THE WRITER IN MODERN AFRICA

AFRICAN-SCANDINAVIAN WRITERS' CONFERENCE, STOCKHOLM 1967

Edited by PER WÄSTBERG
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Foreword

An African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference was held at Hässelby Castle outside Stockholm between 6 and 9 February 1967. It was jointly convened by the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, the Swedish Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Council for Swedish Information Abroad. The participants were twenty-four African writers and about as many writers and critics from Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Ezekiel Mphahlele acted as chairman.

The aim of this volume is to reflect the dominant theme of the proceedings: the writer in the modern African society, his individuality and his social commitment.

Thus, surveys of the different African literatures and several other papers read to the conference have been omitted, as well as the contributions by Scandinavian writers. For the record, the Scandinavians speaking at the conference were Robert Alftan, Clas Engström, Lars Furulund, Uffe Harder, Gunnar Helander, Karl-Gustaf Hildebrand, Olof Lagercrantz, Sara Lidman, Artur Lundkvist, Göran Palm, Jørgen Schleimann, Jørgen Sonne, and Per Wästberg.

A collage of voices from Africa. A confrontation of temperaments, the outcome of which is not measured in tangible results. Views, not facts. Out of a mass of material, I have made a necessarily subjective selection.

Photostats of the papers presented to the conference and transcripts of the discussions may be ordered from the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, Sweden.

Per Wästberg
Per Wästberg

Opening remarks

On behalf of the Scandinavian tribes I welcome you to these ancient and snowy surroundings, in which you will spend the statistically coldest week of the year. Among you, in the last decade, there has been much discussion on whether to use the adopted languages, the colonisers' languages, such as English and French, or the indigenous African languages for the new literature, and much has been said in argument on both sides. Most of you, however, write in English or French; you have a world-wide audience, scattered as it may be. By comparison, writers here in Scandinavia are the villagers of world literature. There are many more people in the world who speak Wolof than Finnish. Many more understand Yoruba than Swedish. Ours is a tribal literature, of which you know hardly anything—and very little trickles out in translations. So you simply have to take my word for it that the Scandinavian authors and critics present here are distinguished and well-known in our countries.

The first congress of negro writers and artists was arranged in Paris in 1956 by Présence Africaine. Afro-Asian writers have met at congresses in New Delhi, Tashkent and Cairo. Colloquies of different kinds have taken place in Africa. Still, this seminar in Stockholm is the first of its sort. It brings together authors from Africa, that is to say, no West Indians, no coloured writers from the United States. Our concern is not with skin colour, not even so much with négritude as a movement of ideas uniting the black peoples of the world; our concern is now with the literature of a continent.

This seminar takes the form of a confrontation between African authors and some of their colleagues from Scandinavia. I hope we shall compare experiences of the past as well as
share the experience of being here together. This is not an official meeting between nations and cultures, so let us skip the rhetoric used on such occasions. It is a meeting between a few people, and personal contacts are its main purpose. One may safely say that relations between individuals are what preoccupies literature in all ages, and in the world today, in literature as in politics, nothing seems more important than that we can keep talking intelligibly to each other, for man has nothing to trust but himself and nothing to fear more than himself.

There are things and ideas African. We speak of African socialism, the African personality, Pan-Africanism, the African mind. There are several definitions of each of these concepts, which are often quite hard to grasp. The inability of the west and the communist powers to understand African politics, as shown, for example, in the recent coups and upheavals, derives from egocentricity in outlook: they fail to see that developments in Africa need not take the same course as in Europe, whether Marxist-revolutionary or not. We outsiders should be aware of something special going on in Africa after all. On the other hand, it is then easy to write off Africa as a concept too difficult to grasp, something savage, strange or exotic. So one has to try to strike a balance: to give Africa its due but at the same time stress what is universal in its politics, social life, and literature.

What then is African literature? I am thinking of the books published by people living in or originating from the forty or so countries in Africa. And I think we may still—but this will be debated—speak of African literature as a meaningful entity in a way in which we cannot speak of European literature. But very soon, with the growth of national literatures, this will not be so.

Another definition was put forward some years ago at a conference on African literature and the universities at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone. It read as follows: “Creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral.” The result was that Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness qualified as ‘African literature but not Graham Greene's The
Heart of the Matter, which could have been set anywhere outside Africa. Chinua Achebe remarked at the time that he was amused by the circumstances in which Conrad, a Pole writing in English, produced African literature, while the South African Peter Abrahams, if he wrote about his experience in the West Indies, would not be accepted as African literature.

The conclusion is that you cannot define African literature as one single unit with certain characteristics. One is forced to use the term “African literature” in a deliberately loose way, remembering that what constitutes African literature is a number of national and ethnic literatures throughout Africa.

Whatever it is, this literature, you write it. Many of you, understandably enough, are bored of being paraded not as representatives of yourselves, of your own vision of life, but of your country or a young continent, a new power; in short, you are forced to represent a multi-levelled reality that too many try to squeeze into a cliché, which is easier to handle and safer to pronounce upon.

We shall hear a lot during our seminar about the relations between the individual writer and society. In Europe there is a notion that an artist lives on the edge of society—behaving unpredictably, revolting against society, which looks at him with suspicion and does not care about him. We know more or less what writers expect of society; but as Achebe has said, “What is not so well documented is what society expects of its writers.” In Africa, I think, society—not only the institutions but the ordinary readers—expect rather much, above all, they like the author to be their teacher. They complain to Chinua Achebe that he has not put the usual questions and answers at the end of his novels that they are used to in schoolbooks. This is not to imply that the African author takes orders from his audience, only that he remains aware of the very direct influence he has on his readers.

One must remember that the traditional role of the African poet is unlike that of the western artist. In the African community the poet is there to celebrate and not to subvert society. But what he celebrates is not the surface appearance of that society but a world in which the spiritual and the material being are one.
The destruction of traditional African values by European colonialism and Christianity has changed the role of the poet and artist. Lewis Nkosi is among those who have pointed out that for the first time "the African artist is confronting the community as an individual whose vision may not conform to that of the statesman, the political or the religious leader.... What the poet or the artist seeks to create is no longer necessarily inseparable from what the politician and the economist seek to create. Hence we can now expect to see real censorship in African societies...."

And Nkosi points to Senghor as an example: the legislator and poet in the same man. As a poet, Senghor decries the effect of industrialisation on the instinctive expression of the African personality, but as an administrator and President of Senegal he does everything to foster a puritanical spirit among his citizens and to make them understand that work is something good in itself—a notion totally strange to Africa, as indeed I believe to most writers anywhere.

There is an abstract Africa as well as the one we read about in the newspapers. There is Africa as an image, as a mystique. In the nineteenth century men and women went to Africa to die—disappointed in love in Europe, hunting lions as compensation, or looking for something which they often had no words for. Mary Kingsley openly declared that this was her motive, and anyone reading of Livingstone’s last journey through the swamps in what is now Zambia will hardly question his obsession with death. Rider Haggard expressed—as Graham Greene and others have pointed out—the Victorian death-wish in She, and many popular novelists of that time used Africa as the liberation from everything that was too complicated in Europe. Africa is used in different ways; in Laurens van der Post, for instance, one observes how symbols, when carelessly handled, turn into clichés.

There is also a spiritual Africa that exists in the imagination of those of us who have never been there. It is an Africa not of jungles or tribes but rather the unmapped, untapped territory of the subconscious—the Africa of Saul Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King, the Africa of the values of one single individual. This Africa is—as Nadine Gordimer has said—only
a new name for an old idea—man's deep feeling that he must lose himself in order to find himself.

Mungo Park, Livingstone, Stanley—they are now dead, and in some ways they were not explorers, any more than you are new explorers of Sweden. Africa existed before them, and one is not surprised that the Congolese have removed a statue of Stanley with the inscription that he discovered the Congo River some time in the 1870's.

The nineteenth century was the time when Europeans mapped a territory known already to the Africans, but the Europeans never managed to understand what the maps stood for. What they saw was not what the Africans saw or what we see now. So revaluation must continue and exploration must not cease—of Africa and of the mind. And Africa today provides some of the outward signs which we read to gain knowledge of ourselves.
Wole Soyinka

The writer in a modern African state

Does he exist at all, the writer in a contemporary Africa? If it were possible to suggest an opposite background to the student of African literature or at least to create an entirely different background, would a stranger to the literary creations of African writers find any discrepancy between subject matter and environment or be any more deeply puzzled than he is today at the lack of vital relevance between the literary concerns of writers and the pattern of reality that has overwhelmed even the writers themselves in the majority of the modern African states? I do not concern myself now with the exceptions, which are in any case so few and without any impact. And I certainly exclude the South African situation for the moment, since I do not, alas, possess the superior complacency of a fellow writer from Africa who uttered sentiments more or less in the following words: "One is tempted to ask", he says, "what is the South African writer doing for himself? A little less talking and protest and a bit more action, especially from the so-called exiles, might be more to the point ..." etc. I regret very much that I have not the exact quotation here, for it is the kind of remark which proves very clearly that the easiest solution to any problem is to maintain complete ignorance of it.

One opposite temptation is to simplify the task by refusing to consider South Africa as an African state, and this certainly has some validity; for is the South African population not legitimately a white one in its entirety, since the black Africans within it have not the status of human beings? The situation in which the South African writer finds himself is quite simply out of this world, and many people who do not possess divine
omniscience and do not contain in themselves a one-man verbal guerilla force, like the writer I have just quoted, are beginning to feel that the solutions are literally out of this world. The experience of the South African writer is approached by that of other Africans only remotely, that is to say, wholly inadequately.

My concern in this talk is primarily with the non-South African writer and why, before very long, he may begin to envy the South African the bleak immensity of his problems. For the South African has still the right to hope, and this prospect of a future yet uncompromised by failure on his own part, in his own right, is something which has lately ceased to exist for other African writers.

While we may debate what constitutes an African writer and what does not, one breed of humanity which we cannot comfortably deny is that of the writer. In new societies which begin the seductive experiment in authoritarianism, it has become a familiar experience to watch society crush the writer under a load of guilt for his daring to express a sensibility and an outlook apart from, and independent of, the mass direction. The revolutionary mood in society is a particularly potent tyrant in this respect, and since the writer is, at the very least, sensitive to mood, he respects the demand of the moment and effaces his definition as a writer by an act of choice. And in the modern African state especially, the position of the writer has been such that he is in fact the very prop of the state machinery. Independence in every instance has meant an emergency pooling of every mental resource. The writer must, for the moment at least (he persuade himself), postpone that unique reflection on experience and events which is what makes a writer—and constitute himself into a part of that machinery that will actually shape events. Let this impulse be clearly understood and valued for itself; the African writer found that he could not deny his society; he could, however, temporarily at least, deny himself. He therefore took his place in the new state as a privileged person, placed personally above the effects of the narrowness of vision which usually accompanies the impatience of new nations, African, European or Asian. He, the special eye and ear, the special knowledge and
response, lost even his re-creative consciousness, which might from time to time, left active and alert in uncreative work, have demanded a re-examination of his own position.

If he has not already arrived at this discovery, the writer from East and West African states is coming closer to the terrible understanding that it is not his South African comrade who is the object of compassion. Already he has begun to shrink from the bewildered stare of the South African, knowing that he, the supposedly free mind who once symbolised a loop-hole for the dead-end of the South African dilemma, has himself become the creature of despair. The change in circumstances is quite direct. The background starts at the united opposition by the colonised to the external tyrant. Victory, of sorts, came and the writer submitted his integrity to the monolithic stresses of the time. For this any manifesto seemed valid, any -ism could be embraced with a clear conscience. With few exceptions the writer directed his energies to enshrining victory, to re-affirming his identification with the aspirations of nationalism and the stabilisation of society.

The third stage, the stage at which we find ourselves, is the stage of disillusionment, and it is this which prompts an honest examination of what has been the failure of the African writer, as a writer. And this is not to say that, if the African writer had truly responded to the political moment of his society, he would not still be faced with disillusionment. For the situation in Africa today is the same as in the rest of the world; it is not one of the tragedies which come of isolated human failures, but the very collapse of humanity. Nevertheless the African writer has done nothing to vindicate his existence, nothing to indicate that he is even aware that this awful collapse has taken place. For he has been generally without vision.

The distractions away from vision were, of course, enormous, the distractions away from a vision clarified in human terms and not in dogma. And they were such as gave full scope to the exploitation by demagogic opportunists of the new aggressive national consciousness. Reality, the ever-present fertile reality, was ignored by the writer and resigned to the new visionary—the politician. Since the phase of anti-colonialist tracts, poetry and general inspiration was clearly over and that
purpose rendered redundant, a new distraction must be created for the aggressive demands of the writer's restless mind. And the publishers were at hand, waiting. Cultural definitions became a new source of literature—not so new, in fact, but they acquired a new significance in the context of political independence. The curiosity of the outside world far exceeded its critical faculties and publishers hovered like benevolent vultures over the still-born foetus of the African Muse. At a given signal they tore off bits and pieces, fanned up with powerful wings delusions of significance in commonness and banality. The average published writer in the first few years of the post-colonial era was the most celebrated skin of inconsequence to obscure the true flesh of the African dilemma.

This was the beginning of the abdication of the African writer, and the deception which he caused by fabricating a magnitude of unfelt abstractions. Isolated by his very position in society, he mistook his own personal and temporary cultural predicament for the predicament of his entire society and turned attention from what was really happening to that society. He even tried to give society something that the society had never lost—its identity. Now identity is a much-abused word, and perhaps the African writer is a much-abused person in this respect, for, poet, novelist or sculptor, the artist labours from an in-built, intuitive responsibility, not only to himself but to his roots. The test of the narrowness or the breadth of his vision, however, is whether it is his accidental situations which he tries to stretch to embrace his society and race or the fundamental truths of his community which inform his vision and enable him to acquire even a prophetic insight into the evolution of that society.

In the movement towards chaos in modern Africa, the writer did not anticipate. The understanding language of the outside world, "birth pains", that near-fatal euphemism for death throes, absolved him from responsibility. He was content to turn his eye backwards in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present. But never inwards, never truly into the present, never into the obvious symptoms of the niggling, warning, predictable present, from which alone lay the salvation of ideals.
I do not suggest that nothing of this literature was valid nor that there was not to be found in it genuine literary value. Only that the present philosophy, the present direction of modern Africa, was created by politicians, not writers. Is this not a contradiction in a society whose great declaration of uniqueness to the outside world is that of a superabundant humanism? In pre-colonial days there was no real collaboration between the creative mind and the political; there was hardly the practical, fruitful acknowledgement of the existence of the one by the other. The seeming exception of the French colonial territories had in fact the most disastrous effect of all, for there, more determinedly than in other examples, the articulate élite became in fact the ruling class—and here incidentally we may refute the literary historic sense of many observers who insist that African writing was in fact a product of political freedom. To take the obvious example, one may as well suggest that the négritude movement and its literature did not exist before Kwame Nkrumah set the precedent in independence for other African states. The French case was, only slightly more so than the British colonial, the crystallisation of the writer's image in Africa in the character of the Establishment. When the writer woke from his opium dream of metaphysical abstractions, he found that the politician had used his absence from earth to consolidate his position; more often than not the writer, who in any case belonged to the same or a superior, intellectual class, rationalised the situation and refused to deny himself the rewards of joining the writers in safety and comfort. He was in any case still blinded to the present by the resuscitated splendours of the past. When he is purged from the long deception and has begun to express new wisdoms, the gates of the preventive-detention fortresses open up and close on him. He becomes an exile, impeccable in his dark suit in the offices of the UN or UNESCO, or resorts to new weapons of violence. Poets have lately taken to gun-running and writers are heard of holding up radio stations. In several independent states the writer is part of some underground movement; one coup at least in Africa is reputed to have involved a novelist and a poet.

Perhaps it is time to move away from generalities and remark
briefly on one situation with which I am at least very familiar and in whose details I have naturally been involved, since it happens to be in my own country. Details are, when we look at them, quite pointless, for I am certain that, whatever developments of the situation are as yet unechoed by other African states, will, before long, be duplicated in the same disheartening details and senselessness. I say this with the sense of obviousness with which I am able, for instance, to look at America today and understand very clearly that here is one society which is on the very edge of collapse. Now, Nigeria was at least one African state where, from the beginning, the writers made an effort to protect their own existence by remaining articulately watchful. At no stage was a level of suppression reached comparable to what existed in Ghana before Nkrumah's fall or exists now in Malawi, where a paranoid has successfully muzzled any hope of free expression. Yet, in spite of this, irrational events have so far deranged the course of basic human intercourse that it is impossible, physically impossible, at the moment for the writers of the country even to come together. And a pattern of this appears to me to be establishing itself over the continent. The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past. Of course, the past exists, the real African consciousness establishes this—the past exists now, this moment, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it. This is not to deny the dangers which attend the development of this historic vision—a convenient term for the total acceptance of the human heritage. A historic vision is of necessity universal and any pretence to it must first accept the demand for a total re-examination of the whole phenomenon of humanity. I regard it as dangerous, because to what else can it lead but to the destruction of the will to action? What we are observing in our own time is the total collapse of ideals, the collapse of humanity itself. Action therefore becomes meaningless, the writer is pushed deeper and deeper into self-insulation and withdrawal; his commitment accepts its own hopelessness from the very beginning.
The consideration which brings me, personally, down to earth is the thought of the Angolan or South African writer, either in exile or making his last feeble twitches before the inexorable maul of a desperate regime ends him. It is the exercise of trying to read his mind when he is confronted by the operation of the human factor in black states in which he had fixed his rights and which always represented, at the very least, a temporary haven. And he sees, and he understands for the first time that, given equal opportunity, the black tin god a few thousand miles north of him would degrade and dehumanise his victim as capably as Vorster or Governor Wallace. This fact has been ever-present, this knowledge is not new, and the only wonder is that the romancer, the intellectual myth-maker, has successfully deleted this black portion of a common human equation. And the intermittent European exercises in genocide have been duplicated on the African continent admittedly on a lower scale, but only because of the temporary lack of scientific organisation. We, whose humanity the poets celebrated before the proof, whose lyric innocence was daily questioned by the very pages of the newspapers, are now being forced by disaster, not foresight, to a reconsideration of our relationship to the outer world. It seems to me that the time has now come when the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity.

The myth of irrational nobility, of a racial essence that must come to the rescue of the white depravity, has run its full course. It never in fact existed, for this was not the problem but the camouflage. And it has become important to state this because the old camouflage has begun lately to take on a new camouflage of fresh understanding. The movement which began with the war-cry of cultural separatism, modified itself with an acknowledgement of the historical expediency of the revolt—I refer, of course, to négritude—has found a latter-day succession in a call to be the bridge, to bring about the salvation of the world by a marriage of abstractions. It is a remarkable fact that the European writer, who had both the leisure and the long history of introspection to ascertain his spiritual needs, has not yet sent out a call to the black writer for
rescue. Surely the game has become transparent by now; the writer's philosophy does not prescribe for his own society, his enlargement of commitment conveniently ignores his own inadequacies, overlooking the well-tried adage which cautions very simply, "Physician, heal thyself".

