, *Anomy* posits these two as possible agents of social transformation, only to retract them. In other words, I will argue that the novel recognizes its structural failure to resolve real contradictions: seeing itself as a "failed text," the novel reviles the resolutions it posits as wish fulfillment — "merely representational" — because these resolutions are not possible on the real plane. In yet other words, *Anomy* constitutes a refusal to be satisfied with providing an alternate reality in art; indeed, the novel self-consciously posits itself as part of a real-world totality in which it is but a moment. With this recognition that it is a "failed text," that texts alone are unable to effect changes in the realm of the real, there comes a realization on the part of the novel that real-world agents, its readers, must be interpolated into the world and the ethos of the novel. In attempting this, the novel effects a reverse interpolation, that is, of inserting and placing itself in the realm of real agents. In the final section, I will argue that if, in the first moment, *Anomy* seeks to act on behalf of real-world agents that it deems absent, it also sets up its readers as possible agents. In this sense, then, we might say that this novel dialectically transcends the Ogunian dilemma of acting on behalf of the community, and seeks communal participation.

The monumental criticism on Soyinka has noted the striking concern with social transformation in Soyinka's work.⁷ In excavating this social content, such criticism has tended to seek answers to textual questions in authorial biography. Within this trend, critics have also seen Soyinka's work as either expression or disavowal of negritude, while comparing Soyinka with other African authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o.⁸ Others have focused, in cogent ways, on Soyinka's representation of social and political unrest besetting modern Nigeria, and have tended to see in this representation a grappling with, and resistance to, dictatorial regimes.⁹ Still others have dealt with the ways in which Soyinka has excavated folklore and mythology

in order to create a mythic system that specifically explains and remakes the realities of colonial subjugation and postcolonial nationhood.¹⁰

What is remarkable, however, about *Anomy* in particular is its overt preoccupation with agents and processes of social transformation. At the very outset, the novel raises what is for the corporate state the threatening specter of a distinctly African socialism. In presenting a picture of the ideal community of Aiyero, the Soyinka novel provides political representation to a vanguard agent that seeks an alternative world. Aiyero, described as a socialist utopia of sorts, has already done away with the institution of private property, and has so far existed in isolation from the encroaches of corporate competition and expansion, and the institution of private property that underpins this drive to competition. The community holds everything in common as collective property; but it is able to do so “due to its three quarter century of accidental isolation,” and only insofar as it “posed neither threat nor liability to the various governments that came and went.”¹¹ Moreover, as opposed to the Marxist logic that describes the institution of private property as collapsing only after capitalism has developed the productive forces — to the degree that capitalist relations of production become fetters on further development of productive forces — this community is described as a throwback to a “primitive” past.

But we are soon notified of the precariousness of this specter as a threat. We get a sense that this ideal community, born of rebellion, is under encroachment by the outside, that the corporation has taken note of it as a “new market for cocoa-bix and cocoa-wix.”¹² And this is not the only threat; the seeming peacefulness of this community is paradoxically described in terms of a curious scene of predatory violence and scavenging:

Gun-bursts, tang of powder, angry dispersion of kites. The hunter groups filled their guns with wild metal, shot down branches and pulped the fibrous trunks, filled the air with rubble as they fired into wall-corners. A coconut disintegrated driving white-fleshed shrapnels over rooftops. A pawpaw turned to red mash. The kites circled the hunters from a safe height, swooped down as they disappeared and snatched up the shreds of red-headed lizards.¹³

Even before the corporation takes note of this as a new market for its products, the novel has signaled the unsustainable nature of this ideal community in isolation; for insofar as it exists as an island of peace amid a sea of chaos, it needs to defend itself from that surrounding chaos. Thus we see, though momentarily, a futile attempt on the part of the novel to explain away the presence of guns and hunters in this otherwise peaceful and

insulated community: Ahime informs Ofeyi that guns appeared early when the community asked itself how it will defend itself against slave-raiders. In time, the community becomes a center of smithy, where “men come from all over the country to seek the best” of guns from this community.¹⁴ At the same time, this community evolves from merely a fishing economy to encourage hunting. But the novel is not particularly convinced by its own explanation. For it is with a sense of foreboding that we see the scene above, where hunters shoot with wild abandon only at “wall-corners,” but the pawpaw is nevertheless turned to red mash, the coconut is “disintegrated” into “white-fleshed shrapnels,” and the lizards turn into reddened “shreds” that the kites scavenge upon. The attempt to provide an alibi for this violence as provisions for self-defense, then, ends up as a foreboding for the genocidal violence later — or, as the narrative voice warns us, “the climax of bright red sluices.”