This reconciliation of cultures, this leaven of black contribution to the metallic loaf of European culture, is only another evasion of the inward eye. The despair and anguish which is spreading a miasma over the continent must sooner or later engage the attention of the writer in his own society or else be boldly ignored. For both attitudes are equally valid; only let there be no pretence to a concern which fulfills itself in the undeclared, unproved privations of the European world. When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon. But there can be no further distractions with universal concerns whose balm is spread on abstract wounds, not on the gaping yaws of black inhumanity. A concern with culture strengthens society, but not a concern with mythology. The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself.

From the discussion

Alex La Guma

I have to thank the organizers, and the chairman, for being present at this conference of unskilled labourers. I say "unskilled labourers", because at conferences that I have attended of workers, either in the electrical industry or building industry or whatever, they have always known what they were and they have always discussed the problems from the point of view of knowing exactly where they stood. It appears to me that we come from very distant places and I think the first thing is to determine what our functions are. The previous speaker, Mr Soyinka, has tried to elucidate the position of
African writers in African states. I must categorize that and talk not of African writers in an African state, but of African writers in a modern police-state, because, when we talk about African writers in a modern state, we have to think of the new Africa, the emergent Africa (call it what you like), and sometimes we forget about the southern part of Africa, which exists under totally different conditions. Mr Soyinka has spoken of African writers who are involved in running guns and holding up radio stations. I, as a South African writer, am prepared to run guns and to hold up radio stations, because in South Africa that is what we are faced with, whether we are writers or whether we are common labourers.

We have come here to this conference to discuss the problem of African literature. What is African literature, what is its place in the continent and in the world? It is possible that I may oversimplify things by saying that African literature or Scandinavian literature or American or English literature is simply that which concerns itself with the realities of its prospective or appropriate societies. African literature concerns itself with the realities of Africa. And South African literature, I am prepared to say, is that literature which concerns itself with the realities of South Africa. And what are the realities of South Africa? When we sit down to write a book, I or any of my colleagues around me, we are, as writers, faced with the reality that 80% of the population lives below the bread-line standard; we are faced with the reality that the average daily population of prisoners in South African prisons amounts to 70,000 persons. We are faced with the reality that half the non-white people who died last year were below the age of five years. These are the realities. Even if we want to ignore these gruesome details and think in terms of culture and art in South Africa, we are faced with the fact that in South Africa today people are not allowed to develop their minds along the lines which they prefer. The government of South Africa today and, I would say, previous governments which have been based upon the oppression of people because they are not of one particular colour have decided for the majority of the people what they should learn, what they should read, what they should write and what they should grow up as. The
present Prime Minister made it quite clear when he tried to
describe the cultural future of South Africa. Many years be-
fore he became Prime Minister, in fact, before his party be-
came a power in South Africa, he described his party and his
future government in these words—he said without camou-
flage, without making any bones about it, that "in German it
is called Nazism, in Italy it is called Fascism, and in South
Africa we will call it Christian nationalism". In order to
control the minds of the South African people, the party which
supports the present Prime Minister and his government
established as early as 1939 a commission of inquiry to lay
down the foundation of the cultural life of the South African
people. The Institution for Christian National Education
established some principles and said that, as far as the non-
white people of South Africa were concerned, education should
be based on the principles of trusteeship, non-equality, and
segregation. Its aim should be to inculcate the white man's
view of life, especially that of the Boers, who are the senior
trustees. Of the coloured people, the people to which I belong,
they said that the welfare and happiness of the coloured man
lies in his understanding that he belongs to a separate racial
group and in his being proud of it. The God-given right of
the white people in South Africa is to civilize and Christianize
us poor blacks. As a result of this process of civilizing and
educating us, we black people have reached the position where
the government does everything to block from our minds any-
thing that will contribute to the raising of the so-called—well,
I am afraid that I should not have said the so-called—the real
civilized standards of the African and other non-white peoples.

Since 1939, 8000 books have been banned in South Africa.
Among these books are works such as those of Voltaire, James
Farrell, the young Jean-Paul Sartre, and innumerable authors
whom I cannot name here. We have reached the stage where
even films for white people have been censored, and the law
says specifically that any film which portrays intermingling be-
tween whites and non-whites, no matter from which country
they come, is prohibited. So you find a very ridiculous situ-
tion when you walk in the streets of South Africa cities and
you arrive outside a cinema. Whether it is for white or for non-
white people, you will find posters advertising, for instance, a film like "Oceans 11", which features Belafonte and Sinatra—you will find these posters displayed with Belafonte's old picture blotted out and only Sinatra there, because South Africa does not allow pictures of white people walking next to non-white people. You have a situation in which films are ruined, because Louis Armstrong is not allowed to be shown next to Glenn Miller. These are the realities of South Africa, and these are the realities which not only ordinary South African people, whether they are workers in factories or rural workers on farms, but also writers or poets, are faced with. So when it comes to the position of writers in South Africa, we find that we are in the same position as any ordinary person. The South African artist finds himself with no other choice but to dedicate himself to that movement which must involve not only himself but ordinary people as well. So that I say that in our society we are prepared to run guns and to hold up radio stations, if it is necessary. I say this because I believe that, whether we are European writers or African writers or American writers, all human activity which does not serve humanity must be a waste of time and effort.

John Nagenda

In Uganda last year, as some people may know, there were a lot of misunderstandings which resulted in a great number of people being killed from my own part of the country. This has filled me with sadness and indeed with despair. Now at the same time I have been reading reports about Ugandans who have been staging football matches, and my first feeling was one of shock. To think that, while so many people have died, others continue playing football! But on closer reflection I have come to the conclusion that, while people are being killed, other people have to play football, because whether we run guns or hold up radio stations, my own feeling is that ultimately we do not change anything. In the countries where gun-running is no longer necessary, there are other problems and other shortcomings, and, whereas it is always going to be a wonderful thing—a very brave thing—to run guns, I think it is
always a very important thing, a very brave thing, to play football through it.

The writer, like everybody else, is a human being with the frailties and the bravery of the ordinary human being, and therefore, while one writer will be writing, trying to change the situation, or, even more practically, doing something physically to change the situation, another writer will turn to drugs, to LSD—whatever he wants—or indeed to the drug of writing for the sensuous feel of the written word. And if we take the two poems which were read by Mr Soyinka, who has, as we know, proved himself both as a fighter and as a writer, my own feeling concerning those two poems was not that they would bring down any régime. My feeling was that sensitively through their words they brought to us again the suffering of humanity. And therefore I want to make a strong plea to this conference that, whatever we do, we must not confuse the different strands of life, we must not forget the fact that there are people whom we must call writers who are not going to run guns and there are writers who are going to perversely enjoy the feel of words, whether these words bring down governments or not.

James Ngugi

Mr Nagenda said that ultimately we do not change anything, and when he talks about humanity, you know, I become outraged. And in the same way I also quarrel with Mr Soyinka for his talking in those metaphysical terms about suffering humanity. I think it is time we started to talk in terms of the kind of realities about which La Guma was talking. And the one basic reality in Africa, not only in South Africa but everywhere, is the fact that 80% of the people are living below the bread-line standard. This is basic to Nigeria, to Kenya, to Uganda, to every other part of Africa.

When we, the black intellectuals, the black bourgeoisie, got the power, we never tried to bring about those policies which would be in harmony with the needs of the 80% of the peasants and workers. I think it is time that the African writers also started to talk in the terms of these workers and peasants. Here, I want to say something about Soyinka. He is one of
the few people, in his writings at least, who has seen the impotence of the African intellectual. Even in his very misunderstood play *A Dance of the Forests*, he was able to show up these black intellectuals, black historians, black artists who are only there to rationalize the corruption of whatever regime they happen to be in. And this vein runs throughout his writing. What am I to think of a person who has done so much in showing up this hollowness of the intellectuals and at the same time couples Dr Nkrumah with Dr Banda? I will not confuse the issues here. If we must see the realities in Africa, we must not think that, just because there are coups everywhere in Africa, the situation is necessarily the same or that the situation in every country is at the same stage of historical development. You know, what happened in Uganda, is maybe slightly different from what is happening in Ghana and in Malawi, and my fear about the coupling together of Dr Banda and Dr Nkrumah is lest we justify the silly regime that has put Ghana 20 years behind. So my feeling is that also in this connexion there has been a tendency, for instance, to think that, just because there has been no coup in Kenya, for example, everything is all right, while the reality is, as I said, that 80% of the people are living in poverty and not a single step has so far been taken in fact to change the social structure. So my feeling is that, as long as we have not changed the social structure in Africa so that at least 80% of the people can live above the bread-line standard and indeed so that those 80% of the people can also participate in the work of social and economic reconstruction, so long shall we continue to have impotent intellectuals and writers. So this I will say to Soyinka: "There is nothing wrong in running guns and holding up radio stations".

*Lewis Nkosi*

It seems to me that there is a confusion that we ought to clear up straight away. I am not myself certain whether we are discussing the duties of the writer as a man or as a craftsman, and I think that, although the writer is a man in society, he is not necessarily going to be a brave man in society. And the two aspects of him are not necessarily the same. Every man has
certain duties in any society, and the writer is definitely in no special position so far as these duties are concerned. But it would be wrong, I feel, to think that, when we are here discussing the problems of literature, we have also to discuss the problem of whether or not we are good citizens, that is to say, people who are responsible or people who are committed. There is a lot of committed literature which is simply bad literature, and our commitment as writers is a commitment to craft, to being good writers. If, by being cowards, we prove to be bad writers, then this is just too bad, but let us at least separate the problem of gun-running from the problem of wielding a pen.

Olympe Bhély-Quénou

Les questions posées par Soyinka et celle qu'a soulevée M. La Guma me paraissent fort intéressantes. Le problème pour nous, vous le connaissez très bien, en Afrique francophone, particulièrement dans les pays qui ont connu la révolution, l'Algérie, par exemple. Nous avons su écrire — et Dieu merci, certains d'entre eux sont ici — tel Kateb Yacine qui, même en pleine révolution, a produit des œuvres qui ont bien situé l'état de son pays. Ces œuvres ont permis à ceux qui ne sont pas Algériens de s'intéresser malgré tout au problème algérien, de savoir ce qu'il y avait à faire. Je pense que, si j'ai bonne mémoire, la première pièce de Yacine a été écrite en pleine révolution, et ceux qui n'étaient pas de la révolution, en voyant cette pièce ont pu prendre conscience de ce problème. Voilà d'abord un des rôles de l'écrivain!

Deuxièmement, Soyinka a parlé de prendre le fusil ou de s'emparer des éléments de l'information. On peut prendre le fusil, mais les éléments de l'information, comme la radio, sont aux mains de l'Etat. Comment peut-on les prendre sans être tout de suite précipité en prison? Nous savons ce que c'est.

Je suis du Dahomey, à côté de la Nigeria et je suis les événements de ces deux pays. Nous sommes condamnés à écrire, à dénoncer ce qui se passe dans nos pays, à l'écrire sans complexes, en toute honnêteté, en toute objectivité. Mais ce n'est pas tout. On n'écrit pas pour rester au frigidaire, on n'écrit pas pour que l'ouvrage reste enfermé dans une bibliothèque, on
écrit pour être édité. Qui est-ce qui édite? Actuellement je m'adresse à des éditeurs français, en dehors des pays africains; ceux qui édient sont des maisons d'édition françaises.

Lorsque l'écrivain africain soulève un certain problème propre à son pays et que l'éditeur lit cet ouvrage, ou bien l'ouvrage est très gentil, c'est du petit-lait, on le publie, tout le monde en parle, tout cela est fort bien. Mais lorsqu'il attaque certaines réalités, l'écrivain doit entendre que son texte ne vaut rien, ou bien : « Monsieur, nous ne pouvons pas le publier. » Nous avons ici Monsieur Tchicaya U Tam'isi. Plusieurs fois, on a refusé de l'imprimer, mais Tchicaya a parlé à un éditeur assez fou, donc assez révolutionnaire, pour le publier. La guerre finie maintenant, Tchicaya est devenu un poète connu dans le monde entier. Il y a dix ans, ce n'était pas le cas. Voyez donc! Vous, Européens, qui avez en main les maisons d'édition, tout dépend de vous, parce qu'il suffit, j'en suis sûr — je suis lecteur, critique littéraire et romancier, il suffit que votre gouvernement ou bien la maison d'édition vous dise : « Monsieur, ce texte est peut-être beau, il est humain, il est réaliste, mais il est trop révolutionnaire, il nous faut le refuser. »


Dan Jacobson

It seems to me that one of our problems here is that we are trying to define the duty and the function of the writer within society. And quite honestly that seems to me a pretty hopeless task, because the duty of the writer will depend upon the particular society he lives in. And even then each writer is likely to see his duty in a different way. In my opinion the second greatest Russian novelist—that is to say, the second greatest novelist in the world—Dostoevsky, took a view of political questions of his day which we can only think of as deplorable. Nevertheless his books are great works of art, and
it is quite possible to say, "I abhor Dostoevsky's ideas and yet I admire his novels."

In other words, in each situation we have to go by a rule of thumb: partly a critical rule of thumb, partly a political rule of thumb, partly a moral rule of thumb. It seems obvious that the position of the writer in Africa is going to be one in which politics will be a constant factor, just as it was for the writers in Russia during the nineteenth century. There have been societies and other times when this has not been so directly. Jane Austen could write works which were not directly political and were yet great novels. I find it difficult to conceive that the writer in Africa will be able to abstract himself from his society in this way. But each situation has to be treated as one of its own kind; and we must avoid saying that the writer must do this or must do that, as we think best.

Incidentally, on the question of gun-running, I cannot help remembering that there was a very distinguished example of gun-running in the African continent by the poet Rimbaud, who ran guns in Ethiopia a hundred years ago. But that was the end of his poetry! We cannot say to Rimbaud what he should have done, and if that is true for the writers of the past, I think it is also true for the writers of the present.

_Tchicaya U Tam'si_

Je voudrais dire quelques mots. Ils n'auront pas la perspicacité d'un critique littéraire, ils seront confus, peut-être parce que j'aurai mis un peu d'émotion à les dire. Je voudrais répondre à certaines questions qu'a posées ici M. Soyinka. En vérité, je ne crois pas que l'on puisse dire, je m'excuse pour mes amis africains, que j'ai reçu le mandat d'écrire sur ceci ou sur cela.

Personne ne m'a envoyé à une école pour devenir écrivain; j'improvis au jour le jour, c'est une recherche, je mets tant de temps là-dessus! Je me souviens qu'en 57, tout de suite après la première conférence des écrivains et artistes noirs à Paris, Glissant a fait une conférence. Dans cette conférence, il disait que l'écrivain doit être ce que l'on a dit à peu près ici, celui qui a le fusil, celui qui fait la révolution.

J'ai dit « non ».

J'ai même employé des images un peu plus vertes que je
n'oserais pas répéter ici par respect pour certaines oreilles.

J'ai dit « non ».

La révolution ne se fait pas sur la place publique, pour l'écrivain. S'il doit y participer, je pense qu'il doit faire comme Tolstoi et Dostoïevsky qui ont fait la révolution peut-être, qui ont préparé la révolution d'octobre en instruisant les gens, Marx, Lenine et consorts. Mais je crois que la participation de l'écrivain, puisqu'il s'adresse chaque fois, individuellement, à la personne, c'est individuellement qu'il doit atteindre la personne dans son tréfonds, dans sa plus stricte intimité et s'il y arrive et qu'il lui a été possible d'atteindre une seule intimité, il a fait une très grande œuvre. Mais s'il doit se trouver sur une place publique — nous avons tous assisté aux manifestations publiques : le moindre coup de fusil, et voilà tout le monde parti comme des moineaux, et il ne reste que quelques inspirés qui ont cru qu'ils avaient la foule derrière eux.

Je pense que l'écrivain que je pourrais être, que je suis peut-être, militierait plutôt pour trouver l'intimité la plus stricte auprès de 200 lecteurs et leur communiquer ce que je pense être le message, plutôt que d'aller le dire sur une place publique. Ceci dit en général. Donc, pour ma part, je ne vois pas d'autre devoir pour un écrivain que d'écrire et d'être un homme, tout simplement. Son rôle, encore une fois, c'est d'être un homme. Mais je voudrais poser une question, peut-être un peu plus particulièrement à mes amis africains.

Dans les pays de langue anglaise, dans les pays de langue française, quelle est la proportion d'analphabètes? Répondre à cette question, c'est répondre peut-être à la question : pour qui écrivons-nous? Si notre littérature a été militante, elle l'a été à l'extérieur, mais non pas à l'intérieur. Pourquoi pas à l'intérieur? Précisément à cause de cette question d'analphabétisme.

Si l'on dit que l'Afrique francophone représente 40 à 60 millions de lecteurs, je voudrais dire que ce n'est pas vrai, parce que seulement 2 à 3 % de ces 40 à 60 millions sont alphabétisés. S'il y a 2 à 3 % d'alphabetisés, je crois que les idées révolutionnaires ne vont pas très loin, d'autant plus que dans ces 2 à 3 % beaucoup de gens ne s'intéressent pas à la littérature, et je comprends très bien cela.

Donc, il y a là un problème essentiel, et je dirais un problème
de langage. Nous avons hérité une langue, c’est une langue très commode; elle nous permet de venir ici, de parler à des Norvégiens qui comprennent le français, de parler à des Scandina ves qui parlent et comprennent l’anglais. Mais, enfin, nous parlons français pour être compris de nos compatriotes, pour qui nous sommes, paraît-il, investis d’un rôle de libérateur ou comme auteurs de la révolution; nous sommes compris de nos compatriotes de langue anglaise pour qui nous sommes les « porteurs de la révolution », etc.! C’est cela la question que je pose à mes amis africains, et peut-être y a-t-il aussi parmi les Scandinaves quelqu’un qui peut nous aider à y répondre.

George Awoonor-Williams

I think one of the basic points Wole Soyinka has made in his very brilliant paper is the question whether the African writer has a duty to provide a vision for a continent, for countries which are caught up in this twentieth-century convulsion in which Africa is finding itself, having woken up to a white man’s world.

I say, “Why not?”, because the important factor is not that the African writer should carry a gun and should seize radio stations, but that he should make sure that he is not just doing these things for their own sakes. He is going to provide in his writings a certain articulate vision, which must order his society because otherwise social life would be a very sterile and a very futile exercise.

In fact, sometimes I wonder if such a thing as an African writer exists, because he might be a creation essentially of Europe. He may say something about the publishers hovering like vultures to snatch this and that, but I am saying that the African writer finds himself in a particular society in a particular time, and whether he writes poetry or whether he writes a piece of drama or whether he writes fiction, he must, through his writings, provide a vision for those who are going to order his society. Whether he is going to the market place to wave banners and sing anthems is a different matter, but I think basically he must be a person who has some kind of conception of the society in which he is living and the way he wants the society to go.
This is why I strongly disagree with Tchicaya when he says, "You don't have to make slogans and things out of writing". I say, "Why not?" You can write about your society, you can write about the past, you can go back two thousand years, but the point is that Africa has woken up in the twentieth century, has been given the ballot box, has been given political parties and has been given a parliament house as soon as she has attained independence. What do you do with those things— you, the writers who are writing poetry, drama or fiction? You have to provide a vision, and this is where I say your duty lies. But the point is, which kind of vision?

Onésimo Silveira

Je ne pense pas, Monsieur le Président, qu'il y ait un profond divorce entre la conscience individuelle de l'écrivain et la conscience collective des masses. En ce qui concerne ce problème, je pense même que l'écrivain africain est par excellence un facteur de transformation ou de révolution pour ce qui l'entoure.

Quand les camarades ici présents soulignent que l'écrivain doit et veut par dessus tout être homme, je me demande si en formulant en de tels termes — et d'ailleurs de façon superflue — le destin qui est réservé à l'écrivain africain, ces mêmes camarades ne sont pas en train de faire implicitement une distinction entre l'homme-écrivain et l'homme. Je crois que l'engagement est, pour nous Africains, bien plus que légitime. Il surgit à la fin d'un processus dans lequel notre volonté individuelle, égoïste, est dominée par la volonté collective, créatrice et révolutionnaire. De cette manière, l'engagement cesse d'être un simple devoir, ou une filiation littéraire, comme il arrive souvent dans les pays où, pas aussi souvent, les problèmes sociaux se présentent ouvertement liés à l'existence souveraine des peuples. C'est particulièrement le cas de l'Afrique.

Je pose la question suivante : si l'écrivain africain œuvre dans l'immédiat pour l'Afrique, écrit sur l'Afrique (ou pour l'Afrique), comment prétendre qu'il puisse se situer hors du feu des multiples souffrances liées au processus historique africain? Quand il s'agit, par exemple, de la position individuelle
de l'écrivain en relation avec les mouvements de libération, je ne crois pas qu'il soit éloigné de la logique la plus élémentaire de prendre les armes et de se battre dans le camp de l'honneur. Pour l'écrivain qui prétend accepter l'engagement jusqu'à ses dernières conséquences, cette position ne fait que constituer le prolongement de l'activité créatrice (pourquoi pas artistique et littéraire?) par des voies convergentes. Dans le cas où l'écrivain fuirait ses responsabilités, il est clair qu'il se trouverait dans une situation qui ne serait profitable ni pour lui ni pour les masses.

Parce que je crois à cela profondément, je le répète : l'intervention de l'écrivain dans le processus social de l'Afrique doit dépasser le plan de la coopération quasi bureaucratique, comme il arrive dans beaucoup de pays d'Europe. Une telle intervention est beaucoup plus qu'un simple engagement. Elle est un devoir. L'écrivain africain, à mon avis, ne doit pas se poser la question de cette intervention. Elle doit être un impératif pour lui. L'engagement extrême qui nous est imposé à nous, écrivains africains, à ce moment brûlant de notre histoire, est notre réponse instinctive à une situation de fait qu'il s'agit d'éliminer, et nous sommes au premier rang des responsables de cette lutte.

Dennis Brutus

It is good that we should return to Mr Soyinka's theme at the close of our discussion. Mr Ngugi has pointed out that what is needed is a return to the inward man, to the exploration of interior values, the real values at the heart of man. But there was also an intervention from Soyinka himself when he pointed out that he was not therefore opposed to the gun-running and radio-station-seizing poet. This is not necessarily contradictory. The point I should like to make is that writers must necessarily be in some way or other expressive of certain human values and therefore they are in a sense committed to precisely these values. If they fail to assert these values, they not only betray the values but their own functions as writers. In South Africa commitment is not a problem. You do not have to be hero to be committed, you are compelled to be committed, you are involved in a situation so fraught with evil that you are
brought into collision with it. That is the only way of asserting certain human values and the fundamental value that the writer is so insistent on claiming for himself, the value of freedom, freedom of expression—what else is he seeking in his writing but precisely the freedom?

So, Mr Chairman, it seems to me, though we are a shifty lot, you made the point yourself when you said: "Writers on the whole don't like to work." We tend to be an evasive lot—we try to talk about problems rather than grappling with them. This problem lies at the heart of this conference and at the heart of the writer as a person, that he must commit himself. Not to African personality; I believe it is to human personality that he must commit himself. And so, whether we are Finns or Swedes or Norwegians or whether we come from any part of Africa, we are all committed, at least to one value, the assertion of human value, of human dignity, and that is why we have a special function when we see human dignity betrayed. When we see humanity being mutilated, we have a function as human beings to stand up against these things. It does not mean going into the market place—it may for some, for others it may be expressed in the study. No matter how we choose our form—and this is one of the special freedoms we enjoy, that we can choose a multiplicity of forms—at the heart of the form must lie the same statement, and that is the assertion of human value.

Eldred Jones

The writer should reflect the totality of his situation. I think in fact if we accept this, we are probably going to come back exactly to Mr Wole Soyinka's point. If the African writer reflects the totality of his environment to-day, he is going to see the crumbling away of these very human values that we are talking about. And this will have to be reflected in his writing. I think it is almost impossible for Africa to produce Jane Austen to-day. Even though Jane Austen might have been unaware of the Napoleonic wars, she was perfectly aware of some of the human problems, like the petty snobbishness that prevailed in society then.

The writer today in Africa must see around him bad politics,
bad religion, the misleading of ordinary people, and he is bound to write about all this if he writes about his environment. Of course, he can decide to opt out of it altogether, to write space fiction or something like that. But I feel that the writer has to write about what happens around him and, in doing so, he is putting himself in the firing-line. Let us not worry about grabbing radio stations and gun-running. The guns will come to us as writers if we are speaking the truth about Africa today, no matter what country we belong to, and possibly the role of the writer today is in fact just offering himself for one generation a willing victim to those forces which are subversive of human dignity and morality.

Moulooud Mammeri

Notre camarade du Ghana a posé la question de savoir parler de la vision de l'Afrique, la vision que l'écrivain doit en donner. Deuxièmement, il a soulevé la question de savoir à qui nous nous adressons. Il faut s'adresser aux Africains. Il faut dire une chose. D'abord, les écrivains sont des paresseux. Ce que je viens d'entendre montre que nous ne les lisons pas. La faute en est à nous, enfin aux critiques qui lisent tous les pavés pour dire ce que racontent les écrivains. En réalité, et j'en suis heureux, la plupart des écrivains africains que j'ai lus, que je ne connaissais pas, que j'ai retrouvés ici me semblent avoir été ou sont encore des hommes engagés. J'en reviens à ceux que j'ai déjà cités : Tchicaya, Syad et Kateb Yacine, et à un que je ne trouve pas ici, Achebe, qui présente la situation de son pays, peut-être parce qu'il est d'Ibo; enfin, il est Nigérien et que nous sommes voisins. Voilà un homme. Ce sont des hommes qui ont présenté la situation de leur pays et, pour peu qu'on connaisse le pays, on a l'impression d'avoir tout vu, on sent tout cela.

On m'a dit : à qui vous adresses-vous? Mais, écoutez, mon cher ami, la littérature africaine a jusqu'à présent été écrite par des Européens, par des étrangers ou même par des Africains qui ont essayé de faire voir l'Afrique, leur Afrique à eux, L'Afrique que nous, écrivains africains, nous présentons d'une manière différente de celle des autres; nous avons voulu faire comprendre aux Européens ce qu'est l'Afrique sentie de
l'intérieur. S'il n'y a pas beaucoup de lecteurs africains parce qu'il y a des problèmes d'alphabetisation, nous sommes quand même condamnés à nous faire connaître, à faire connaître notre pays à ceux qui portent des jugements erronés sur l'Afrique.

Donc, nous sommes obligés d'écrire, hélas, si vous le voulez, pour les étrangers, pour vous, Européens! Sinon, ce n'est pas la peine d'écrire, car je suis certain que, parmi nous qui sommes ici, il y en a peut-être trois qui ont lu les œuvres entières de ceux qui écrivent. Voilà la situation!

Je reviens à Soyinka, parce que c'est lui qui a posé le problème, Soyinka nous a parlé du fusil. Bien sûr, Soyinka est contre. Il faut parler sur la place publique, il faut atteindre l'écrivain dans son intimité. Je suis certain que lorsqu'on est militant, ça veut dire tirer sur les gens. On peut tirer à coups de plume; c'est le cas des écrivains, ou on peut aller sur la place publique et tirer sur les gens. Il nous appartient irréparablement, en tant qu'écrivains et en tant qu'Africains, de poser des problèmes, des questions politiques. Heureusement les écrivains sont les seuls à sentir cette réalité, tous ces conflits qu'on trouve souvent en Afrique entre écrivains et hommes politiques.

Donc, notre révolution, notre combat, c'est d'abord un combat des intelligences et un combat de gens qui posent des problèmes de conscience, de gens qui sont là pour inquiéter et de gens qui sont là aussi pour faire connaître leur pays, non pas seulement dans le cercle fermé des Africains, mais aussi à l'extérieur. Sinon, je ne comprends pas pourquoi nous sommes venus ici si ce n'est pas pour nous faire connaître.
Kateb Yacine

L’écrivain et la révolution

Simplement, je voudrais ici, sans aucun formalisme, dire à nos camarades suédois que l’idée généreuse qu’ils ont eue doit être payée de retour et que l’émulation socialiste au sens noble me fait un devoir de vous dire des choses que peut-être certains écrivains ne se disent qu’à eux-mêmes. Mais il est nécessaire, je crois, que nous en sortions puisque nous sommes jusqu’à présent en quelque sorte des mandarins, nous sommes détachés par nos peuples, nous avons une certaine vanité, une certaine façon de nous concevoir comme écrivains qui est largement partagée. Je crois que le moment est venu de nous poser le problème de la révolution, par exemple. Il y a des gens qui croient que la révolution c’est une affaire de mots ou bien que c’est quelque chose de très grave, ou bien quelque chose de théorique qui leur rappelle peut-être le protestantisme ou l’islamisme. Non, la révolution, c’est une chose très naturelle, elle est inscrite dans les étoiles — le monde est en révolution perpétuellement. Tout ce que nous pouvons faire c’est être en harmonie avec ce monde. Je crois que le rôle du révolutionnaire est un rôle tellement modeste au fond, il suffit de pousser le mouvement du monde, et je crois que ce mouvement n’est pas statique puisque nous sommes vivants, et nous serions morts. Justement de tels mouvements nous échappent, parce que nous sommes, d’une façon ou d’autre, des opprimés.

Je suis sûr que le peuple suédois, par exemple, malgré toutes les apparences de prospérité, est un peuple qui se pose des problèmes, qui est profondément malheureux, parce qu’un bonheur qu’on ne peut pas partager avec les autres n’est pas un bonheur. Par conséquent, cette générosité suédoise elle-même a un côté tragique, et la façon que nous avons d’y répondre nous-mêmes, un côté presque burlesque, parce que,
franchement, lorsque vous nous invitez chez vous, nous avons tenté de vous dire simplement « merci », et pourtant, nous avons beaucoup de choses à dire. Mais encore faut-il que ces choses se disent, et ce n'est pas facile, ce n'est pas l'affaire d'un discours, ce n'est pas l'affaire d'une rencontre, mais c'est quand même l'affaire d'une idée. Je suis heureux que des camarades suédois l'aient eue, parce que vous savez que, chez nous, le problème de l'existence nationale commence à peine à se poser. Nous venons d'accéder à notre indépendance et, chez nous, il y a des gens très bornés, il y a, comme chez vous, des gens qui sont ennemis du mouvement du monde. Par exemple, vous serez peut-être étonnés si je vous disais que le racisme, la haine des Noirs, est très généralisée encore en Algérie. Il y a encore beaucoup d'Algériens qui détestent les Noirs, qui ont un complexe à leur égard. Pourtant, ce sont des Africains. Vous voyez que nous sommes loin d'être aussi blancs, moralement, qu'on le croit. Vous voyez, il y a encore véritablement des problèmes.

Je crois que l'écrivain, après tout et avant tout, est un homme. La grande richesse de cette rencontre, c'est que l'on peut se voir en tant qu'hommes. Ce n'est pas suffisant, bien sûr, parce que la vie est irremplaçable et qu'une réunion ne pourrait jamais rendre toute la richesse de la vie. Et pourtant, le côté organisateur devrait être une constante de notre vie, parce que, au fond, le sujet de cette conférence, c'est l'homme seul. Bien sûr, nous sommes seuls, tous, d'une certaine façon, lorsque nous écrivons. Dans l'acte d'aimer, l'homme est seul; dans certains actes, dans la mort, il est seul.

Mais les mots prises des certains façons sont restrictifs. Si l'on prend le mot solitude dans son acception riche, la solitude n'est pas un obstacle aux communications; au contraire, plus on communique, plus on est seul. Il y a des moments où, effectivement, le besoin de communication est très grand et, en même temps, il faut que ce soit un individu qui le dise avec ses faiblesses, ses fautes, son côté humain irremplaçable, par lequel, justement, il prend une telle communication, puis qu'un autre homme le reprendra, la conduira, la grandira ou la détrira. C'est ça la vie. C'est que, malgré toutes les atrocités, les guerres, les incompréhensions entre peuples, c'est quand même la vie qui continue. Et nous sommes vivants, et que
nous nous soyons rencontrés aujourd'hui, c'est quand même un miracle.

Il y a des gens qui, par exemple, ne veulent pas comprendre les autres. Il y a des journalistes qui écrivent sur la révolution culturelle chinoise, mais que connaissent-ils de la Chine? Qu'est-ce que cela signifie cette peur de la Chine, en quelque sorte ce refus de reconnaître le peuple chinois qui est quand même un des plus grands peuples de la terre, sinon le plus grand, à tous les points de vue. Qu'est-ce cette façon de le mettre toujours dans le coin et ensuite de le montrer du doigt? C'est quand même une attitude honteuse. D'abord, il faut le reconnaître, parce que qui est grand, est grand. Le peuple chinois est le plus grand peuple de la terre. Faisons-lui une place, et après il sera tout petit, du fait même de sa grandeur. Je ne voudrais pas que vous croyiez que j'ajoute une petite brique au défi chinois, pas du tout. Parce que nous pourrions être fusillés par les Chinois demain, il n'y a pas de problème. L'énorme écueil de cette réunion, c'était que les contacts soient simplement fortuits, en quelque sorte. Il ne faut pas que cette rencontre soit fortuite, parce que, après tout, nous ne sommes que des hommes, mais nous sommes des hommes. Et le masque qu'on porte, qu'il soit blanc ou noir, c'est un masque, ce n'est qu'un masque, et nous avons beaucoup de choses à détruire dans la mentalité de l'homme moderne; nous avons, par exemple, la mentalité impérialiste à détruire. Nous avons des combats politiques à mener.

Personnellement, je n'aime pas le mot engagement, parce que, peut-être, je ne le comprends pas bien, mais pour moi, le mot engagement sonne comme s'il s'agissait de s'engager dans une armée ou d'entrer dans une caserne. Je préfère le mot « écrivan révolutionnaire », c'est-à-dire, l'homme qui marche, coûte que coûte, quelles que soient les contradictions, qui marche, qui continue, qui avance, qui avance, parce qu'il faut qu'il avance. Ce n'est pas héroïque.

Il faut détruire la mentalité pseudo-héroïque qui fait que Don Quichotte, par exemple, serait un homme seul. Or, finalement, tous les hommes sont des Don Quichottes.

Je me souviens, par exemple, d'un homme que j'ai rencontré dans une ferme en France, qui s'appelait Bascoul, qui était
considéré comme le bétail de la ferme, auquel personne ne parlait. Nous-mêmes, nous étions deux Algériens dans la ferme, il était très difficile de lui parler. Un jour, nous sommes arrivés à sept heures du matin et nous avons vu Bascoul habillé de son costume du dimanche : cravate noire, chapeau façon, très solennel, il montait le cheval du patron, il caracolait. Peu de temps après, il a cessé cette manifestation, parce que, tout à coup, il a compris que, tôt ou tard, il redeviendrait le Bascoul, bétail de la ferme, qui mourrait peut-être comme ça. Peut-être est-il mort maintenant.

C'est quelque chose d'énorme, parce que cela nous montre cette conception mesquine que nous avons de la révolution, ça nous montre que des gens très simples, des gens qui n'ont pas de nom, qui n'ont pas de vanité, qui n'ont pas le désir d'arriver ou de toucher qui que ce soit, qui sont enfermés dans une espèce de solitude, qu'ils n'ont même pas recherché, qui ne sont pas masochistes, qui ne sont pas consentants, que tous ces hommes traversent la conscience historique d'un temps pour qu'un misérable écrivain algérien les comprenne ou ne les comprenne pas. Voilà la chose magnifique de la vie, c'est que nous pourrions être des écrivains de valeur ou qui savent bien écrire et en même temps de parfaits imbéciles qui passent dans la vie sans rien voir.

De ce point de vue, il m'était difficile de parler de l'homme seul, parce que c'est un problème puissant chez nous. En Algérie, la question se pose maintenant de savoir si nous serons libres ou non. Et elle se pose d'une façon cruciale. Elle se pose telle que les hommes, du peuple et du gouvernement, ne pensent à la culture que par ricochet, incidemment. La culture n'est pas au centre du problème, elle est là. Nous avons, je crois, notre part de culpabilité, parce que, effectivement, à force d'être isolé fortuitement, l'écrivain finit par devenir un lâche. Bien sûr, les hommes politiques représentent une espèce de pot de fer, et nous sommes les pots de terre. Chaque fois qu'ils se heurtent aux hommes politiques, les écrivains perdent, ils sont congédiés, ils sont humiliés, ils sont réduits à l'obésance. Pourtant, ce contact nous ne devons pas le fuir. De la même façon que nous voulons avoir des contacts avec le peuple, il faut aussi que nous ayons des contacts avec le gouvernement.
et des contacts francs, des contacts bruts, des contacts de conscience et de lutte. Il faut que nous puissions dire au gouvernement : « merde », et il faut que nous puissions aussi être associés à ce qui se passe chez nous. Et c'est très difficile pour nous, parce que nous sommes héritiers de multiples aliénations.

Vous devez savoir que l'Algérie militait pour son indépendance. Or, aujourd'hui, peut-on dire que l'Algérie est indépendante? Non! Peut-on dire que l'Algérie est vraiment l'Algérie? Non! Et elle ne le sera pas, elle ne le sera jamais si les écrivains ne s'y mettent pas, parce que les écrivains sont des hommes et pas n'importe quels hommes. Il y a une fausse modestie qu'il faut détruire. Il y a une façon de se tenir à l'écart pour l'écrivain, qui, à mon avis, est une lâcheté, parce que, finalement, nous sommes les représentants d'une des plus belles choses dans le peuple. Ce que le peuple vit dans sa lutte, dans son existence, nous en sommes une parcelle, une des plus belles; disons que nous sommes une fleur dans un chantier. Il y a des gens qui pissent dessus, bien sûr, mais c'est une fleur. Bon, et cette fleur-là, il faut qu'elle parle, il ne faut pas qu'elle se sous-estime, sinon l'homme serait un être vraiment méprisable. Ce qu'il tend à devenir, vous le voyez bien, alors qu'actuellement nous sommes réunis dans une espèce de fraternité vraie à laquelle je crois profondément, et, en même temps, il y a des gens qui creusent le tombeau de cette fraternité. Il y a des gens qui écrasent les Vietnamiens, mais, enfin, je ne veux pas y faire une plate allusion politique; ça devient presque plat de parler de choses aussi graves. Mais ce n'est pas ça seulement, ce n'est pas seulement le Vietnam, c'est partout dans toute la vie. Nous passons notre temps à pétiner notre propre idéal. Je ne suis pas un pacifique, je suis pour la violence, pour la guerre révolutionnaire, c'est vrai, mais la guerre révolutionnaire ne signifie pas extermination, ne signifie pas affrontement ridicule, elle signifie qu'on veut convaincre les gens. Et si l'on n'arrive pas à les convaincre, alors peut-être ont-ils quelque chose à nous dire, peut-être ont-ils des choses qui traversent la mentalité révolutionnaire, mais qui, pour l'instant, ne s'expriment pas. C'est une chose très difficile pour l'écrivain....
A l'heure actuelle, je serais tenté, si vous voulez, d'être à la fois pro-russe, pro-chinois, pro-vietnamien, pro-suédois, pro-algérien, etc. Oui, mais il faut quand même écrire. Et de ce point de vue, je pense qu'il faut, à un moment donné, puisque nous sommes entre fabricants de romans et de poèmes, il faut que nous ayons conscience de la terrible hypothèse de l'aliénation. Je ne sais pas comment c'est en Suède, mais, par exemple, pour nous, Algériens, nous sommes édités, à l'heure actuelle, par des Français, parce que, ou bien nous tombons sous le charme culturel de la France et nous devenons pro-français, ou bien, si nous tournons des propos un peu durs, on nous croit anti-français.