Furthermore, this alternative world of an authentically African socialism is poised for an incestuous implosion. Ofeyi is puzzled about why the men of Aiyero always came back. He sees it as a problem: “your children travel the whole world, achieve all sorts of experience in their own right and still return to the tiny pond to settle. It’s admirable, but ... it encourages in-breeding. They seem untouched by where they have been, by the plight of the rest of mankind, even of our own people.”¹⁵ It is not simply that this community makes its people unable to comprehend the plight of the rest of the world. What is concomitant with this lack of understanding and growth of the individuals from this community is also a larger sense of an implosive destruction. For Ofeyi thinks of this insulation of Aiyero as leading to stagnation and death: “The waters of Aiyero need to burst their banks. The grain must find new seminal grounds or it will atrophy and die.”¹⁶ In this, Ofeyi merely reproduces what is already a recognition of the “need for new blood” on the part of the Custodian and of Ahime; they see Ofeyi as the answer to their dilemma, and court him as a prospective member of this community.

Ofeyi’s induction into the community highlights the novel’s preoccupation with the idea of a workers’ vanguard. Although Ahime sees Ofeyi as an answer in the sense that he expects Ofeyi to move to the community, Ofeyi has other plans: “The healing essence which soothes one individual or some stray dog that happens to wander into Aiyero is not enough for the bruises of others I know of. They require a different form of healing.”¹⁷ This different form of healing that Ofeyi envisions requires the emigrant men of Aiyero to infiltrate the land beyond Aiyero, across the river, in order to proselytize others outside of this community. Ofeyi wants the rest of the world to partake of that mysterious substance that the children of Aiyero are fed, and that

“inoculates them against the poison of places like Ilosa,” against the temptations of the world of commodities.¹⁸ According to Ofeyi, the men of Aiyero, when they go to their new communities, would entail “sowing a new idea.”¹⁹ This project is described as sowing a “new concept of labouring hands across artificial frontiers, the concrete, affective presence of Aiyero throughout the land, undermining the Cartel’s superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder, ending the new phase of slavery.”²⁰ While Ahime thinks of this sowing with a bit of alarm, it does not take Ofeyi much persuasion to get Ahime to concede to his request. When Ahime does concede, not only are the men “lent” to Ofeyi for two years, but they are also now to send their surplus earnings to Ofeyi for use towards this project. Henceforth, Ofeyi must persuade these men, who have never “joined a political party even out of curiosity,” that his “idea fulfils their own constant readiness for service.”²¹

At first, it appears as if Ofeyi’s project is succeeding: the working class is beginning to forge the unity to transform social conditions. When Ofeyi and Zaccheus visit the Shage dam project — the site of Ofeyi’s experiment in building working-class solidarity by introducing the workers from Aiyero among the workforce in order to defeat the hold of the Cartel — we see also a building of hope through the approach toward the project. We see Ofeyi calming down during the drive towards the Shage dam project with the approaching “deciduous landscape” of llanas tangled in the treetops, forming “dense, seemingly impenetrable ceilings in the forest.” Ofeyi suggests that he wants to visit the dam because it “may clean [his] mouth entirely of that last encounter,” during which he witnesses a ritualized mutilation and killing of a fellow human by a group of “hunters.”²² Although no work is being done on the dam project because of the generalized ethnic conflict represented by the torture and killing of the human transformed into a creature, the Shage dam project was “the one place the [cartel’s] animals could not touch because the union here was strong. They had a meeting here and they decided to suspend work at the first sign of victimization.”²³ At the approach to the Shage dam, Ofeyi offers news of working-class solidarity, in response to Zaccheus’s sense that “it feels so spooky. There isn’t a living soul within miles.”²⁴ Ofeyi explains that the site is deserted because the workers had “stopped work here days before the troubles began.” The workers from Cross-river, who “had been brought into the Cartel plans,” had reported the plans to the Aiyero leaders. Indeed, the workers had finally closed down the entire works two weeks before the “Cartel turned their jackals loose.”²⁵ The solidarity of workers here, for Ofeyi, is what kept the workers from the generalized state of scapegoating and victimizing that had beset entire villages and towns.

But this turns out to be a mistaken notion on Ofeyi’s part: the message of solidarity and brotherhood does not win out in the end. Ofeyi’s visit to the

Shage dam project provides what seems to be the final comment. What follows next signals the shutting down, not only of the Shage dam project, but also of Ofeyi’s project of building a workers’ vanguard. And if the inscription on the sign board at the approach to the dam itself — “TO DAMN” — does not clue him to the impending scene of doom and desolation, he is soon disabused of any faith in solidarity and brotherhood. As soon as he opens the door, “the stench was the first to hit him, a wet slap of putrefaction in the face.”²⁶ It is at this moment that he realizes that the otherwise deserted project site is littered with human remains:

From that height the even mist was shredded, he now perceived, in a hundred places, opening patches of the lake to the light, to a display of floating bodies so still that they seemed anchored. There was the marvel, although the bodies were swelled and the faces decomposed there hung about the scene a feeling of great repose. Perhaps the shroud of miasma dulled all sense of horror, or the abnormal stillness of giant machinery made it all a dream, a waxwork display of shapes, inflated rubber forms on the rafts in motionless water, perhaps it all seemed part of the churned up earth, part of the clay and humus matrix from which steel hands would later mould new living forms.²⁷