Ce n'est pas vrai. Nous ne sommes pas anti-français. La chose est quand même simple. Nous avons vécu sous l'impérialisme culturel français, c'est-à-dire que, lorsque j'étais petit enfant, il ne me venait jamais à l'idée qu'il y avait une Suède, une Norvège ou un Dahomey. Il n'y avait que la France, et l'Algérie était une toute petite chose dans la France. Je ne sais pas comment vous pouvez imaginer ça, vous qui ne l'avez pas vécu, mais si vous étiez enfermés sous cette calotte-là, dans cette atmosphère-là, à un moment donné cela deviendrait étouffant. A l'heure actuelle, par exemple, nous ne savons absolument rien de la littérature suédoise. Ce n'est pas parce qu'on m'a donné un livre ou deux que je vais lire dans ma chambre, aujourd'hui ou demain, que je vais dire que je la connais, parce que ce sont des choses qui devraient se faire tout naturellement avec le temps qui s'impose. Nous avons été coupés de vous. J'en profite pour dire quelques mots.

L'idée de l'écrivain est une idée réactionnaire. En quelque sorte, on veut réduire l'homme à l'état d'écrivain. Il y en a eu des exemples sanglants dans l'Histoire. Par exemple, les Scribes. Et on a su finalement que les Scribes étaient plus dangereux que les dictateurs, parce qu'ils étaient investis d'une puissance, du fait même qu'ils n'étaient pas au pouvoir et qu'ils étaient obligés de traduire ce pouvoir pour avoir un lit ou pour avoir une pension. Ces gens-là deviennent extrêmement dangereux. Par exemple, si je parle en français, c'est parce que ces gens-là ont tué la langue arabe. Les poètes courtisans ont tué la langue arabe. Ils l'ont vraiment tuée. Et cette mort est une
mort continuelle, parce que, en un sens, cette langue arabe, on l'a faite, on l'a sacrée, on l'a cultivée dans un faux sens. Et on peut aimer quelqu'un jusqu'à le tuer.

C'est ce qui se passe chez nous. Notre refuge dans la langue française n'est pas véritablement un vrai refuge. Comme je me considère jusqu'à présent comme un homme de la rue en Afrique du Nord, si je veux acheter un paquet de cigarettes, je parle la même langue que l'homme qui le vend. Il n'y a aucun problème. J'écris en français parce que la situation actuelle m'impose d'écrire en français. Bien, cette situation considérée d'un point de vue étroit puisse paraître triste. Je n'en crois rien. Au contraire, je pense que le fait de posséder la langue française signifie pour nous s'adresser au peuple français dans sa propre langue, non pas qu'il soit un peuple ennemi, mais il est emprisonné dans ce système ennemi. Et nous voulons le toucher parce que notre révolution sans la participation du peuple français serait incomplète.

A l'heure actuelle, tous les peuples se sentent plus ou moins solidaires; il y a des incompréhensions, il y a des murs, mais un peuple ne saurait plus bouger tout seul. Je crois qu'à notre époque, le peuple le plus coupé du monde ne pourrait plus bouger tout seul. C'est une grande force, et pour nous, par exemple, pour vous, ça peut paraître fortuit, ça peut paraître un exercice de l'esprit. Mais pour nous, c'est essentiel, parce que nous avons hérité de deux formes bâtarde de civilisation, un mot que je déteste. Je n'aime pas le mot « civilisation » comme je n'aime pas l'expression « écrivain engagé ». Il y a un seul mot, je crois, qui, comme l'amour est irremplaçable, c'est le mot « révolution ». Ça oui, c'est un mot, mais engage-ment et tout ça, ce sont des tricheries par rapport à la révolu-tion, parce que, effectivement, la révolution n'est pas une chose avec laquelle on triche; il est impossible de tricher avec une révolution, parce que la révolution tue les hommes et les fait vivre. Et alors, nous vivons dans une espèce de tricherie.

Vous savez bien que nous aurions couru le risque de nous dire « Bonjour, comment allez-vous? Ah oui vous êtes Suédois, etc. » Voilà, malheureusement, le langage, enfin le langage qu'on nous impose. Malgré tout, pour la poésie c'est une tâche révolutionnaire énorme. Je comprends bien la modestie
rêelle des écrivains qui ne veulent pas se dire porteurs d'un message, parce qu'à la fin nous deviendrons des emmerdeurs si nous voulons apporter à chaque homme son message; nous deviendrons pires que des facteurs, tous les chiens de la bourgeoisie nous courant après, j'en suis sûr. Non, ce n'est pas ça. Il y a une façon très modeste, très obscure, très simple d'être révolutionnaire, et je ne voudrais surtout pas tomber dans les compliments, mais je crois qu'en Scandinavie vous avez cette façon d'être révolutionnaire, c'est-à-dire, de l'être en toute simplicité, sans que ça entraîne des rapports violents entre les hommes. Ceci dit, ce rapport violent existe. Et chez nous, nous n'avons pas encore fini avec ce rapport violent.

Comment l'écrivain peut-il intervenir dans les luttes politiques qui se produisent et qui, à l'heure actuelle, embrasent le continent africain? D'abord, est-ce que ce sont des luttes politiques? Pour ma part, je ne peux pas dire que ce sont des luttes politiques, pour la bonne raison que j'ignore mon propre pays. L'individu qui s'initie l'écrivain qui est devant vous, qui devrait en quelque sorte vous apprendre des choses sur le pays, lui-même, tragiquement, ignore ce pays. Vous voyez ce que ça veut dire. C'est quand même très grave. Aller dans ce pays pour un écrivain, ce n'est pas n'importe quoi, parce que, pour ma part, vous savez, comme tous les écrivains, il y a des moments, où on se replie sur soi-même, où on ne veut plus rien savoir, etc., parce que la vie est forte tous les jours. Tous les jours, il y a des moments où on est fatigué, où on se replie. Ces moments-là, on doute que le peuple soit là, et pourtant il y a tout à coup quelqu'un du peuple qui vous prend par la veste et qui vous dit : bon, toi tu as dit que tu es écrivain, ça veut dire que tu exprimes ce que je pense, eh bien, écoute-moi. Ça commence à se produire chez nous. Ça commence à être à cette échelle très simple, et il faut que nous y passions honneur.

Je crois que j'ai exagéré; j'ai abusé de votre patience. Je préfère que vous me posez des questions.
Lewis Nkosi

Individualism and social commitment

I confess myself to be a little embarrassed by this subject—individualism and social commitment. It is the kind of theme that excites passion and therefore is always good at conferences, but it does literature no good at all. I doubt whether any writer has been able to get a new grand strategy for his work after having listened to an exposition of individualism and social commitment. A bad writer is likely to get worse after listening to such talk and good writers do not need to be told what to be committed to.

However, like all writers, I suppose I also have views on such grand topics—the atomization of society, the loneliness of modern man, the alienation of the artist. I suppose that, if one has to be atomized, it is best to get in on it on the ground-floor, really, while the going is still good. At any rate I feel that to talk about individualism in relation to the writer I must go back to the topic which we have kicked about, which is really what I think the social commitment of the writer is, what it consists of. I am not going to talk at length about individualism and I hope that my discussion of what I think the social commitment of the writer should be will clarify what I feel his individualism consists of. Already Mr Soyinka has discussed the role of the writer in African society in a far abler and more intelligent manner. Personally I have already indicated that I feel that a writer should be committed, but I am not at all in agreement with a number of the writers present as to the nature of this commitment.

First, I suppose that the sound of the adjective, a positive adjective like "committed", is better than that of the negative "uncommitted". "Uncommitted" is soft, effeminate, languid,
lazy. "Committed" is just the opposite of this. By all means, then, let us be committed! But if we agree that the writer should be committed, the question is: what should he be committed to? Already there has been much talk about gun-running and holding up radio stations. There are times where these activities are indeed necessary, there are times where they even seem commendable to me. Unfortunately they are the kind of activities which are of small benefit or no benefit at all to a bad writer and for a good writer such activities will merely provide a necessary experience in very raw form.

My own view is that a writer has a function to perform in revolutionary societies, but that that function is of a limited sort. Most writers have the gift of eloquence, if not in their utterance, certainly in their writing. They can communicate the anguish of their situation to a lot of people at home as well as abroad, they can act as instruments of propaganda and sometimes, as in James Baldwin's essays, turn such propaganda into exquisite forms of personal lyricism, while providing original insights. But, contrary to the romantic notion, writers simply are not unacknowledged legislators, they are not legislators—period! It would be far more prudent for us here to take a less exalted view of our function. I am not even sure, in fact, that we are absolutely necessary to society.

Whatever effect they, the writers, have on society, it is accumulative rather than immediate. More often than not, when writers think they have affected immediate changes, their works are themselves no more than a symptom of a social change that has already taken place. A story like Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground is astonishing for its originality and insight into the situation of what we might call the post-Renaissance man or what one might say is the modern man, but the story is not really so much a projection into the future as a mirror of what was beginning to happen to 19th-century man. It is not the prophecy in a story like that that impresses us, though writers who are original in their exploration of the human condition in any period of history always strike us as prophetic.

It is therefore my view that talk such as we heard near the beginning of this conference—that poets in Africa should and
are going to provide a vision of what is to happen—is false and misleading. Writers are going to do no such thing. I am tempted to be contentious and say that good writers are certainly going to do no such thing! Look at the so-called romantic poets in England—to say the least, Wordsworth's feelings about the Industrial Revolution were very negative. Already I have had occasion to point out the contradictions in Senghor as a poet and Senghor as an administrator. I think that, though discernible harmony existed between the artist and his community in traditional Africa, as in most agrarian—I would like to use the word "primitive" here but I lack the courage—societies elsewhere, such harmony does not subsist very long in bourgeois societies. It may make some writers feel good to think that they are providing a vision for their societies, but I think that anyone who is not wearing blinkers knows where real power resides. If you want a vision of the future of Africa, you have a better chance of finding out if you buttonhole an economist, an investor, a policeman with a gun, a politician who is organizing the next coup. Perhaps the function of writers, apart from mirroring their societies, is to be bad-tempered, to grumble and to protest, but there is not very much they can do about the real direction of society.

Now I am coming back to the question of gun-running as part of a social commitment. I really fail to see why this phrase should have agitated so many people. Gun-running and holding up radio stations have very little direct relationship with literature. They have something to do with the duties of a writer as a man and as a responsible member of his community—we cannot really judge how good the poet Dennis Brutus is by simply counting the number of guns he has carried to the revolutionary front.

This question lies outside literary considerations, as at least I see them, and it is the kind of question that can sensibly be put to the writer as a man, as a citizen. Indeed I am inclined to think that writers are just congenital shirkers—the reason why they think they have a special function to perform in revolutionary situations is that they want to be excused from precisely those duties which other members of society are reluctantly performing. By writing bad committed poems, they
suppose they have discharged their duties. Of course, this is absurd—any social commitment that a writer has to his society is as a man, but the commitment of a writer as an artist is to a special kind of republic, the republic of letters.

I do not want to be misunderstood as saying that novelists and poets should remove themselves from matters that are of public concern, but a writer's social commitment is of a different order altogether. Mr Brutus said that writers should feel a concern for the preservation of certain values, like freedom. With this I wholeheartedly agree, but a mere expression of this concern on a public platform would be of little help in determining Mr Brutus's status as a poet or as a citizen in the republic of letters. A writer's special commitment is to language and its renewal and to the making of a better instrument for the delineation of human character—it is a commitment to craftsmanship. This is not at all a romantic notion. After all, language is not unrelated to those human concerns that we speak of as freedom, preservation of human life, etc. I certainly find no contradistinction between language as a method or form and the content of what is being expressed—these two are inseparable. If a writer were to write a poem about slavery and I found in it an image like "as happy as a slave", I should judge that poem a failure, especially if it were full of lines like that.

Here again it is the question of the relationship between language and life, so one is not really arguing that people should close their eyes to the world. I suppose this is also another way of saying that a writer's commitment is to telling the truth—the form this truth-telling will take will not only mean being accurate, but will also mean expressing truly relationships between people, between things, between man and the collective entity that is society. When we come to a poem or a novel and say that it is like listening to a piece of good music, and we feel in the core of our being that this is true, then the writer's commitment, as far as I am concerned, has ended, his duties as a writer have been discharged.

Now, we may, of course, feel that as a writer or as a citizen or as a father and husband, a certain writer is just a plain bastard; we may feel that, so far as revolution is concerned,
he is a coward. Some of Scott Fitzgerald's drunken bouts were intolerable, some of Hemingway's antics were annoying, James Joyce was certainly not a model of a good husband (he was not even married), and Theodore Dreiser was an adulterer. I have no statistics to present, but I am inclined to believe that most writers have been improvident in the past; they are probably congenital liars, drunks, fornicators and likely to lower the moral tone of society. Perhaps revolutionary forces are better off without this type of writer, indeed, I fail to see what particular use a deranged poet is to the armed struggle, but I suppose you can always find something to do for even a bad lot during times of national emergency. Certainly writers can run errands and carry sandwiches to the front, and a few may even be as brave as Hemingway and carry guns and actually fight.

I hope the writers present here are good men, certainly, I hope they are good lovers and good husbands, but their private habits, such as personal cleanliness, are of little concern to me and I hope to literature.

From the discussion

*Dennis Brutus*

The first point is this: when Mr Soyinka spoke of gun-running and holding up radio stations, he was throwing it out in passing. He was developing a very serious theme on the future function of the writer in Africa and in passing he referred to the distinction between the writer as a writer; a committed writer, and the writer who might or who might not go in for gun-running or holding up radio stations.

The other point that many of us must know, but others may not, is that Mr Soyinka, who threw this out in passing, was eminently qualified to make this kind of casual comment, because he himself has been charged in the court of his country for holding up a radio station. So you see his reference was not intended to dismiss this kind of thing. He was not sneering at it; he was saying that it might happen but that it was not essential to the notion of commitment.

If I may for a moment refer to myself, I cannot claim any
credit for gun-running. I have not in fact carried any guns. The nearest I have got to carrying guns was to let other people fire their bullets into my body. I do not know if this can qualify as gun-running. In fact my point is that this is irrelevant, it does not matter. I mention it in passing. I am not concerned with how a man expresses his involvement; I am desperately concerned that he should. He must express his concern with human beings, not only as a human being but also as a writer, who claims a rather privileged position in society—and who is more privileged than we are to be here as the guests of the Scandinavian Institute? I came from prison to live in a castle—what greater privilege can you have than that? We claim these privileges as writers. I have not been invited here because I make pleasant chit-chat over the tea-cups or because I make wisecracks in the bus coming home from a reception. I have come here because I am a writer and I have come here with other writers to talk of the concerns of writers.

And when I know, as I do, that there are men at present who are facing imprisonment because they have published my poetry, when I know that there are poets who have been silenced and who will be imprisoned if they write even a slogan, can I ignore this? Because this is the special area where I, as a writer, am concerned. There are areas in which, as a man, I am concerned, but here I am concerned with writers and the annihilation of their freedom to be writers. And if we ignore this (I know many of us laugh at Jane Austen, who wrote those delicious novels with the Napoleonic wars going on around her and made no reference to them in her work), I say we are going to make even bigger parodies and even greater scarecrows of ourselves if we come here, cosily shut ourselves into this castle, and ignore the writers who all over the world to-day are denied the freedom to be writers.

I say this because we have claimed the privilege, as writers, to ignore our obligations as men. We come here and say: “What concerns us as human beings is important but does not belong here at a writers’ conference.” I am not sure that that is true, but for the sake of argument I will accept it, but then I insist that, as writers, we have obligations to writers in other parts
of the world who cannot be writers. And if this conference ignores this fact, it will be to me a matter of profound sorrow. I know there are men all over the world who will say: “Oh, a handful of writers were shut in a castle and did not care what happened while the world went by.” They will say: “See, they have not castigated our evils, they have not condemned the restraints on us, for them it does not matter!” I do not think this is true.

And I hope that the records of this conference will include some reference to the men and women who are unable to function as writers, unable to achieve the freedom which we believe writers ought to have.

Wole Soyinka

I mainly wish to express my everlasting gratitude to Mr Brutus for clarifying what was very obvious, except to everybody else who made reference to something which I said in passing. I was astonished at the kind of relevance which was given to this kind of very casual “in” joke. Since Mr Brutus has very directly let the cat out of the bag by referring to this specific incident, I should point out finally that I was acquitted, so I do not want to be accused of being a gun-runner or a radio-station-holder-upper or any such thing. In any case, this is not really what we are here to discuss.

I wish to refer specifically to Mr Nkosi’s speech, and point out that, among other things, if a writer believes in himself, then he certainly recognizes a certain duty to himself, which is one of self-preservation. In other words, he must preserve and fight for the essence of himself, which even Mr Nkosi has acknowledged to be essential, if he feels he is threatened. I am reminded of a Muslim priest who for some curious reason made an attempt to convert me to the religion of Islam—he felt I was in need of salvation. He came to me and said an astonishing thing. He said that the main reason why he wanted me to become a Muslim was that the central doctrine of the Muslim religion is that of self-preservation and he felt I should be more cautious if I became a Muslim. This, as I said, was a rather astonishing doctrine, but I have no doubt that in his own very subtle way, before he was through with me, he was
going to use it really as a basis for converting me to Islam. So the writer, like any other human being in society, in one way or the other has a duty to protect himself and protect his trade.

If he feels committed or involved or if he feels a compulsion within himself to write the truth, then he surely has the right to try and build the kind of society in which he can write this beautiful literature, these beautiful words. I think most writers have had the experience of being unable to write for months, I have heard at least one writer tell me that. Because of a certain tense situation in his country, he has not been able to write anything for a long period. I think most writers occasionally go through this kind of experience.

Now the question of self-preservation remains to be solved—whether one regards it as a means of experience or feels that one must genuinely plan for this kind of society. This is precisely what I mean by the necessity for a writer to have some kind of vision and I do not think it is so easily tossed aside. If a writer takes charge of incidents, as they come every day of his life, then I think he is a very foolish and rather precarious kind of human being. So the question of a vision simply refers to the contribution of the writer to the kind of human society—individual, parochial or world—that he believes in.

Now his weapons as a writer are obviously the weapons of words. His weapons as a man, if you want to make the distinction, can be anything, from those two particular incidents which I do not want to refer to again to standing on the top of the Eiffel Tower and shouting his torments to the world. So the question of vision is simply a question of the future, the kind of society in which a writer must be able to function to his fullest capability. So at least I think that is one way of looking at it—simply as a means of self-preservation.

*John Nagenda*

I do not want to appear to be unserious, and I do agree with the speakers we have heard this morning. I do agree, for example, with Mr Brutus, who made a very strong plea, and if anything that I say in opposition must necessarily sound
destructive, yet I feel that there is a dilemma here which we must not gloss over.

The contradiction, as I see it in myself, is between myself, as somebody who perhaps selfishly seeks for safety, as somebody who is afraid of being hit by bullets, and the need therefore to make sure either that I run away from the bullets (which I think I would probably choose to do) or that I create the kind of society in which bullets will not fly. Now this is a very strong feeling in myself. That is on the one hand. But at the same time the dilemma, as I see it, is this: what society is going to move into a situation in which the trigger, if you like, has been removed and therefore also the risk of the gun being fired, what society is going to move into this situation, while at the same time it ensures that the writer is inspired to produce at his maximum?

It does seem to me that the kind of societies which have moved into this situation have at the same time lost something. I have not been here very long, but I would say that in some ways this country has done so—and it seems to me, with my very superficial acquaintance with some aspects of society here, that the trigger has been removed and the gun is no longer fired. So that, for example, when yesterday a friend of mine broke a glass in a fit of rage in a night-club, it seemed such an awful thing to do, and I told him so. To give you another example: when somebody said to another friend of mine that they were going to turn the town upside down, all that was turned over, as far as I could see, was a glass or two. In a way you can move into the kind of safe situation in which the creative explosion is deadened. I do not want to say that this is what has happened to Sweden, but I do want to say that the ideal society which we are all looking for may, to the creative man, not be what we think it will be. We are here as men who are writers and writers who are men, but in a way what we are really involved with is our capacity to translate into whatever medium we use very important explosions within ourselves. I think we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that it is only when we are social reformers (and I know this is a gross generalization) that our creative virtues are at their best.

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I want to suggest that dealing with the individual in society is the primary consideration; as far as I am concerned, my part in society is not necessarily to make the society better than I found it. If I can help to make the world a better place than I found it, that is a good bonus, but essentially all I care about as an individual, as a writer, as this thing that is sitting at this table, is that I have an individual capacity, an individual possibility, to live my life in this world before I die. And anything, whether it be to stop other people being shot or whether it be something less than that, anything that stands in the way of myself having this experience of what is around me I must consider to be a buffer between myself and the spontaneous enjoyment of life. And if it came to a point at which all the rest of the world was being murdered and I could escape to a little cave and still manage to find a private "explosion", I would do that, and to hell with the rest of the world! Therefore, in conclusion, I want to say that, whether we react to situations outside ourselves or not, finally our only responsibility is to ourselves. For myself, my own work must stem from this understanding and be judged by it.

Virgilio de Lemos

Those who say that each poet must speak with an individual voice to express his own experiences and interpretation of mankind are following the ruling patterns of western culture. What seems to be less clear is the explanation of why modern African writers cannot express "the collective African soul". This is not surprising, considering the kind of education they have received at high school or the university and the degree of dynamism of the cultural life of their new milieu, open to external influences that affect their individual character. If their minds are as receptive as they should be and are influenced by the impact of all European forms of literature and nègritude and, having absorbed and being liberated from these influences, they create masterpieces, we cannot possibly classify their production as invalid. We are not in a position to say that they have taken the wrong direction.

We feel that the quality of a literary work does not particularly lie in the theme chosen, because it is not important
whether it is a result of an individual or collective experience, whether it is the voice of imposed nationalism or anarchy or whether it denounces and contests the existing traditional or conservative social structures, no matter what aesthetic forms are adopted.

What is important is that writers are mature and skilful enough to treat language and to influence people through its power. The number of people a writer may affect during his lifetime is less important.

Portuguese African literature is neither abundant nor of a high standard, owing to the absence of a cultural policy. It could not be otherwise, because at least more than 97% of the Bantu population cannot make literary use of Portuguese, Arabic or any of the Bantu languages (Swahili included). But when in the urban centres people have access to culture, it happens that some of them reach a high level. The influences of European, Brazilian, American-Negro or North-American literary movements is not to be neglected or rejected, as cultural development depends upon regular contact with new forms of expression and thought.

We should refuse to accept standardized definitions of good Bantu literature (and this is valid for any other literature) or to consider it less valid when European (from west or east—if we think of Gogol, Dostoevsky or Chekhov), South-American or North-American influence can be detected.

As cultural evolution is a phenomenon which cannot be divorced from the social and economic background of a society, the introduction of changes in the system of production simultaneously provokes changes in the way of life and its interpretation. It also originates new forms of art, which will gradually replace primitive ones. This obviously applies to the art of writing. Changes which mirror progress in all senses of the word are to be welcomed and not made occasions for sorrow, as some of the traditionalists (who advocate a retour aux sources) would have us believe.

George Awoonor-Williams

I would like to go back to Nkosi's brilliant paper and pick up particular things that Soyinka has touched on briefly. There is
this whole business of a vision. I do not think we are here to sit down and map out visions for African writing and then go back and say we are going to follow them. I think the basis for the argument we started a few days ago is that in this whole confusion, in this vastness and complexity which we call Africa, what is the position of the writer? Is he essentially a clever craftsman, who has just found himself a new toy and is amusing himself—one has declared that he might run away into a cave if the whole world were about to be destroyed?

But I am saying that it is essential that, whether the writer is a fornicator and adulterer, he always has a specific duty to the community in which he lives; to provide what might be described as a kind of personal vision, a personal vision which for good or evil is going to push the frontiers of human achievement and human progress as far as possible. Because, let us face it, we in Africa are discovering ourselves as the new frontiersmen, whether we like it or not. I mean, we have all kinds of convulsions going on there and we just cannot simply be fornicators and adulterers. I mean, we should expect that we are going to carry on a love affair with our own society, and this love affair must essentially not be limited to brief and blissful orgasm but should generate and bring to birth some kind of coherent vision. And I would say that it is always a personal and creative urge which will lead to this.

*Lewis Nkosi*

I think writers can have a fantastic capacity both for self-deception and for sheer inability to understand what is very clear. At least this is clear to me. It is probably there that the problem begins for a writer—in communicating his ideas. I have been accused of many things already that I am not even concerned to deny, for instance, I did not say we should not issue a call from this conference deploiring the situation in which writers are jailed and I never said that writers should never defend themselves if they are being destroyed. What I was making a plea about was that, when we come to their forms, to their books, the question of whether they have made this plea in a public conference is of absolutely no use to me. They may gain certain experiences in their books, if they are
good writers, but I cannot attribute any value to their books on the ground that they have fought a jungle war.

I know this is a simple exposition which may be the reason why it is considered to be a superficial one, and I must say that I was not attacking Dennis Brutus personally; I was merely using Dennis Brutus as an example because he is a man I respect, both as a fighter for freedom and as a poet. What I was saying was that his function as a fighter in South Africa has nothing at all to do with the value of his poem when we read it. If it is false, it does not help him at all that he has fought in South Africa.

And another writer thinks that I said that good writers ought to be adulterers or that they ought to be lovers. I was really surprised. I was only pointing out that some writers have been reactionary, some writers have been cowardly, some writers have run away from war, but when we come to their books, we simply cannot use this as a criterion of how good their books are. In their books they may create heroes, they may even create committed literature, but I do not see where this brings us. I was not attacking Mr Soyinka, with whose paper I was in substantial agreement; I did not even hear that he used the phrase that we must provide a vision for our society. I think another poet said that. But I must say that I am merely trying to be commonsensical. When you say that a writer ought to provide a vision, what does it mean? In English we should say that this is tautological. Every writer has a vision. Otherwise I do not see what he is doing writing.

Wole Soyinka

I just want to answer a question which was asked very directly by Mr Nkosi. What I was saying was not that the writer ought to give a vision to society. The point in my talk was that the African writer is being caught by events. He is beginning to be a mere chronicler, and in the particular situation of the African society I think this is essential. Even George Orwell, if you like, wrote with a great vision—whether you accept it or not, this is a fact! Even Arthur Miller in his Crucible wrote of the beginnings of something terrible within his own society. This is what I say has been lacking in African writing.
This does not mean that every African writer has to write in these terms, but at least I am suggesting it is about time the African writer stopped being a mere chronicler and understood also that part of his essential purpose in society is to write with a very definite vision. After that, if he prefers to retire into his cave to protect himself, then it is just fine, but he must at least begin by exposing the future in a clear and truthful exposition of the present.
Mbella Sonne Dipoko

Cultural diplomacy in African writing

Of all the literature which is being produced in the world today, African writing in French is perhaps the one which is best suited to the conference table. This is because cultural diplomacy is its spirit. Born out of internal and external conflicts, nurtured by subtle emotional crises, complicated by political stress and all kinds of political involvement, it is a literature of revolt, dialogue and compromise. But it is also something else. It is the alienation of the citizen from the city he built with his passion and his words of love. And then it is cruel, not towards others, as some have feared, but towards the authors themselves; for, conceived as a kind of self-defence, these novels and poems, conniving with history, end up by exposing the essentially vicarious nature of the authors' commitment to their literary obsessions. There are a few exceptions. They represent the dissident line in this writing.

I. Revolt, dialogue and compromise

The brutality of colonialism and the dogmatism of its cultural arrogance caused the African people so much physical pain and humiliation that they would not have been human if they had not protested, while at the same time affirming their natural and original value as human beings. They needed such an affirmation for the protest to have any sense. Nothing was to be taken for granted any more. The black man and the white man were equal. This had to be said and re-said over and over again. In fact it is still being said, even today. And since oppression is so ugly, African writers, especially the poets, had to sing the beauty of blackness. In so doing, they transcended compassion. They attained joy and even hope. They regained
their self-pride, which had been eclipsed by the parade of foreign symbols and customs backed by armed power. To read a novelist like Ferdinand Oyono is to understand why the revolt had to take a racial aspect. Here Toundi, a colonial commandant's African houseboy, is being tortured by an African guard on the orders of white officials:

Derrière mon dos, Mendim s'essoufflait.
— Crie, bon Dieu! Mais crie donc! gueulait-il dans notre langue, ils ne me diront jamais d'arrêter tant que tu ne crieras pas....
— Le garde compta vingt-cinq, puis se retourna vers les blancs.
— Passe-moi la chicotte, dit Gosier-d'Oiseau.
Il fit siffler le nerf d'hippopotame sur le dos du garde, qui poussa un barissement de douleur.
— Là! c'est comme ça qu'il faut frapper! Recommence!
Mendim retroussa les manches de sa veste kaki, les lèvres tordues de douleur.
— Crie! Crie donc! pleurait-il, en s'acharnant sur moi, as-tu de la merde dans les oreilles?
— Ta gueule! lui cria l'amant de Sophie, en me déchantant un coup de pied sous le menton. Stop! Stop... Stop! ajouta-t-il.
Mendim s'arrêta.
— Demain, rien à manger... compris? dit Gosier-d'Oiseau, en me retournant du pied. Tu me l'amèneras au bureau après-demain. Chicotte toute la journée... compris?
— Oui, chef, dit le garde.
Les blancs s'en allèrent.
Je ne pouvais vraiment pas prévoir que je passerais la nuit dans la case de Mendim me Tit. Il somnole devant moi, la bouche ouverte, tassé dans un vieux fauteuil comme un vieux pardessus.
— Je crois que j'ai fait aujourd'hui quelque chose que je ne pourrai jamais oublier ni expier..., m'a-t-il dit quand les blancs furent partis.
Ses gros yeux se voilèrent de larmes.
— Pauvre Toundi! Pauvre de nous...!, gémissait-il.¹

Colonialism had many similar scenes to offer and poets tended to see in it all nothing other than racial oppression, forgetting that it was merely a mechanism of a certain kind of force, the logic of minority power; and that white people had done the same to each other through the centuries, were still doing it even today.

And the two World Wars did not seem to be sufficient reminders. Mourning the black martyrs of white-rule Africa was renewed in the darkness of the night, which became a symbol of Africanness. But it was no longer the night suggestive of mere darkness and which, taken pejoratively, could mean ignorance. It was the night which, to Senghor, is “plus vériéique que le jour”.³ “Nuit d’Afrique ma nuit noire, mystique et claire noire et brillante.”⁴ Or, according to Aimé Césaire, “la nuit peuplée de soleils et d’arcs-en-ciel”.⁵ This poet even goes further in his symbolic identification of Africans with the night; in his revolt against the violence of the colonial enterprise, he writes:

gemir se torde
crier jusqu’à une nuit hagarde à faire tomber
la vigilance armée
qu’installa en pleine nuit de nous-mêmes
l’impureté insidieuse du vent.⁶

The most striking image there is “la nuit de nous-mêmes” (the night of ourselves). And the “insidious impurity of the wind” seems to stand for the intruder, the colonizer.

This juxtaposition of the night and the wind comes up again in another poet, L. G. Damas:

sur l’océan
nuit noire
je me suis réveillé
épris
sans jamais rien saisir

de tout ce que racontait le vent
sur l'océan
nuit noire
Ou bien le vent repasse sa leçon du lendemain
ou bien le vent chante des trésors enfouis
ou bien le vent fait sa prière du soir
ou bien le vent est une cellule de fous
sur l'océan
nuit noire
pendant qu'un bateau foule l'écume
et va
va son destin de roulure
sur l'océan
nuit noire.  

Notice how helplessly isolated and melancholy the night is in that refrain, thrown in four times in a poem full of dismal movements on the ocean with winds which are “madhouses”, winds that sing of “hidden treasures” or say their evening prayers. And in all that, four times thoughts of the “dark night”, aloof, contemplative.

But one has to go back to Senghor’s poetry for the most eloquent elements of the narcissistic revolt which gave birth to such volumes as Leurres et Lueurs by Birago Diop, Coups de Pilon by David Diop, Au Fil de la Liberté by Conté Saidou and even some of Tchicaya U Tam’si’s poetry. Senghor sings:
O ma Lionne ma Beauté noire, ma Nuit noire ma Noire ma Nuel?

And again:
Femme nue, femme noire
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté!

... 
Femme nue, femme noire
Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme que je fixe dans l’Éternel,
Avant que le Destin jaloux ne te réduise en cendres pour nourrir les racines de la vie.  

7 L. S. Senghor, Chants d’Ombre (Paris, Du Seuil, 1945).
8 Ibid.
The blackness the poet loves is naked blackness, divested of all trappings of western civilization. So he undresses the black woman in order to sing the liveliness of her colour and the beauty of her curves. It is this search for nakedness, the search for original Africa, unadorned by foreign contributions, which leads Africans writing in French to look so much to the past. It is a search for authenticity, in which they get their people's dream of happiness all wrong.

For the masses, happiness was, as it still is, a prospective dream. Better conditions of living, higher purchasing power, personal freedom, a share of all the good things of modern life, from industrial products to learning; in short, a longing for better days to come. The prestige which educated Africans have among their people shows how forward-looking the common man is. And this is where the paradox of the situation emerges with brutal clarity; for the educated African, especially when he is a writer, that is, an intellectual—to use the word which one hears so often in French-speaking African circles—seems to recoil from all the education he has got, to reject its authority and to seek his happiness, his peace of mind, his mission, in a retrospective dream. He is nostalgic; for him it is better yesterdays that seem to count and not better tomorrows.

Camara Laye's brilliant autobiographical novel *L'Enfant Noir* and his philosophical novel of a white man who comes to Africa in search of a black king, *Le Regard du Roi*, Nazi Boni's *Crépuscule des Temps Anciens*, Birago Diop's *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, Bernard Dadie's *Le Pagne Noir* and Abdoulaye Sadjji's *Tounka* are, in one way or the other, laments for what Nazi Boni has called "l'Afrique spécifiquement Africaine". What these books celebrate in their various ways is old and eternal Africa. The colourful pageantry, the proverbial warmth of heart. And even the mysteriously sublime in Africa's practice of its vision of the world. Sometimes the nostalgia is so extravagant that one wonders whether there is not something like artistic sincerity, which has nothing to do with intellectual authenticity. Senghor, for example, says,

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1 Paris, Présence Africaine.
Et mon coeur de nouveau sur les marches de la haute demeure.
Je m'allonge à terre à vos pieds, dans la poussière de mes respects
A vos pieds, Ancêtres présents, qui dominez fiers la grande-salle de
tous vos masques qui défient le Temps.

In the same poem he says:

Vous savez que j'ai lié amitié avec les princes proscrits de l'esprit,
avec les princes de la forme
Que j'ai mangé le pain qui donne faim de l'innombrable armée des
travailleurs et des sans-travail
Que j'ai rêvé d'un monde de soleil dans la fraternité de mes frères
aux yeux bleus.a

And one is not surprised when he ends the poem with:

Demain, je prendrai le chemin de l'Europe, chemin de l'ambassade
Dans le regret du Pays noir.

For, as soon as we are faced with these preoccupations with
traditional Africa, whether in the poets or in the novelists, we
know the revolt is over; that cultural negotiations are about to
open; that the time for the spiritual dialogue with the foreign
metropolis has arrived. It is at this point that, whether we
like it or not, the solitude of the African writer begins. All
his resounding rejection of the white man's culture—the in-
equality, the Christianity which the Cameroonian novelists
Mongo Beti and Oyono whip so well, the one in Une Vie de
Boy and Chemin d'Europe, the other in Le Pauvre Christ de
Bomba—in brief, the revolt against Europe—mellows, The
writer, the poet and the intellectual become ambassadors, tak-
ing news of Africa to the courts of Europe. Cultural nationalism
gives way to cultural diplomacy. In Epîtres à la Princesse,³
Senghor speaks of:

Mon espoir est de revenir à la fin de l'Eté. Ma mission sera brève,
J'ai la confiance de mon Peuple. On m'a nommé l'Itinérant.

And again:

Ambassadeur du Peuple noir, me voici dans la Métropole.
J'ai compté douze portes rayonnantes, dénombré douze mille étoiles.

a Chants d'Ombre (Paris, Du Seuil, 1945).
Like most of these writers, he is the ambassador representing his people at the colonizer's court in Europe, where he has to talk of them and to which he has to deliver their messages. Now, since the ruler of this Africa was at the time the French President, Senghor could not claim to be the ambassador of modern Senegal, which was a dependent territory; hence he had to follow his imagination to the distant past when the land was free. And it is about this ancient, independent Africa that he talks; his poetic dialogue with the French is centred on it. And one notices the same thing in nearly all the other writers of French-speaking Africa: there is the marked tendency to try to prove something to Europe, to parade the charm and specific qualities of the homeland. When Camara Laye makes his *Enfant Noir* end with the take-off of the hero's plane for Paris, one has the impression that he too was just an ambassador or a cultural attaché of his native Guinea, going to Paris with memories and messages from the Fouta-Djallon.

Another result of this ambassadorial pose is the refusal to criticize custom and tradition in public. For tradition, all the folklore, the myths and the history are the cultural homeland and while on a mission abroad the man who represents his people never criticizes his country, whose servant he is. Hence most of the writers of French-speaking Africa are the uncritical servants of old Africa, which they glorify, beautify and often romanticize—not a bad thing in itself, given the nature of colonialism and the hurt it inflicted on African self-pride. It is when this attachment to the past and its emotional reconstitution becomes indiscriminate that the whole thing could become reactionary, that is, anti-progressive.