As this passage shows us, the “slap of putrefaction in the face” does not completely wake up Ofeyi. Indeed, the narrative voice itself refuses to acknowledge what it has already described as the still-floating bodies as human forms. Instead, the sense is that of a “feeling of great repose” that can be gleaned only if the floating human bodies are not realized, on the ultimate level, as dead humans, but as “a waxwork display of shapes,” or as clay “from which steel hands would later mould new living forms.” The novel comments on Ofeyi’s attempted, but failed, rationalization of this scene to conform to his idea that this loss was not tantamount to the “total erasure of the essence of [his] idea of solidarity between the immigrant men of Aiyero and the local ‘Cross-river comrades.’”²⁸ And, in commenting thus, in showing Ofeyi himself suggesting that “he is lying to [himself] ... seeking barren consolation,” the novel distances itself from Ofeyi’s feeble attempt at denial, and considers the development of this vanguard as a failed resolution.²⁹ And if the novel’s disillusionment resonates with the reader, it is because it encapsulates the revulsion at the degeneration of the African socialist project into one-party states, authoritarianism, and repression.

If Ofeyi’s project of building a worker’s vanguard seems to have failed against the repressive regime of the Cartel, the novel is not convinced about the Dentist’s project of decapitation, either. At first glance, it seems that the

novel does posit guerilla warfare as the more effective option: Ofeyi is finally rescued from prison by the Dentist, who takes the jail warden hostage. In the end, though, this is not what the novel sees as a satisfactory solution; the novel ends on an ominous note: “Temoko was sealed against the world till dawn.”³⁰ All that the combined efforts of these characters have been able to retrieve from this netherworld three-in-one prison house, lunatic “asylum,” and leper colony, is the limp figure of a comatose Iriyise, a breathing body but without life; all Ofeyi can do by the end is ask, “what ravages had induced this deep refuge in her volatile self.”³¹ And here, Ofeyi is not simply commenting upon Iriyise; indeed, Iriyise becomes the crystallization of a much more generalized condition, marked by an “abdication of the will, resignation, withdrawal ... the ultimate condition of the living death.”³²

It is not simply that the novel sees its particular agents — vanguard party or guerilla warfare — as ineffectual. Rather, in representing these political endeavors as failed attempts, and in retracting these as solutions, Soyinka’s novel also signals its own self-consciousness about its inability to tackle a causal problem that it has already identified, but which it sees as too overwhelming to represent. Indeed, the problem lies almost outside of representation, for it is outside the problems of the novel’s world, that is, the problems confronting the characters in the novel — the hold of the Cartel. The novel views the problem as not restricted to the geopolitics of an unnamed Nigeria. For the problem is not simply the cartel; the cartel is one link in the chain. Ofeyi is fired after having been chided by the government mediator in the Corporation Chairman’s office in response to the “sinister reports [about Ofeyi] which began to come in on [his] account of [his] activities.”³³ Ofeyi counters with his complaint that even though he knows where the profits go, he does not know “where the workers disappear to, the so-called agitators.”³⁴

Ofeyi’s dispute with the Corporation, then, turns out not to be only that. In taking issue with the Corporation, we see that he has confronted the entire government and corporate machinery. For here we find out that the Cocoa Corporation is not a self-enclosed, isolated whole, carrying out its work of accruing profits on its own. Indeed, the Corporation is inextricably tied to the government, as becomes clear at the supposed mediation by the government official during the dispute between Ofeyi and the Corporation, an “industrial dispute between employee and employer.”³⁵ Ofeyi notices that the government mediator continues to refer to the Corporation as “we.” Moreover, in response to Ofeyi’s complaint about the health benefits of the cocoa products, we are told that the products have been examined by “analysts, chosen and approved by the Government ministry. And we choose to accept their report rather than that of some disgruntled backroom chemist whose

qualifications were probably obtained in Moscow.”³⁶

This reference to Moscow alerts us to yet another link in the chain. For what the government representative indicates here, in the negative, is also his own government’s alliance with the other pole of the Cold War, that is, the United States. This association is reinforced when Ofeyi is summarily given a leave of absence, and sent abroad by the Cartel superiors, as a preemptive response to the first sign that Ofeyi might be an “agitator” among the workers. The alibi is that Ofeyi’s subversive jingles and advertisement campaign are losing their edge. And it is here that the U.S. makes its first appearance as the prime site for Ofeyi’s rehabilitation. One of the cartel “bloodhounds” advises Ofeyi to take a leave of absence, travel, and learn especially from the Americans, who have “the greatest advertising know-how in the world”; indeed, they “are such a prosperous nation” because they “really understand the profession.”³⁷ This casual reference to America as the optimal location for honing Ofeyi’s advertising skills, for “obtain[ing] the best possible results from [his] talents,” is only superficially casual.³⁸ Ofeyi is not only to be sent away for a duration suitable for his rehabilitation as an advertising genius, but also for a political agent to be reformed into an obedient and “happy...employee.”³⁹ And since the “Americans have the greatest advertising know-how,” this purpose will be best served by a visit to America, prime among the stops on Ofeyi’s itinerary.