What are the immediate consequences of this use of art as a diplomatic weapon? I think it accentuates cultural alienation; for the artist ceases to create for himself alone; and also from beyond the grave the ancestors seduce him, diverting him from the problems of his contemporary compatriots. So that, unlike the social politician, whose life is dedicated to the material happiness of his people, the African intellectual is not the ambassador of his people but the ambassador of the ancestors, those lucky ones who had lived and died as free men. So the values he takes for discussion with the rest of the world are
traditional values, messages of the beginning. And this is where
the problem of audience arises.

The existence of a dialogue between civilizations, a dialogue
initiated on a global level by the writers and accepted by
Europe, results in the audience of the African writer being
concentrated around conference tables. This makes the writer
often very self-conscious and at times more or less bent on
pleasing. That is why sometimes one fears that his indepen-
dence may suffer. If it does, within the limits of what is
reasonable and worthy of an artist, then it is just the price he
has to pay for the compromise, the rediscovered harmony in
which the contradiction between his aspirations and those of
the other party is resolved. But even the harmony is only
superficial; enough artistic tension remains in the heart which
takes refuge in self-justification. In his *Chaka*, for example,
Senghor makes the Zulu leader say, in replying to the white
voice which accuses the African of hate:

Ce n’est pas hain que d’aimer son peuple.

And, addressing the 16th session of the U.N. General As-
sembly, Senghor, who, it must be said, is one of our greatest
living poets, declared:

Que nos confrontations — politiques, économiques, morales, cultu-
relles — demeurent seulement pacifiques. Je suis sûr qu’alors peu à
peu, par échange et emprunts, par osmose, toutes les nations et
races avancèrent d’un movement convergeant vers la civilisation de
l’universel.

The revolt is over, the dialogue well advanced, now that
both sides seem to have agreed on a compromise.

Besides Senghor, one other important African poet working
in French is Tchicaya U Tam’si, who is from the Congo. With
him one is still with the *négritude* movement but very far from
the aristocratic romanticism of the Senegalese poet and much
nearer Césaire and Damas, the two other fathers of African
writing in French. By consigning polemics to beautiful poetry,
Tchicaya U Tam’si makes protest sublime even when he is
reporting:

66
la fraie eut bien
tout de suite après les vêpres;
un ban de ventres blancs
flotta sur Stanley-pool
parmi les jacinthes d'eau
Et la nuit crétita
sous le feu des étoiles.

And again:

Ceux qui sont venus
avaient sous leurs narines
la croix et la bannière
où l'on vit le Christ
accroupis et somnolent
sur les flammes du purgatoire
et j'oublie, un vomitif
dans les calices, dans chaque main!
Vous êtes venus:
Êtes-vous sûr d'avoir vaincu?

His other volumes are *Le Mauvais Sang, Feu de Brousse, A Triche-Cœur*, and *Epitomé*. Essentially a surrealist, throwing in words just as they come, prompted only by his sensibility, he attains the freedom and perceptiveness of the greatest spontaneous poets. But he can also be quite straightforward and immediately moving, as when he turns aside, as if fed up with a kind of love:

Va
Va va
au Golgatah
le ventre nu devant!
J'ai déjà la bouche sucrée
de tous les mots d'amour
qui vont pleuvoir de ta peine.

After the originality of Senghor, Damas, Césaire and U Tam'si, the other African poets are just in love with words; reading them, one hears echoes of the French romantics. Birago Diop, for example, better known for his *Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, sob:

Le cœur vaste comme un rêve
un rêve d'enfant
Souffrant ailleurs
Vœux, pleurs
Serments, leurres
des heures
d'antan ...  

II. Outside the city, self-betrayal and dissent

The literary movement of négritude was only a sublimation of a social dream: the desire of the people for a happier city. It was this dream which some African poets interpreted in terms of the past, instead of in a vision of the present and the future. They started by presenting black Africa and traditional values as the antithesis of white Europe and industrialization. We have seen that this did not last.

A meeting-place, a compromise, was agreed upon. It was where the synthesis of the two cultures, the one African and animist, the other European and Christian, had to be worked out in the spirit of the interpenetration of civilizations. And it was to this rendezvous that African writers arrived, their poetry and sometimes their prose carrying memories of Timbuktu and of the ancient glories of Ghana, Mali and the other pre-colonial African kingdoms. With their lyrical vision they glanced over their shoulders from time to time and said a word to modern Africa; and then another word; and on their return from the mission in Europe they spoke to their people, using words, only words, beautiful words, eternal and as solid as stone. And criticising the colonial enterprise, they built the ideal city, block after block, or rather, stone after stone, all made of words, and they seemed to believe in that city. It became their hope and the hope of their people. A city of human warmth, a city of love, of equality, where there will be no suffering.

But many soon discovered that the movement was more descriptive than anything else. There was no participation, as if the writers themselves knew that the city was a dream, that
it would always remain a dream; that it would be difficult to stop industrialization from accomplishing its mission, which is the destruction of ancient tradition. The beautiful reconstitution of the past remained only in the pages of books, the pages of our books, never in the way of life of the writers, never in our way of life. Some of us did not even make the effort to get really near our sources, in order to make our songs and our protests, our theories and our sweat less idle.

Some remained diplomats, living abroad even when they were in Africa. Designers of the neo-traditional city, they live outside its walls, strangers abroad, they are also strangers to their own sources, and yet the talk continues, and yet the poems continue to greet the dawn like the daily songs of early birds. And still they continue to talk of Timbuktu. They remind us of the Almamy and of ancestral astrology, of our philosophy—beautiful posturing, and nothing more. There is a certain emptiness in retrospective dreams when, created, they are in their turn, incapable of becoming creative.

In conclusion, let us for a while recapitulate certain points but in another context. From the beginning politics was central in the works of French-speaking African writers. If they talked so much of love and dignity and the past, it was because they were dissatisfied with the present, as administered by the colonial administration. And injustice and oppression came to be identified with the white man. But, as if history had decided to expose these writers before their people, the anti-imperialist struggle made headway and Africans, including some writers, found themselves in positions of power. At last they could concretize the dream of the ideal city, bring the ancestors nearer the living and drive death and suffering very far away. But that city was not founded. And more and more it is becoming futile to blame everything on the white man, futile even to continue to sing the past. Thus the exercise of power brought with it the occasion for a new realism in African literature. Blaming the white man has lost some of its urgency.

Sociology is gaining ground over ethnology, and classical traditionalism is losing some of its attraction. The giant of this new vision is Sembene Ousmane, whose latest short novel, Le
Mandat,⁴ is a minor masterpiece. No sentimentality, and he sees social parasitism in the communalism which accepts privation and suffering lying down. He is the leader of the new dynamic realism which is developing in French African writing.

Eldred Jones

The decolonization of African literature

The most obvious sign of the influence of Europe on African literature is in the language of African literature. Although there have been, and still are, writers who write in African languages, the late Yoruba novelist Fagunwa, for example, the best modern African writing is written in European languages—predominantly French and English—but also in Portuguese. There are obvious drawbacks arising from this situation. It takes a great deal of time and effort to master a second language well enough to produce in it a work of art which is not at best a literary curiosity, tolerated because it is produced by someone from whom the world expected nothing and so is pleasantly surprised to get anything at all. This means that many artistically gifted persons may not have direct access to a world audience. The drawback is not, however, total. It is possible to write in an African language and get the work translated into a world language. This has actually happened to a few authors.

The great advantage for a writer who masters his language of adoption is the obvious one of direct access to a large number of his fellow Africans, whom he can only reach through a European language, and direct access to a large part of the rest of the world as well. This is why all who can will, I believe, write in a European language.

It has been shown by several African authors that a work can be written in a European language and still convey something of the African experience in artistic form. Senghor's poems are written in excellent French but are so imbued with African images conveying the spirit of Africa that he can be said to have added a new dimension to the language of his
adoption. An English critic has acknowledged a similar repay-
ment of Wole Soyinka's debt to English. Penelope Gilliatt, 
writing in *The Observer* (London) of September 19, 1966, 
wrote:

Every decade or so, it seems to fall to a non-English dramatist to 
belts new energy into the English tongue. The last time was when 
Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* opened at Theatre Workshop. 
Nine years later, in the reign of Stage Sixty at the same loved 
Victorian building at Stratford East, a Nigerian called Wole 
Soyinka has done for our napping language what brigand dramatists 
from Ireland have done for centuries—booted it awake, rifled its 
pockets and scattered the loot into the middle of next week.

What Miss Gilliatt is saying in her own, rather tough, 
brigand imagery is that Soyinka is employing his adopted 
language with such originality that he is contributing to its 
enrichment. The use of the foreign language then need not 
embarrass the African or the European. As everyone knows, 
English and French are the two foremost African languages.

The African writer need not therefore be dominated by the 
language of his adoption, though it is perfectly possible that he 
may be. It is possible that with the adoption of his new 
language he may become mesmerised by the material in it and 
quite unconsciously reflect ideas and attitudes not really his 
own. This, of course, really means that a person who is so 
mesmerised cannot be a really successful artist. For the true 
artist learns from all he meets but distils it in his own imagina-
tion and makes something new and original out of it. This 
should be the aim of the African writer. To be faithful to his 
own imagination, whatever language and whatever medium he 
happens to be using.

Writers themselves have examined the means by which the 
character of African speech can be conveyed in a foreign 
language. I have elsewhere (in *African Forum*, No. 4, 1966) 
quoted Mr Chinua Achebe's words on the subject, as well as 
the excellent illustration he gives from his own work.

Other authors have sought to use the very syntax of African 
languages, while employing the words of the foreign language. 
This is the basis of Gabriel Okara's style in *The Voice*. Yet
others have used the standard version of the foreign language. The success of each work has to be judged individually, in so far as it fulfils the author's purpose and is an artistic success.

Much more fundamental than the mere reproduction of syntax is the conveying in its totality of an experience in a way that reflects its environment without precluding it from general applicability. In looking at the African author's work we may be able to recognise its Africanness; we must be able to see its universality. Fortunately the two things often go together. A work which succeeds in realising its environment to the full often achieves this universality. The happy paradox is that, to be truly universal, one must be truly local.

In one sense African literature has been unduly influenced by the fact of colonisation. Necessarily so, since artists and intellectuals tend to be very sensitive to restrictions of any kind. Because colonisation itself was a form of suppression, there was a great outcry against it. It therefore became a recurring theme in the work of African writers. The voices of Anglophones and Francophones merge here in a strong unison. Two poems illustrate this very well:

From the rostrum they declaimed
On Martyrs and men of high ideals
Whom they sent out,
Benevolent despots to an unwilling race
Straining at the yoke,
Bull-dozers trampling on virgin ground
In blatant violation.
They trampled down all that was strange
And filled the void
With half-digested alien thoughts;
They left a trail of red
Wherever their feet had passed.
Oh, they did themselves fine
And strutted about the place,
Self-proclaimed demi-Gods
From a counterfeit Olympus.
One day they hurled down thunderbolts
On a toiling race of earthworms.
They might have rained down pebbles
To pelt the brats to death
But that was beneath them.  
They kept up the illusion  
That they were fighting foes  
Killing in the name of high ideals.  
At the inquest they told the world  
The worms were becoming pests  
Moreover they said  
They did not like wriggly things.  
Strange prejudice for gods.

That poem expresses a poet's bitter reaction to what the poem sees as a "violation" of Africa by a haughty race of men. There are differences between that poem and the next one, but the position of the poet speaking for "us" against "them" is the same:

In those days  
When civilization kicked us in the face  
When holy water slapped our cringing brows  
The vultures built in the shadow of their talons  
The bloodstained monument of tutelage  
In those days  
There was painful laughter on the metallic hell of the roads  
And the monotonous rhythm of the paternoster  
Drowned the howling on the plantations  
O the bitter memories of extorted kisses  
Of promises broken at the point of a gun  
Of foreigners who did not seem human  
Who knew all the books but did not know love  
But we whose hands fertilize the womb of the earth  
In spite of the desolate villages of torn Africa  
Hope was preserved in us as in a fortress  
And from the mines of Swaziland to the factories of Europe  
Spring will be reborn under our bright steps.

The latter poem is by David Diop, of Guinea, translated from the French, and the former by Mabel Segun, of Nigeria. Both poets are united in rebellion against foreign domination. This is one theme that united African poets in the days of colonialism. One of the finest expressions of this frustration is Gabriel Okara's "Spirit of the Wind".

This is the voice of protest—it is a reaction to a stimulus
imposed from outside and so powerful was the stimulus that it produced a powerful reaction. So once again—such is the irony of art—a poem was stimulated by suppression.

Linked with this was the cultural movement which reacted strongly to the assumption that nothing good had ever been or could ever be produced in Africa. Again this led to a deliberate attempt to bring out all that was beautiful, all that was glorious in the African past in rebuttal of this change. The values of traditional life came to be extolled, and a picture tended to emerge of a rural paradise presided over by ancestral spirits, ringing with the voice of the praise singer and the laughter of women:

Let me listen in the smoky heat for the shadowy visit of propitious souls,
My head on your breast flowing, like a kuskus ball smoking out of the fire,
Let me breathe the smell of our dead, let me contemplate and repeat their living voice, let me learn
To live before I sink, deeper than the diver, into the lofty depth of sleep.

That was Senghor. Dei Anang is equally romantic when he longs for

... the days of drums
And festival dances in the shade
Of sun-kissed palms

... ... ... ...
To untutored days
When maid was ever chaste
And lad abhorred unhallowed ways
For fear of ancient gods.

The picture of an Africa in which no one ever did any wrong!

There have been novels which have quite vigorously demonstrated the lack of real understanding which often underlay the work of colonial administrators and missionaries—again in both languages—Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* (in English, *Houseboy*) being just two examples. So colonialism has been a source of inspiration
—perhaps the most dominant inducement to Africans to write.

Many but by no means all of these works, which were the results of the reaction to the colonial situation, tended to play down—for obvious reasons—what was wrong with the old African society. (It is worth commenting here that Achebe's novels do present some of the inherent cruelties, however rational to the participants, along with the integrated life of the community. Oyono also in the work quoted shows Africans participating in the cruelties of the colonial regime as functionaries of the masters.) Generally, however, in looking back on the African past writers felt a need to avert their eyes from whatever was wrong and concentrate on showing what was good in African society. Again because this was a reaction, the picture tended to be one-sided (the opposition, as it were, having presented the other side so effectively). But this was in fact limiting.

The African writer can now, I feel, shake himself free of this indirect limitation and take a total and unembarrassed view of his Africa—the Africa of the present and the past. The resulting picture may be unromantic, it may be disillusioning. The only rule should be that it must reflect the total situation.

This is already happening. I have mentioned Mr Achebe in relation to the novel of the past. He has, of course, looked quite searchingly around him at our own Africa in No Longer At Ease and more recently in A Man of the People. Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters and Easmon's The New Patriots do not gloss over the glaring and frightening imperfections of modern Africa. The second instalment of Camara Laye's autobiographical work Dramouss also hints at some of the mixed consequences of political decolonization.

One of the most interesting antidotes to the over-romanticised view of old Africa is Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests. First of all, the play works in two areas of time, since the past illuminates the past. The play looks back at one of the great empires of the past, not so much as a symbol of greatness, but as a community of people—people, rather than shadowy historical giants or massive saints. The play shows people with the familiar urges, drives and motives which make up our own
world, and which, unless human nature has dramatically changed, must have governed people then in Mali, Songhai, Ghana or any of the great kingdoms. Thus, in clearing away the false romance of the past, the play puts us on our guard against any illusions about our present.

War in the past probably found its blind adherents, like the Historian of Soyinka's play, who is a forerunner of the academic lackey who uses his intellect to defend ideas and policies which he knows are wrong. This is not a particularly African character, although Africa has its own supply of them. The play breaks out of the dimension of the past and out of the boundaries of Africa when Soyinka portrays the glorification of war in these dramatically ironical words of the Historian:

I would show you the magnificence of the destruction of a beautiful city. I would reveal to you the attainments of men which lifted mankind to the ranks of gods and demi-gods. And who was the inspiration of this divine carnage? Helen of Troy, a woman whose honour became as rare a conception as her beauty. Would Troy, if it were standing today, lay claim to preservation in the annals of history if a thousand valiant Greeks had not been slaughtered before its gates, and a hundred thousand Trojans within her walls?

The specious arguments of the prostituted intellectual carry the day. Mata Kharibu, the tyrant, has his way, and the slave dealer (not European) has a new and unexpected source of merchandise. African artists can produce great works but, as men, they are as subject to jealousy as Demoke is to vertigo. All this is not to say that the empires of the past were not great or that Africa today is not potentially great, but it is to say that the human element in politics, as in art, is just as uncertainly poised on the brink of triumph or disaster now, as then. When artists look at their material like this, they are likely to write great and abiding literature, and they would have overcome the limitations of colonization.

Africa has a wealth of tradition, but it is also a new and dynamic continent. It is a land of quiet villages and throbbing cities, of skyscrapers and mud huts, of honour as well as corruption, of benevolence as well as of tyranny, of beauty as well as ugliness. This is the total picture. We must look at it all.
Only then will our writing, whether of the past or the present or even of the future, be imbued with the independence of spirit which produces great literature.

From the discussion

Ezekiel Mphahlele

The language question has been discussed exhaustively before, several times. People have felt pretty sentimental about the use of their mother tongue, but those who are not sentimental and are faced with the reality of the situation decide to use the language of the colonizers. What if a creative impulse kicks you in the pit of your stomach? You do not go into the academic question of what language you are going to use—you get a kick in your stomach and you get your paper and you pour yourself out in the medium that comes to you naturally. It is no use weeping about it, it is just a practical thing that you do. I think there will no doubt come a time when we will have national African languages—all to the good if that happens. But writers and artists do not wait for social changes which take centuries anyhow. They just go on and create.

I think, as far as regional trends are concerned, there are regional trends and we feel them all the time we write. The South African is in a situation of very immediate urgency and the prose and the poetry that goes into expressing this situation is very sensuously felt. They know—there is just no reflection at all of the bigger, the more complex conflict between the old and the new. There is no problem of the man parachuting to the ground from somewhere outside, from abroad, of the home-coming of someone. The problem does not arise. Whereas in certain areas he will find the kind of poetry that I mentioned in my lecture, in which there is a problem of home-coming and it seizes the poet at the moment at which he feels it, there is even a more personal poetry that you will find.

It seems to me, though, that, generally speaking, one can speak in terms of two kinds of use, two uses of language. There is the language that is very personal; it is a personal, immediate experience and the poetry tells you that, in terms of
poetry, I mean. And there is the language that you feel—this is public poetry. It is not immediately felt by the individual who is writing. What he is trying to do is trying to capture and demonstrate what he thinks is a communal feeling, a public feeling.

When Senghor looks at masks, they mean something to him, and then, as he goes on, he comes to a point where he says: "You purify the air of eternity." I cannot feel it personally myself, I just cannot. I say to myself, what do you mean by "you purify the air of eternity"? It is a vast metaphysical idea which I cannot conceive, but which I know is there, and it sounds beautiful. Any man is harassed by failures around him, harassed by wars around him or so many other things around him, poverty, hunger. Then you look at something and you say "purify the air of eternity". It gives you a comfortable feeling, but I have no idea of what it means. This is not that kind of personal poetry.