And if this location of America as the site for political rehabilitation is not clear enough, America rears its menacing head again when Ofeyi’s partner, Iriyise, is to be “disappear[ed] for a while.”⁴⁰ Chief Biga, one of the four pillars of the Cartel, threatens her with getting “scarred for life” in the event that she does not accept his offer of disappearance. Here again is another political agent prime for reformation, and the car that is to carry her is a Pontiac: “Alone of all the cars that came into that area only the long American amphibian risked its fenders and paint on the ninety-degree turn through narrow wall corners into the court-yard.”⁴¹ The risking of fenders and paint, the danger in the invasion is compounded by the description of the car and its horn as breaching the harmony of the working-class courtyard, or, as Ofeyi calls it, the early “Petty-Traders’ Pause” and the later “White Collar Silence.”⁴² In this attempt at Ofeyi’s and Iriyise’s rehabilitation also lies a generalized disruption of the workers’ lives and activities. And given that this is precisely the disappearance from which Iriyise emerges only as a destroyed consciousness with a comatose body, this reference to America as the privileged location for reformation becomes a reference to its destructive potential to reform beyond recognition, to beat into submission. This is precisely where the novel, through a series of deferrals — from the Corporation, to the national government, to the U.S. — uncovers the system of

imperialism, and makes a connection between the problem and the solution.

Once the novel has discovered this connection, it finds the problem too overwhelming, too large to tackle by itself. Indeed, the novel self-consciously abandons its search for revolutionary agency and turns inward, surveying the social decay that overwhelms efforts at resistance, while meditating on the function of art and itself. The novel's comment upon itself comes through the figure of Iriyise, the Cocoa Princess, as herself an object of art — her face and dancing body, choreographed, objectified in the advertisements for the cocoa products. Iriyise's body-as-art becomes the sign of the exotic, the regional flavor for sale on the world market. The description of Iriyise dancing the cocoa dance, rising from a pod, brings home the failed nature of narrative as a political act, especially if we keep in mind that this performance is itself a promotion for the cocoa products:

The pod lifted slowly, guided by unseen forces Iriyise ... floated out on a layer of palm oil under her skin, [and] stepped onto an earth-covered stage ... into a thunderstorm of applause ... but Iriyise saw nothing of the thousand eyes [She was] deaf to every cue Palm oil ran freely in her veins until, exhausted, she gathered herself for the final leap Back within her shell, lathered, she felt, not in sweat, but in rich black oil she waited again to be freed.⁴³

This containment in art form becomes central to understanding the novel. Iriyise, arrested in the shell, encapsulates the novel's statement upon itself — that art in this world, of oil and cartels, is arrested, waiting to be freed from its reified existence. And here is where the novel's double-bind appears. On one hand, Iriyise had been the space of subversion: when Ahime lures Ofeyi to Aiyero, setting the stage for potential resistance to the Cartel, he does it through Iriyise. On the other hand, if Iriyise, at this moment of performance, can show the abandonment of an artist, seeing and hearing nothing, absorbed in her performance, herself as the object of art, this object is confined, arrested, and, as such, commodified. It is no coincidence that after Iriyise is disappeared by Chief Biga for her part in Ofeyi's subversive activities, she reappears by the end of the novel in a coma. What is now, in this scene, a momentary confinement in a cocoa "shell," becomes revealed later as an intensified state of confinement in a comatose, "crumpled form" — an almost dead object produced by the arts of state and corporate repression.⁴⁴ At the heart of the novel is this very realization, that art in the world of cartels and profits is reduced to a possible, but failed, political act.

What we have laid out so far are the ways in which the novel grapples with the problem of finding revolutionary agency. But this aspect of the

novel is also what has garnered the most criticism. In a comprehensive appraisal of Soyinka's work, Biodun Jeyifo argues cogently for the centrality to Soyinka's project of "the elaboration of a distinctively African literary modernity through a poetics of culture and a revolutionary tragic mythopoesis which is also neo-modernist."⁴⁵ Jeyifo astutely observes that Soyinka's writings pivot around the "notion of an inviolable, infrangible self" that refuses to be subdued — modeled on the heroic Ogun figure who alone, of all the gods, traverses the abyss.⁴⁶ Precisely in its action on behalf of the rest of the community, this self also acts as a "'representative' self, a self that aspires to speak and act in defense of a whole culture or community."⁴⁷ Jeyifo sees *Anomy*, however, as uncharacteristic of Soyinka's writings. In his landmark study of Soyinka's oeuvre, Jeyifo claims for Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* the status of a unique failure. Calling the novel "Soyinka's greatest artistic flop," Jeyifo suggests that the novel is marred by implausible narrative and characters: if Ofeyi and Iriyise seem hollow and "unconvincing" "as symbols of revolutionary renewal in the revisionary version of the Orphic myth deployed in the novel," the representation of the Cartel bosses as symbols of "incarnate evil" also lacks credibility.⁴⁸ Jeyifo claims further that the representation of the cross-river terrain and the people, as the "natural habitat of incarnate evil," is inflated. Jeyifo's point is that the characters and events become simply types in a schematic allegory and lack the ambiguity and subtlety that otherwise characterize Soyinka's oeuvre.

But what if we turn the tables here and see this novel, not as attempting to conform to the rest of Soyinka's oeuvre, but as exceeding the limits of the oeuvre? What if we see the novel as not only a critique, but, more importantly, as an attempt to move beyond the parameters of the mythic system that the rest of the oeuvre has created — in particular, the myth of the individual hero acting on behalf of the community? Seen in this light, then, the novel is structurally determined to fail since it attempts what it cannot do, that is, transgress the limits that the form of the novel imposes. In doing so, it attempts to challenge the very notion of representation. The story of national regeneration, then, cannot be told through the exploits of the hero who brings the culprits to justice. Indeed, the story of national regeneration cannot be told, period, precisely because the form of the novel itself acts as a barrier: the plot is narratable only through the events as they relate to individual protagonists, but whose individual stories are not adequate to the national story, let alone remake the national story. Indeed, the individual "hero," Ofeyi, is anything but a tragic mythic hero; however much we may identify with him, he becomes the sign of an impossibility. In the face of systemic nationwide and worldwide corporate domination, the attempts of the individual protagonists cannot but seem and *be* puerile, ineffectual. In other

words, the question here is: what if, ultimately, the subject of history in this novel is not the individual protagonist, but narrative itself?

In order to continue this exploration, a comparison with Soyinka's plays is instructive. For if the creation of this representative and tragically heroic self is a signature of Soyinka's artistic prowess, *Death and the King's Horseman* serves well as our point of comparison. Perhaps one of the most discussed of the plays, and widely acclaimed for artistic merit, *Death and the King's Horseman* depicts a struggle between indigenous tradition and an uncomprehending and bureaucratic colonial rule.⁴⁹ According to tradition, Elesin, the King's Horseman, must accompany his liege to heaven when the latter dies. This entails that Elesin must take his own life before the king is buried. But as soon as the District Officer, Simon Pilkings, gets word of this news, he orders that the already reluctant Elesin be imprisoned to keep him from taking his life. In prison, however, Elesin hears that Olunde, his son, has taken the place of his father, and has killed himself in keeping with tradition. The body of the son is brought to Elesin, rolled up in a mat; upon seeing the body of his dead son, Elesin strangles himself with the very chains that are to keep him from doing so. The play ends, though in a bloodbath, with a sense of continuity of tradition: Elesin's young bride who had accompanied him to prison is pregnant with the Horseman's child, and is led away by Iyaloja, who had brought Olunde's corpse to Elesin, in order to awaken Elesin's sense of honor. She leads the young bride away with the words, "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind to the unborn."⁵⁰ Although the play closes with this sense of continuity and hope, this is only a representational continuity: the "dirge rises in volume, and the women continue their sway," but the "[l]ights fade to a black-out," leaving the characters in a blacked-out box, away from the realm of the audience for whom the play is being performed.⁵¹

In this sense, representational continuity bespeaks a strict honouring of boundaries between the world and the text. The integrity of the work of art is kept intact; it does not leak out into the world of the real. This containment issues from an implicit acknowledgment on the part of the play of the primacy of its collective nature, since what is embedded in the performance of the play is direct interaction with the audience. The play, having started out as a primarily collective form, turns by the end into its dialectical other; that is, it requires and posits formal constraints to maintain its boundaries from the world. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., commenting on *Death and the King's Horseman*, sees the play as representative of Soyinka's ability to create a "self-contained, hermetic world, an effected reality" and calls this ability Soyinka's "greatest achievement," for it also bespeaks his ability to "create a reality, and not merely to reflect reality."⁵² For our purposes, here, it

is important to note that the creation of an alternate reality, a "self-contained, hermetic world," is possible for the play precisely because the play is always already, structurally, an interactive form. The play must strive not to overspill the boundaries between the text and the world. In this struggle lies the play's success.