Tchicaya U Tam'si writes something like "having found no man on my horizon, I played with my body the ardent poems of death, I followed my river to the cold and surging billows, I opened myself to the world of seaweeds where solitudes crawl, opened the markets to solitudes, to the sun, opened my flesh to write blood and riots, the breath of sperms transfers me into the east of leaves and storms". This, you know, starts deep from there, from the bottom. This is personally felt and I can understand it.

And when Soyinka writes "you leave your faint depression" etc., this is very personal. We move along this level. I am not saying that one is better than the other; what I am saying is that there is the poetry that is at this personal level and is felt, and there is the poetry which is public poetry and has that function. It is not here a matter of which is better; we just respond to the poetry, as a phenomenon. When a man, like Paul Joachim writes this poem, he calls it "Burial". I will read it to you:

The time when we were affiliated to poverty as one is connected to the gas or electricity supply the time when eternity was turned inside out and the spectre of death no longer even noughted our minds...
This is public poetry. And when we say "turn eternity inside out", it is beautiful, but what does it mean? Very often we think we have to have public poetry; we must have poetry that does not reflect us necessarily, but reflects what we think to be a mass-collective response to situations. Then there are times when we lock ourselves in and we look more inwards, but then, because we are part of nature, we correspond with the other people around us and with our social situation.

Albert Memmi

Au fond, quelle est la situation? Ces peuples ont été opprimés pendant des dizaines d'années, quelquefois des siècles. Le résultat pour l'écrivain, pour le professeur, pour l'homme de pensée, c'est qu'il a été culturellement aliéné. Nous le savons, et maintenant tout le monde le reconnaît, même les anciens colonisateurs. Autrement dit, il était obligé pour faire une carrière, pas une carrière au sens vulgaire du mot, il était obligé d'adopter d'une certaine manière, plus ou moins, les valeurs du peuple qui le dominait. Le résultat, c'est que dans une carrière intellectuelle, il était obligé d'adopter la langue du peuple dominant, d'adopter même, d'une certaine manière, des valeurs institutionnelles et culturelles de ce peuple.

Le résultat était que, lorsqu'il a fallu lutter contre cette domination, il a lutté aussi contre les valeurs du peuple dominant. Nous sommes d'accord jusqu'ici. Au point que le christianisme, par exemple, est apparu dans beaucoup de cas comme l'antithèse, comme le diable. Évidemment parce que le christianisme était amené dans les wagons du peuple dominant, le christianisme a donc dominé pendant quelque temps, et même la langue du peuple dominant, et même les valeurs du peuple dominant sont apparues en quelque sorte comme l'antithèse de sa personnalité. Réaction normale! Il fallait donc combattre ces valeurs pour se libérer.

Je vous donne un exemple extrêmement simple, actuel : les Noirs américains. Beaucoup d'entre eux, comme vous savez, voulant lutter contre la domination des Blancs américains, ont imaginé de se convertir à l'islamisme, non pas parce qu'ils avaient pour l'Islam, je crois, une attirance intérieure parti-
culière, peut-être que oui, peut-être que non, mais simplement,
yous le voyez bien, il y avait une espèce de renversement. On
adopte la religion des gens qui, eux, ont été opprimés ailleurs
et donc on rompe avec les Blancs américains. Voyez le ren-
versement, il est très clair.

L'indépendance acquise, que vont faire ces jeunes nations?
Il faut, en effet, construire rapidement une nation, une culture
qui soit contre la culture du peuple dominant. Donc, retour à
soi. Affirmation de ses propres valeurs. Mais dans tous les
gestes humains, dans tous les gestes collectifs, l'élan est tel
qu'il faut faire une surenchère de soi, il faut en remettre, il
faut exagérer. Alors, maintenant, l'Islam devient quelque chose
d'extraordinaire, et si on est chrétien le christianisme devient
quelque chose d'extraordinaire, et je vous dirai que j'ai les
mêmes ennuis, au fond; étant un écrivain juif, je suis, je vous
assure, face aux mêmes problèmes, avec les traditionalistes juifs
qui sont au moins aussi emmerdants que les autres. Pourquoi?
Parce que, pour eux, être un écrivain juif ne peut l'être que si
l'on retourne à la Bible, à la cabale, si l'on devient religieux,
si l'on revient aux rites, si l'on suit complètement toute la
tradition; alors, je dis, c'est une autre réaction, c'est encore un
mythe. Aux mythes que nous a proposés le colonisateur, nous
proposons maintenant des mythes de la tradition, et nous voilà
devant une nouvelle prison. Nous passions, en effet, d'une
prison à une autre, or qu'est-ce qu'est la littérature et qu'est-ce
qu'est l'art? C'est d'abord, évidemment, la liberté.

L'écrivain, qu'est-ce que c'est, l'artiste, qu'est-ce que c'est?
C'est quelqu'un qui essaie d'exprimer tout de même ce qu'il
sent le plus exactement. Alors, on lui dit : attention, vous
n'avez pas été loyal envers votre peuple! Mais c'est grave cela,
c'est encore la suspicion, c'est encore l'accusation, mais l'accusa-
tion, au lieu d'être portée par l'ancien colonisateur sous l'angle
négatif, elle est portée cette fois-ci par les siens qui veulent
egalement accuser l'écrivain. En commençant ici, je vous disais
que si j'avais quelque chose à proposer aux hommes d'après
ma petite expérience, je dirais maintenant : ne soyez pas
coupables. Vous vous souvenez de ça? Il ne faut plus que l'écri-
vain soit coupable. D'ailleurs, de toute façon, il l'est, mais
cest une autre histoire. Il faut donc que l'écrivain se libère,
qu'il écrit ce qu'il veut, qu'il écrit ce qu'il sent. C'est ça la vraie liberté!

Alors, je m'adresse aux écrivains scandinaves qui écoutent notre dialogue. C'est que, vous aussi, vous vous sentez coupables. Vous avez l'impression d'être un peu à l'écart des grandes routes de l'Europe. Vous avez l'impression que la civilisation elle est à Paris, que la civilisation, elle est à New York, elle est à Rome, et que vous en êtes loin, et j'ai compris quelque chose depuis deux jours que je suis ici. Pourquoi nous avez-vous invités? Mais, sincèrement, parce que vous vous sentez seuls, vous avez l'impression que vous êtes seuls et que, nous, de notre côté, nous sommes un peu seuls, et par conséquent, notre solitude va-t-elle nous renseigner sur votre propre solitude?

Eh bien, l'écrivain est un solitaire, et on n'en sortira pas, ni nous non plus, et je dirai plus : il n'est pas question d'en sortir. A partir du moment où vous avez peur de cette solitude, allez faire de la politique. Faites de la politique, descendez dans la rue. Si vous êtes jeunes, soyez beatniks ou autre chose, et si vous êtes vieux, vendez des casseroles. Mais si vous voulez être écrivain, c'est-à-dire, affronter directement le destin humain, eh bien, il faut l'accepter et l'affronter seul.

Je vous jure que si chacun d'entre nous, écrivains algériens, tunisiens, scandinaves, l'écrivain juif que je suis, se regarde pour de bon, se saisit bien en main et dit exactement ce qu'il sent, comme il le sent, c'est-à-dire, s'il est loyal envers lui-même, je vous jure que c'est la meilleure manière qu'il a d'être loyal envers son peuple, parce qu'en ce faisant, on traduit réellement son peuple.

La liberté de l'écrivain en Afrique du Nord, c'est le même problème à mon sens, c'est-à-dire que cet écrivain doit écrire ce qu'il a envie d'écrire, comme il le sent, et loyaltyment. Je sais bien que ce ne sera pas du goût de certains dirigeants nord-africains et que cela peut l'amener à une opposition politique. Eh bien, de la même manière, il a le choix : entrer en prison ou s'en aller. Je le dis tranquillement. Je regrette que ça soit ainsi. Ne croyez pas que je suis un boutefeu, je suis absolument le contraire d'un boutefeu. J'aurais souhaité que ça se passe calmement, que toutes les discussions soient possibles, que
chaque écrivain puisse vivre chez lui et que les gens écoutent ce que dit l’écrivain comme une opinion parmi d’autres. Si cela n’est pas possible, il y a une troisième solution, c’est le silence. Ou bien il accepte de se taire et de vivre chez lui : s’il ne peut pas se taire, eh bien, il n’a qu’à vivre autre part. Thomas Mann, après tout, avait quitté l’Allemagne, avait vécu en dehors de l’Allemagne pendant très longtemps. Victor Hugo a vécu hors de France alors qu’il était assez âgé.

Je vous dis : je ne veux pas dramatiser la situation de l’écrivain, mais, d’une certaine manière, l’écrivain est destiné presque, s’il est loyal envers lui-même, à représenter un certain nombre de choses que la société ne peut pas supporter d’entendre et, par conséquent, à se trouver en conflit presque régulièrement. Pourquoi? Une société, c’est comme un individu : elle a une conscience claire, elle a aussi de l’inconscience. Voir l’inconscience n’est jamais très agréable. La société ne peut pas supporter ce que l’écrivain va chercher dans les profondeurs de l’inconscient. Quand nous osons dire, par exemple, qu’un mythe juif ou un mythe musulman, un mythe chrétien, peut être une chose dangereuse, nul doute que nous nous trouvons dans un grave conflit avec les structures sociales de ce pays.

C’est ça la vraie mission des écrivains; ce n’est pas de signer des manifes tes. Bien sûr, il faut en signer de temps en temps, mais ce n’est pas là la vraie mission. C’est le problème de l’engagement, par exemple. Le vrai engagement de l’écrivain, ce n’est donc pas de signer des manifes tes, ce n’est pas de prendre position sur les votes ou sur les non votes, c’est d’oser représenter la réalité telle qu’elle est pour de bon. Et ça mènera nécessairement à un conflit avec la majorité des gens, parce qu’eux, en général, ne peuvent pas voir cette réalité. Et c’est ça qui nous distingue des gens.

Dennis Brutus

We have heard from Mr Memmi, both to-day and yesterday, contributions of such thoughtfulness and such insight that I believe we must all be grateful to him. I think this will be one of the most memorable aspects of this conference. Especially his references to the need for the writer to be free, in a special
personal sense, to liberate himself, the need not to feel guilty, to cleanse himself of the sense of guilt (though he did say in parentheses that, even while he would tell the writer, "do not feel guilty", the fact of the matter is that the writer is guilty). And he might have gone a little further perhaps and examined not only the need for innocence, but a no less profound need within us also to declare our guilt and to be found guilty. The allocations of guilt you need when you feel disquieted and uneasy because people tell you that you are not guilty and your anxiety is to be found guilty, and I should have liked to hear him on that point as well. He gives us useful information on the freedom of the writer in North Africa. In doing so, he analyzes the role or (that unhappy word) "mission" of the writer. He speaks of the need of the writer to write, and in North Africa and indeed in other parts of Africa, as I know only too well, perhaps in many other parts of the world, the writer must make the same choices. He must either write or he must be silent; he must go to prison or at least find himself in political opposition. All these possibilities are open to him. But because of his necessity to write, this need to liberate himself, this need to be true to himself, he is almost inevitably going to find himself in collision with his society.
Dan Jacobson

Boyhood in Kimberley

When people in Europe hear that Kimberley is my hometown, they are often much impressed. "Ah, the Diamond City", they say, imagining for me an exotic and exciting background. When South Africans hear that I am from Kimberley, they are not in the least impressed. "That place?", they say, "What a dump! I bet you're glad you're out of it."

In South Africa, Kimberley has a thoroughly bad reputation. It is supposed to be unbearably hot, which it is, for a few months every year. It is supposed to be dry and dusty, which it is, for most of the year. It is, above all, supposed to be dead, which it was, for many years. Thirty years ago, when my family came to Kimberley, none of the diamond mines was being worked, and it was said that a man could take a deckchair into the middle of Dutoitspan Road, Kimberley's main street, and sit there for a morning without being disturbed. And somehow, elsewhere in South Africa, this picture of Kimberley as a kind of ghost-town has persisted, in spite of the fact that today the mines are working—working double shifts, as a matter of fact—and that in addition Kimberley has become a busy marketing and industrial centre. But the belief in Kimberley's total collapse after its years of fame and spectacular growth is clearly more dramatic, and hence more appealing, than the truth. I know that there is a part of myself which resists the changes in recent years which have made Kimberley so much more commonplace and conventional a town, by South African standards, than it used to be. There is a part of myself which still likes to think of the town as some kind of isolated, ironic monument to the hysterias of the past, a symbol of a defunct imperialism and an exhausted greed for money, in the middle of the silence and indifference of the veld which lies around it.
About seventy miles south of Kimberley, where the road and railway cross the Orange River, you leave the truly desert-like Karroo and come to the grassveld of the northern Cape Province. Instead of a sparse, brown scrub, the veld is covered with pale grass, barely knee-high, and dotted with the dark tufts of camelthorn trees. Instead of rising only to abrupt, stony koppies, each one reared up by itself on the flat, unending plateau, the veld begins to roll, to lift and fall away in great swells. In the early days of the diamond field it was said that you could see the dust of the mine-workings from twenty miles away: now, as you approach Kimberley, you could be coming to any South African town of medium size. Only, as you draw nearer, you see around it what looks like an unusually large collection of koppies; when you come closer still, you see that these are not koppies at all, but mine-dumps, which surround the town like a miniature range of mountains. They are all the same blue-grey in colour. The newest are so smooth and so bald that they might be made of stretched cloth; the oldest are so haggard, wrinkled and fissured that it is difficult to believe that men had anything to do with the making of them.

Among these dumps, and around the immense open holes from which the dumps were excavated, the town straggles. In spite of all the rebuilding and replanning which has taken place recently, it is still the most irregular and confusing of places, with suburbs pushed apart from one another by the mines and all their debris; with a commercial and shopping centre whose streets do not so much run into one another as lie tilted against each other. People mined in Kimberley before they built; and they built before they had planned how they were going to join their buildings together in streets. So, haphazardly, Kimberley continued to grow. The suburbs were given names like Belgravia and Beaconsfield; its streets were named after people like Gladstone, Lord Milner, the British High Commissioner in South Africa at the time of the Anglo-Boer War, and Lord Lyndhurst, a Colonial Secretary in late-Victorian times. The name of the town itself honoured yet another Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Kimberley, who had complained that he could neither spell nor pronounce "Voor-
uitzicht", the original Boer name of the farm which Johannes de Beer had owned and on which the diamonds had been found. Monuments and statues were erected within the town, as it grew: a statue of Queen Victoria appeared in a dismal, sandy park named after her; Cecil John Rhodes was eventually cast in metal, facing north, towards the territories that carried his name, and the charter for which he had secured with the money he had made from Kimberley's diamonds. The original canvas of which the town had been built had long since disappeared, but much corrugated iron remained. And more ambitious business establishments, hotels and private houses stood two storeys high, with great gauzed verandahs, lacy ironwork, decorative stucco, fancy gables, fretted wood. Then, abruptly, there came a slump in the diamond trade, and the town simply stopped growing and changing; stopped dead, for a generation and more.

It was toward the end of this long period of utter stagnation that my family came to Kimberley. My father, after thirty years in South Africa—during which he had been everything from a milk-roundsman to a pedlar, a farmer to the editor of a short-lived Zionist monthly—had just bought a bankrupt butterfactory in the town. I was then barely four years old; and it is from the moment of our arrival in Kimberley, when my mother lifted me through the window of the train and passed me to my father, who was waiting on the platform below, that my memories become clear and coherent, fall into a consecutive pattern. Before then, all is darkness and doubt; thereafter it is as if the sun had risen on my own consciousness. The image of the sunrise is a peculiarly appropriate one, by the way, for I can remember vividly the impression made upon me by the brightness of the light which fell upon the town. For the first few months in Kimberley I seem to have looked at it through eyes half-closed to escape from the sudden, surprising glare of the place. Everything glared: the sky, the iron roofs, the sand on which so much of the town sprawled.

We went from the station to an hotel nearby, grandiloquently called the Savoy, where we lived until my parents managed to rent a house in Milner Street. Of the house in Milner Street, I remember chiefly the days when my brothers and I set on
fire the hedge which grew in front of the house, and the fire-brigade came to put it out.

From Milner Street we went to a house in Rendlesham Road (who, I wonder, was Rendlesham?), this house being one of those immense, double-storied affairs I mentioned earlier, with great wooden verandahs running right around it, both on the ground and first floors. From there we moved to the house which I thought of as home until I finally left South Africa at the age of twenty-four.

The contrast between the feverishness of the past and the stillness of the town as I knew it as a child; the contrast between the energy and ambition which had dug the big holes of the mines, and the air of utter abandonment and uselessness which they had when I saw them; the contrast between the forlorn self-assertion of so many of the town's buildings and monuments, and the emptiness of the veld around it: all these contrasts made a deep and ironic impression on me. And my feeling is, when I look back, that I became aware of the contrasts and ironies at a very early age. It was impossible to avoid developing a sense of the tenuousness of the human settlement around me, of its dislocation, of the fortuitousness of its birth, early growth, and sudden decline, of the unpredictability of what would happen to it in the future. And all for diamonds, which could not be eaten, burned for fuel or worn for warmth.

The sense of tenuousness and dislocation I have spoken of was, I am sure, heightened for me by the fact that I was the child of parents who had not been born in South Africa, but had come from another world—the world of the small Jewish shtett of the Baltic States thousands of miles away. But if I was half-alien to this scatter of buildings thrown down apparently at random on the veld, so was almost everyone else in the town: alien to it, and alien, also, to one another. They shared no language, no culture, no colour: they seemed to have been pushed arbitrarily together, and their relations with one another were characterised as much by prejudice, suspicion and resentment as they were by any acknowledgement of a common humanity. The Africans lived in their part of town; the Cape Coloured in another; the whites in yet others. Interspersed
among these groups were smaller communities: Indian and Chinese shopkeepers among the non-whites; Jews and Greeks among the whites. There were comparatively few Afrikaners in Kimberley when I was a boy, but there were enough of them to be felt as a threat by the "English", most of whom were in fact South African-born, and who were then the dominant group culturally. All these people met in the streets and shops, they did business with one another, and the Coloureds and Africans came into the houses of the whites as servants; but their social life was severely segregated. The Afrikaner children went to Afrikaans schools; the English-speaking to English-medium schools: the Cape Coloureds went to Coloured schools; the African children . . . well, most of them, at that time, did not go to school at all, but wandered around the streets in ragged bands. They hung about the Market Square, trying to earn pennies by carrying the parcels of the white housewives; they stood in little groups and watched us, in our "English" schoolcaps and blazers as we cycled or walked home from school; beyond the fences around our school grounds they were the spectators of our games of cricket and rugby. One was always aware of being under the scrutiny of these excluded groups that one could never finally exclude from one's own consciousness.