The dynamics of Soyinka's novel, *Season of Anomy*, are qualitatively different from those of his plays. As opposed to the play, the novel, having arisen from the creation of a leisured class under bourgeois society, has historically evolved as a particularly private form. The novel must labor under the burden of its structural hermeticism, and it is this labor — this failed attempt — that certainly makes this novel different from Soyinka's oeuvre. For here what we find is not the creation of an alternate "hermetic" reality, but, rather, a heroic and tragic struggle, on the part of the text, to bridge that gap between the world and the text. More specifically, here, if the play's heroic Olunde, acting on behalf of his erstwhile father, has been able to maintain traditional integrity and defy imminent cultural collapse resulting from the colonial encounter, it is not so much the novel's male protagonist, Ofeyi, but rather narrative itself that undertakes this tragic heroic traversing of the void between representation and reality.

What we have already seen, however, during our discussion of Iriyise's dance, is that the novel also sees itself, and art, as a failed political act, as unable to affect reality, because of its confinement in representational form. But this realization on the part of the novel — of its arrest in art form — is not its final statement on itself. Indeed, this realization engenders an act of will, as it were, to refuse the status of arrest to which it sees itself doomed. This is the kind of failure, then, that turns into its very obverse — success. For the point here is not that *Anomy* is a failed attempt to represent an alternative. It is that the novel itself recognizes its structural failure and attempts to will away the boundaries between the text and the world. In other words, Soyinka's novel recognizes, and responds to, precisely this limitation on the work of art — a limit that the novel views with a sense of frustration. Because the novel recognizes its own structural limitations, that is, its essentially individual character — not only in that its primary reader is the individual reader, but also in that the narrative necessarily unfolds through the exploits of individual protagonists — it nevertheless seeks to overcome this limit. This response is what makes *Anomy* uncharacteristic of Soyinka's oeuvre. If, on one hand, the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, may be said to belong to the realm of wish fulfillment, wherein the contradictions of an indigenous culture besieged by invading colonial regulations and mores are resolved on the representational plane, the novel, on the other hand, recognizes this as wish fulfillment, and seeks to resolve what it sees as

contradictions of reality on the real plane. The novel undertakes this endeavor via an attempt to demolish the boundaries between the world and the text, between reality and its representation, in order that the represented resolutions may intervene as real resolutions.

In this sense, Iriyise's double-bind, as we had argued earlier, is also the novel's double-bind. This arrest of the spectacle and of the spectator, the object of transformation and the would-be agent, into discrete compartments, becomes horrifically clear during a scene of perversely slow and methodical mutilation and killing by a hunting group of an unnamed human figure transformed into a monkey wearing clothes. The narrative voice shows us Ofeyi and Zaccheus, hiding and watching helpless as the hunters stalk the already maimed human:

A movement from the stunned creature, a stirring in the matted rags, a twig, a tubercular arm scabbled on the tar ... again all was still. Only for an instant. The eyes of the watching group were suddenly alerted to the evidence that life still existed in him. Again the claw moved on as if it sought to smooth down the protruding pebbles And only then was there animation in the eyes of his hunters who had waited ... just for this moment. As if this flicker of life was a sign, a sanction and a command that must be fulfilled before it again petered out they swept him up, bore him onto the grass verge and held him by his wasted limbs to earth.⁵³

This sacrifice is completed first with the slitting of the throat, and then the cutting of his genitals, which are stuffed into the victim's mouth. Afterwards, aggressors "stepped back and looked on the transformation they had wrought."⁵⁴ If Ofeyi and Zaccheus watch helpless, the narrative voice has also curiously distanced itself from the "stunned creature" on the ground. It has already described the human victim of this sacrificial ritual as a "monkey wearing clothes."⁵⁵ It, too, waits and watches the movements, transfixed, not only like our protagonist, but also like the victimizers.

With these passages, the novel swings from a search for workers' solidarity challenging the power of the Cartel to an exploration of the self-destructive violence of the Cartel's victims — the torture and ritual mutilation of one of their own. Paradoxically, the novel's retreat from social agency emphasizes such agency, by contrasting workers' collective struggle with a passive relationship between the spectacle and the viewers, which form concentric circles. If the hunters watch, they are, also, actors in this scene of inhumane depravity; Ofeyi and Zaccheus watch the hunters and the hunted, helpless but entranced, actors in their inaction, while the narrative

voice watches and relates the narrative, as if in the outermost of concentric circles of viewers, transcribing the events. If workers' self-activity has failed to emerge to resolve the contradictions, African "traditions" do not provide an alternative either. Rather, the continued penetration of imperialism in postcolonial Africa leads to social decay and violence. The novel seems to have reached an impasse.

In this apparent impasse lies the novel's comment about the social function of narrative, and of art — that art necessitates the establishment of a contemplative distance between the viewer and the object of art. The realization is that the object of art is bound to inertia, an arrest, a crystallization into a discrete moment. But also in this very realization that engenders the impasse lies the seed of a further consciousness, and action, on the part of the novel, whereby the novel seeks to bridge that contemplative distance, the void. The impasse is thus dissolved: if it is the case that the narrative voice occupies the outermost of the concentric circles within the narrative, and is most distanced from the narrated event, itself not the participant, the actor in the event, it is also the case that this apparently distanced narrative voice is, simultaneously, the actor of the narration itself. It thus turns out that this construction of concentric circles of narration/viewing is not limited, that this series of circles itself lies within a larger circle in which the real-world reader is interpolated into the actions of the narrative voice. And the implication is that this moment of discrete isolation is continuous with totality as a process; in this further circle, the reader occupies the position that the narrative voice had occupied in the previous, inner circle. In the act of reading — and in this sense, reading itself becomes an act of narration — the reader becomes the actor, the agent that makes history.

Specifically, the novel holds the reader — even the first-world reader — *potentially* responsible for the victimization, in being a silent, consuming party to the victimization. It is in this context of potential culpability that the novel's anxiety about "resignation" or "abdication of the will" is to be read:

Was this what they fought against, abdication of the will, resignation, withdrawal or enforced withdrawal — what did it matter? — the half-death state of inertia, neither-nor, sensing but unaffacting, the ultimate condition of the living death? Looking beyond [Iriyise's] body for consolation [Ofeyi] glanced through a barred window, through restricted openings at a handkerchief firmament. A few stars pocked the sky and he wondered whose constellation they might be, the detached movement of worlds which transgressed his present

stagnation from one corner of the window to another, right over the edge of void.⁵⁶

In looking “over the edge of void,” beyond the comatose body and the withdrawn consciousness, beyond the arrest within barred windows, and towards the sky, towards “the detached movement of worlds,” Ofeyi makes a conscious effort to refuse the “abdication of the will.” The sky becomes a firmament, a distant expanse, but it is a “handkerchief firmament,” not so expansive — and something banal, everyday, and, most importantly, something graspable: “the detached movement of the worlds” beyond, the constellations beyond, become not so detached after all. For despite its self-consciousness about its inability, and precisely because of it, the novel strives to connect what may seem detached events and circumstances. It is this sense of looking beyond, on one hand, from an immediate scene of victimization, to the Cartel, and finally to the U.S., and, on the other hand, from represented agents of change, to readers as agents, that the novel reiterates over and over again, along with its anxiety of suffocation and dissolution that is attendant upon the inward look. For if the problem of the nation is variously concatenated, the solution itself must follow the same structure of strategic deferrals, from the activity of the characters in the novel, to the activity of the narrative voice, to the activity of its readers.

Concomitantly, above all, what is to be noted is that despite holding the reader responsible, despite the chastening of the reader, the novel eschews the politics of guilt proper: the novel holds the reader responsible, not for the victimization itself, but for watching the victimization, and as such sees the reader also as victimized. Though the above passage directly refers to Iriyise’s comatose state, “the half-death state of inertia,” of “enforced withdrawal” from the world into a shell, it also voices Ofeyi’s anxiety about his own paralysis: lying near Iriyise’s comatose body in prison, initially, “he did not move from the spot where he had regained consciousness.”⁵⁷ “[E]nforced withdrawal,” then, suggests rather a politics of solidarity. Ofeyi’s own paralysis next to Iriyise’s body in prison, but also in watching the hunters’ mutilation of their human victim, is similar to Iriyise’s “enforced withdrawal” under a “tyrannical hold”; furthermore, Iriyise’s loss is also Ofeyi’s loss.⁵⁸ Indeed, Iriyise’s prison-nurse, who, Ofeyi wonders, may also be the “female warder,” is recalled as “nothing beyond a blur of the frightened woman, cowering beside a tree” — frightened, forced into being the warder.⁵⁹

But though the “madness and general contagion” of the cross-river people is excoriated, it comes along with a recognition of their interests as separate from those of the Cartel bosses.⁶⁰ The charge of complicity certainly

is operative here, especially against “the curtailed bodies and minds who slugged one another over half-chewed meat and buried their teeth in pestilent carrion.”⁶¹ But what is in store for them is nothing more than “half-chewed meat” and “pestilent carrion.” More importantly, the possibility of redemption, through the recognition of conditions in common, is far from foreclosed: Suberu, the mute giant and once-inmate turned prison guard, finally helps Ofeyi escape and himself walks away, leaving the madness behind him. Suberu’s transformation from prison guard to Ofeyi’s helper results from Ofeyi’s attempt to invoke a sense of solidarity in Suberu, to “reach” him through drawing a parallel between Iriyise’s state and Suberu’s state of confinement: “Do you know what it means to be exploited? To be kept in a death row all your life?”⁶² The novel, then, beckons its readers to will themselves to act, and, in the words of the doctor, to “await the opportunity to strike back at their tormentors,” just as Ofeyi had willed himself out of his paralysis: Ofeyi “sat up suddenly as rationality seeped through and he realized that his situation was all too temporary.”⁶³ It is in this way that the novel turns what is at one moment a failure into a driving force in the very next moment: through the recognition of its own failure the novel attempts to interpolate its readers, thus situating itself in the world of real agents, as, not itself the individual agent of change, but a moment in the process of change. In its attempt to engage the reader as an actor in the project of transforming reality, the novel turns its very failure into its strength.

Notes

¹ Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 30.

² Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 61.

³ For a discussion of Soyinka’s politics, see Olaniyan’s *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, especially pages 43-66. For a more sympathetic account of Soyinka’s politics vis-à-vis class, see Gareth Griffiths and David Moody, “Of Marx and Missionaries: Soyinka and the Survival of Universalism in Post-Colonial Literary Theory,” in *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing*, ed. Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1989) 74-85.

⁴ Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (New York, Macmillan, 1965) 253.

⁵ Soyinka, *Interpreters* 253.

⁶ Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy* (New York: Third Press, 1974) 254.

⁷ See, for instance, A. C. Okere, "Art, Mimesis, Mythography and Social Relevance: The Aesthetics of Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*," *Literary Criterion* 29:4 (1994): 44-54; Chidi Amuta, "From Myth to Ideology: The Socio-Political Content of Soyinka's War Writings," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23:1 (1988): 116-29; and Irene Assiba d'Almeida, "From Social Commitment to Ideological Awareness: A Study of Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*," *Ufahamu: Journal of the African Activist Association* 10:3 (1983): 13-28. In elucidating the implications of an intertextual dialogue between Soyinka's novels, Juliet Okonkwo also notes this concern with social change. See Juliet Okonkwo, "The Essential Unity of Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*," *African Literature Today* 11 (1980): 110-21.

⁸ See Eustace Palmer, "Negritude Rediscovered: A Reading of the Recent Novels of Armah, Ngugi, and Soyinka," *International Fiction Review* 8:1 (1981): 1-11. See also Bonnie J. Barthold, *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981).

⁹ For instance, see Werner Sedlak, "Wole Soyinka's Cultural Activism: His Representations of Detention in *The Detainee*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *Season of Anomy* and *The Man Died*," *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 23-24 (2001): 41-54.

¹⁰ Ato Quayson's suggestive discussion notes not simply African, but global concerns in Soyinka's use of a distinctly African mythopoesis. Quayson sees Soyinka as meditating on his "culture's conceptual system and its place in the world" (210), and as "adopt[ing] both a national and post-national posture in drawing on Yoruba, Nigerian, and even African verities at a world level" (213). Ato Quayson, "The Space of Transformations: Theory, Myth, and Ritual in the Work of Wole Soyinka," in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001) 201-36.

¹¹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 2.

¹² Soyinka, *Anomy* 2.

¹³ Soyinka, *Anomy* 13.

¹⁴ Soyinka, *Anomy* 13.

¹⁵ Soyinka, *Anomy* 6.

¹⁶ Soyinka, *Anomy* 6.

¹⁷ Soyinka, *Anomy* 24.

¹⁸ Soyinka, *Anomy* 24.

¹⁹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 24.

²⁰ Soyinka, *Anomy* 27.

²¹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 28.

²² Soyinka, *Anomy* 169.

²³ Soyinka, *Anomy* 170.

²⁴ Soyinka, *Anomy* 171.

²⁵ Soyinka, *Anomy* 171.

²⁶ Soyinka, *Anomy* 172.

²⁷ Soyinka, *Anomy* 173.

²⁸ Soyinka, *Anomy* 173.

²⁹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 173.

³⁰ Soyinka, *Anomy* 320.

³¹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 309.

³² Soyinka, *Anomy* 307.

³³ Soyinka, *Anomy* 53.

³⁴ Soyinka, *Anomy* 54.

³⁵ Soyinka, *Anomy* 56.

³⁶ Soyinka, *Anomy* 55.

³⁷ Soyinka, *Anomy* 21.

³⁸ Soyinka, *Anomy* 21.

³⁹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 21.

⁴⁰ Soyinka, *Anomy* 64.

⁴¹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 67.

⁴² Soyinka, *Anomy* 65.

⁴³ Soyinka, *Anomy* 40-41.

⁴⁴ Soyinka, *Anomy* 305.

⁴⁵ Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka* 45.

⁴⁶ Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka* 25.

⁴⁷ Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka* 26.

⁴⁸ Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka* 178 and 190.

⁴⁹ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

⁵⁰ Soyinka, *Horseman* 76.

⁵¹ Soyinka, *Horseman* 76.

⁵² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death," *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001) 73.

⁵³ Soyinka, *Anomy* 164.

⁵⁴ Soyinka, *Anomy* 164.

⁵⁵ Soyinka, *Anomy* 164.

⁵⁶ Soyinka, *Anomy* 306.

⁵⁷ Soyinka, *Anomy* 306.

⁵⁸ Soyinka, *Anomy* 308.

⁵⁹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 306.

⁶⁰ Soyinka, *Anomy* 309.

⁶¹ Soyinka, *Anomy* 309.

⁶² Soyinka, *Anomy* 315.

⁶³ Soyinka, *Anomy* 315 and 307.