In the meantime—my parents from one world, another half-formed, half-abandoned, incoherent world around me—I read, and read, in book after book, comic after comic, of a third world: of England, of Britain, to whose empire Kimberley had once belonged, and because of whose empire I was growing up speaking English and attending a school which modelled itself as much as it dared to on some vague notion of an English public school. The England I read about had an existence in my mind which was quite as real as the country around me; in a way even more real. If I doubted anything, it was not the reality the books spoke about, but that of Kimberley, of South Africa—this country where summer came at the wrong time of year, and where winter brought no snow or fog; where there were no villages, only dorps at distances of thirty or forty miles away from one another, along dusty, corrugated roads; where there were no dells, no thatched cottages, no streams, no lords,
no ladies, no "conkers", no Cockneys. Instead, we had heat, sand, drought, occasional savage thunderstorms, iron roofs, defunct mines.

How was one to make sense of it all? How was one to reconcile the books one read with the country around one? To reconcile what one's parents told of their childhood with one's own? To reconcile the hours spent playing with the servants in the garden or listening to them talk in the kitchen with the strangeness that severed them from us when they went into their own quarters in the back yard of our house, or disappeared into the dusty, swarming shantytowns of the African "locations"? How was one to reconcile what one read of Kimberley's past with what one saw to be its present: its drabness with its fame; its suppositious wealth with its forlornness; the imperial pretensions that had been nourished inside it with its meagre realities?

In school, our headmaster, an Ulster Irishman, exhorted us to sing "There'll Always be an England", "Hearts of Oak", and "Rule Britannia". In the synagogue bent men wearing prayer shawls swayed in their devotions, praying to a God that I seemed always to have known I did not really believe in. At my father's place of business gumbooted Africans who towered above me were equally ready to do anything I asked of them or to laugh contemptuously at my clothes or haircut or my curiosity about the work they did. A boy in my class was tormented because it was rumoured that his mother "had Coloured blood", but other boys, far more Coloured in appearance, were left alone because they were good at sport or spent money freely. And the kind of persecution that boy was subjected to could be turned against myself and others, because we were Jewish; it could be turned against boys with Afrikaans names because they were "Dutchies"; it could be turned against the African children in the streets. In all this, what was there that was certain or secure or self-justifying? What could be trusted, relied upon to present to one a single, simple face?

The best answer to that question was the physical satisfactions that a place like Kimberley offered, where the sun shone unbrokenly through entire seasons, and the veld began practically at our 'doorstep. At school, most of the energies of the
staff were expended on the sports fields: we were expected to take part in tennis, cricket, rugby, athletics and swimming; and I joined in some of these sports with a passion that was equalled only by my passion for reading. Outside school, on foot and on bicycles, by day and by night, we explored the town and the veld around it, in long, pointless searches and rambles. After my father had bought a cattle ranch thirty miles away from town, we went there over weekends and during the school holidays, and camped in the empty farmhouse, swam and fished in the river, rode across the veld on horseback. We indulged in much minor delinquency around the town, stealing fruit from trees, goldfish from ponds, plaster dwarfs from gardens, soft drinks from lorries. Several times we were taken down to the local police station; each time we were merely lectured at before being sent home. In many ways, this was the best of Kimberley—not the delinquency, such as it was, but the freedom of those long afternoons the sun gave us, and of those evening “warm as another country's noons”, to use the words of the South African poet, F. T. Prince, who was himself born in Kimberley.

But irony returns. We were free to enjoy ourselves, to do what we did, partly because we were white and because we came from respectable homes. We were well fed and well clothed; we were always protected, even from the police, by our white skins. And we knew it even then. There was no escaping the doubleness, the social and moral incoherence of our life. And if there was to be no escape from it, and if I was to be a writer, as I knew from a relatively early age I wanted to be, then eventually I would come to realise that I had try and relate my experience of Kimberley to the larger incoherencies, both of South Africa as a whole and of the world beyond I had for so long read about and was so eager to visit.
Dennis Brutus

Childhood reminiscences

After my release from Robben Island prison in 1965 I got someone to drive me through Dowerville, the township of my childhood, in Port Elizabeth. It was possible for me to go there because, by one of those freaks of South African legislation, I had been banned, among other things, from entering any Coloured, Indian or African township, but not from entering white areas. And Dowerville has since become white.

A little group of 100 "council houses" in a housing scheme—the earliest in our province and, some said, the first in the country—it had, if anything, become worse. Fences sagged, gates hung askew, torn from their hinges, windows were broken, with rags stuffed in the holes, and lean dogs snuffed among the tufts of grass and debris on the pavements. Bare-arsed children with mucous pendants to their noses stood in doorways and shirt-sleeved men lay stretched on the grass or sprawled in the sunlight on the doorsteps. Perhaps it seemed to me worse because they were white—poor working-class whites (and there are not many of them any more in South Africa), who were capable of only the lowest forms of labour and so remained at the bottom of the scale of white privilege: men who worked on the railway tracks—where it was government policy that only whites could work—or did unskilled jobs (at skilled rates) in the nearby car, tyre and glass factories or simply supervised the gangs of Africans labouring in the street. But this was a group which as often as not did not work.

It all seemed to me worse and sadder. Certainly the non-whites, when they had lived there, had been constantly threatened with eviction because their places were not sufficiently cared for—though the real reason had been that the government Group Areas Board had decided that this area was a

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"black spot" in the middle of what it wanted to be an all-white area and had spent years in forcing the removal of the people. But in the Dowerville of my childhood I remember many people who had been extremely house-proud; in fact they were inclined to be "stuck up" and to regard themselves as superior to those who did not live in housing schemes. Korsten, where most of the "coloured" lived, was a hodge-podge of slum dwellings and shacks, poorly provided; the taps were in the streets, the roads unmade and many houses without electricity, so that we were sure we were much better off than they were and "a cut above them". Of course, there were people in Korsten who owned their own houses, which made them "superior" in other ways—in the housing schemes, in spite of many promises, it was never possible for any non-whites in Port Elizabeth to buy houses.

To ride through the township; to see the streets I had played in; the house I had grown up in; the houses in which my friends had lived; the houses of people who had been "names" of import to me when I was a small boy. This I had promised myself in the long empty hours when I had been in a prison cell. It had been possible for me to do it. But it had been many years since I had been there last—for some time before going to prison I had been confined to Johannesburg. But I had heard tales of how the people were stubbornly trying to resist being moved. They had been in the township for thirty years. Previous efforts to move them had failed. It might have reached the point where, as at Sophiatown, the police and the army trucks had had to come, to force the people to move at the point of the bayonet. But at Dowerville people began to speak of the futility of resistance. At that point resistance broke. But many of the "names" had moved long before, of course. And many of them had died. There was gentle Ben Jeptha, a pillar of our small community and a leading figure at the small school-cum-church which served most of the people in Dowerville. And big Bill Johnson, the American negro boxer and sailor who had settled with his coloured wife—they owned the first gramophone I ever saw, one of those enormous horn-things; years later, when I first heard the hoarse gritty voice of Ma Rainey—mother of the blues—it was the image of
Jim Johnson's huge horn-trumpet she evoked. And there was Nurse Courtiers, who had the only telephone in the area, and Mr Ruiters, who was a special person because he was the principal of the school. There were also the black sheep in our community—women whose lives, I gathered vaguely, were only to be talked about in undertones, and not in the presence of the children, and drunken Pappiegaan, who rolled up the street at the weekends, and his no-good son Harry, who popped in and out of reformatories. But on the whole we were a respectable community, and tried hard to live respectfully.

In this community my parents belonged and they fitted in with no more discomfort than others. They were both teachers, and my mother had also been prominent in sport and church activities. My father, who had taught at schools at the other end of town, and had spent some years in Rhodesia—where I and two others of our family of four had been born—did so with less ease. But they too tried, in their small house, in discomfort and with a constant battle against penury, to be genteel; I did not evaluate their efforts of their values then—it was simply the milieu in which we existed—nor do I want to try to do so now; it seems to me simply their way of expressing their desire for a richer, more worthwhile existence. But they were not very successful. For periods my mother would try ways of supplementing the family income; she gave private lessons at home (always the aspirations towards education in these poorer groups) or gave music lessons or took in washing and ironing. My father, who had studied French and bookkeeping, gave lessons in both and also did the books of small Indian and Portuguese fruiterers.

Ironically, it was probably the strain of trying to build a decent family that eventually broke the family apart. For many years my father was neither seen nor heard from. It was only after my own marriage, when he lived with us briefly, that my father again made contact with the family as a whole.

In my childhood years, I remember him as a stern and brilliant man, surrounded with books and papers and much pre-occupied with his work. We saw little of him, and when he spoke to me, it was because he had to scold me or to inquire with amused contempt what I had been up to lately.
I was regarded as not merely not bright, but definitely imbecilic. And from what I have been told of myself at this stage—the years between five and ten—there seems to have been good reason. A boy who could be so abstracted that he could pause with a cup held to his lips and go on daydreaming until the cup fell and broke or who could be so attracted to the sound of a name that he could sit on a pile of soiled linen chanting “Angelo” endlessly to his own made-up tune until he fell asleep seems to me to have deserved the disdain with which he was treated.

It was presumably this subnormality as well as a nose injury which I suffered which prevented me from attending school regularly. For long periods I attended no school because of nosebleeding—and I was not averse to making it bleed whenever it suited me. This deprived me of playmates for most of the day—my fellows were all at school—and this led to more daydreaming no doubt. So a taste for solitude and fantasy grew early, but did not prevent me from taking part—enthusiastically but inefficiently—in sport. Football and cricket, both badly. And an occasional street fight, which I engaged in more through ignorance than courage. On one occasion, having fought three boys successfully in turn, on my brother remarking with his usual disdain that “they were not my size”, I undertook to take on three of them at the same time. A broken arm was what I got for my ignorance on that occasion.

But a great deal of my time was spent alone. Mostly in the sunlight in an open area at the lower end of the township. On the stretch of land below the township, where the bus ran, was an open patch of waste ground. It was full of holes and mounds and littered with builders’ rubble and refuse. Beyond this was a high fence and a row of trees. The fence was overgrown with creepers and climbing vines, so that one could not see through it. But beyond it, we knew was “Kensington”—a township for white people. Occasionally we heard voices and for a short while I had even become friendly with a small boy of my own age on the other side of the fence. He called me “Darky”, and so great was my simplicity that it was not until my brother pointed out that this was an insult that I began to resent the word and no longer sought him out.
But though I no longer sought him out, I still spent a lot of time on parts of that waste ground. Because, among the rubble and the litter there, wild tendrils of purple convolvulus curled in and out, showing up brilliantly against the white builders' sand in morning sunlight. Even now, when I think of my childhood as a whole and try to recapture its atmosphere and mood, the image that first leaps into my mind is of those tendrils of purple convolvulus, bright and wild, curled around the rubble and the debris in the bright morning air.

The time I am trying to recapture was between 1929 and 1934 when I was between 5 and 9 years old; from 1935 a new phase began. At this time Dowerville was a group of roughly a hundred families (more, since there was always sub-letting in the hundred houses, though this was forbidden by the Council) on the western outskirts of the small but growing town of Port Elizabeth.

The town itself was predominantly white, and became increasingly a white preserve; with white people we had little contact—except, of course, that everybody worked daily for white employees—and what contact there was with whites who came to our township was chiefly with rent-collectors, instalment collectors and a few people from the churches. West and north of us lay the large areas for non-whites; Korsten, on the far, neglected edge of the town, a large mixture of half-African and African, with neither conscious of any marked difference; this was before the racial consciousness of the war years, before the energetic efforts to create separate ghettos for Coloureds and Africans—led, oddly enough, by a Jewish refugee from eastern Europe, Adolph Schauder—before the elaboration and expansion of the vicious doctrine of apartheid.

But even then Dowerville was cut off from the community as a whole; and in this isolated community I was an isolated individual, even as a small boy roaming the streets alone during school hours. But it is the growth of my literary interests that I should be examining just now.

When I was not roaming around, I was reading. Newspapers, boys' magazines—the Champion, Tiger, possibly Boy's Own Paper, though I do not remember this—and even advertising handouts.
Probably it was escapism—or compensation. But much of my time was spent reading. I do not remember quite when I learnt to read, or how. Certainly, I do not remember being taught the letters of the alphabet or being taught to put them together to make words; much of it must have come through a sort of intuitive process—of recognising words which were read to me and then going back to read them myself. This is what I think happened. It is possible because my mother, a teacher, and a parent ambitious for her children, and often lonely because of the late hours my father kept, spent a great deal of time reading stories to us, and getting us to read stories to her. This was chiefly the job of my elder brother, Wilfred, but sometimes of my elder sister, Helen. My brother was four years older, but I was often anxious to emulate him. Not, I think, out of jealousy, but because I was simply not aware that a gap must exist between the capabilities of, say, an 11-year-old and a 7-year-old. And so the stories he read at night to the assembled group, I pored over the following day, and partly by reading, partly by guessing, was able to follow. I also insisted on reading them, with numerous halts and irritating mispronunciations, to my mother. Her patience was enormous. This, then, I think, is how I learnt to read.

But another element was the fact that my mother loved poetry and enjoyed reciting it or reading it to us. And as Wilfred and Helen advanced at school and learnt poems—"recitations", which they recited at home, and which she remembered and joined them in—so I found myself being drawn in as well. But she read many more; the Tennyson poems of Camelot and the Round Table, and the narrative poems of Wordsworth were among her favourites and I learnt to love them as well—and this must surely have been to my advantage when I came to the study of English literature at matric. and in university.

Cowboy and adventure stories I discovered largely because of an accident. The Jeptha boys were our close friends, and Mrs Jeptha did washing and ironing for a "missus" whose sons got several English magazines ("comics") each week. And when the sons of the missus had done with the comics, the Jeptha boys got them. And they lent them to us. So I got Beano and
Rainbow and many others, and learnt about the English world of schoolboys and japes and dirt-track riders and the R.A.F. and detectives, like Colwyn Dane and Sexton Blake, and Pen­tonville and haunted manor houses. I remember especially one weekly with a sickly blue cover which carried scarifying ghost stories; in it too appeared a thrilling story of a mysterious Underground train that ran soundlessly through the tubes, manned by men in black cat-suits. It was thirty years before I rode in the London Underground, but the memory of that thrilling serial came back to me then.

In prison, going over the themes of my poetry with some bitterness in the empty hours there, I discovered something that linked my adult work with the beginnings of my literary knowledge; there recur in my poetry certain images from the language of chivalry—the troubadour, in particular. The notion of a stubborn, even foolish knight-errantry on a quest, in the service of someone loved; this is an image which I use in my work, because it seems to me a true kind of shorthand for something which is part of my life and my pursuit of justice in a menacing South Africa. But it only made sense to me when in prison another image came to me; of my mother, in the afternoon sunlight, reading of Sir Galahad’s search for light and beauty, with the sunlight falling on the page, and on the glowing colours of a picture of a knight entering a dark forest.

“Romantic nonsense”, I snort, and resolve to make new starts and to dismiss this kind of romanticism—even to suppress it. But it helps to explain some things.
James Ngugi

Life in a village: Memories of childhood

My village on Thabai Ridge sloped gently from the high ground on the west into a small plain on which Rung'ei Trading Centre stood. The Centre was a collection of tin-roofed buildings that faced one another in two straight rows. The space enclosed served as a market, where women from various ridges congregated to sell and buy food and exchange gossip. Indian traders from Nairobi had also discovered this market, where they often came, haggled over prices with the women, let slip one or two dirty words which sent the women into fits of laughter, and then took the vegetables and other wares to Nairobi, where they disposed of them to the city people at a much higher price. Other Indians had settled in the area; a few minutes' walk from the African shops brought you to the Indian place, where buildings, also in two straight rows, were made of corrugated-iron sheets. These Indians also bought potatoes, peas, beans, and maize grains from Rung'ei Market during the harvest, stored them at the back of the shops, and later sold them during the hard times.

The African shops, though often roofed with rotting tin, had the unsurpassed virtue of having stone or brick walls. People claimed that Rung'ei was the first centre with such buildings in all Gikuyu country. Rung'ei had other virtues, too. The iron snake had first crawled along this plain before climbing up the escarpment on its way to Kisumu and Kampala; for a long time Thabai was the envy of many ridges not so graced with a railway line. Even people from ridges bordering the Masai land paid visits once in a while just to see the train coughing and vomiting smoke as it rattled along. Thabai was proud of Rung'ei. They felt the Centre belonged to the ridge, that even the railway line and the train had a mystical
union with Thabai; were they not the first to welcome the rail and the train into the heart of the country? Of the story, current to this day in other ridges, which told how men and women and children deserted Thabai for a whole week when the iron snake, foreseen by the Gikuyu seer, first appeared on the land, they kept discreet silence. They ran for refuge to the neighbouring ridges, so the story goes, and only trickled back, and that cautiously, after the warrior spies, armed with spears and simis, brought news that the snake was harmless, that the red strangers themselves were touching it.

Later, the railway platform became the meeting place for the young. They talked in groups at home, they went for walks in the country, some even went to church; but in their minds was always the train on Sunday. On Sunday afternoon, the passenger train to Kampala and the one to Mombasa met at Rung'ei station. People did not go there, as it might be thought, to meet friends arriving from Mombasa, Kisumu or Kampala—they just went there to meet one another, to talk, to gossip, to laugh.

Love-affairs were often hatched there; many marriages with their attendant cry of woe or joy had their origin at the station platform.

"Will you go to the train today?"

"Oh, yes."

"Leave me not behind, friend."

"Then you must be ready on time. It takes you a whole day to just put on your clothes."

"That's a lie in clear daylight."

Girls normally went to the river on Saturday to wash their clothes. Sunday morning was the time for pressing the clothes and also doing the hair. By lunch-time, they were ready to walk or run to the station. Men had no such rituals. They were ready all the time, and in any case most of them spent their time at the Rung'ei shops, only a short distance from the station.

The train became an obsession: if you missed it, sorrow seized your heart for the rest of the week; you longed for the next train. Then Sunday came, you went there on time, and immediately you were healed.
From the station they normally went to dance in Kinenie Forest overlooking the Rift Valley. Guitar players occupied a place of honour in this community; beautiful girls surrounded them and paid tribute with their eyes. Men bought dances. When a person bought a dance, the guitarist played for him alone, praising his name, always the son of a woman. The man danced to the rhythm alone or invited his friends to join him, while others only watched. Nobody else could come in. The conventions governing the dances in the wood were well understood.

Often the dances ended in fights. Again this was well understood and men came prepared, at times courting danger with provocative words and insulting songs. The men organized themselves in groups according to the ridges of origin. Thabai was famous, because men from there successfully beat other groups and took away their women. Girls loved men from Thabai anyway, so that taking them captive was never exactly a very difficult feat.

At the platform things were different. Nobody thought of starting a fight. There, the man who had beaten you the previous Sunday and taken away your woman was a friend. You talked and laughed together. But he knew later in the wood you would look for a chance to stab him and take away his woman.

"I rarely missed the train", Gikonyo now remembered, years later, when this was only a myth. "I loved to rub shoulders with the men and the women. Yet the day I missed the train was the happiest in my life", he told Mugo.

Then Gikonyo worked as a carpenter in Thabai. Though an immigrant into the ridge, he and his mother had become absorbed into the community and its daily rituals. He came to Thabai, a child strapped on his mother’s back, from Elburgon area in the Rift Valley province, where his father, Waruhiu, worked as a squatter on European farms. Being a hard-working man, it was not long before Waruhiu found himself a centre of attraction to many women.

He got new brides and complained that the thighs of the first wife did not yield warmth any more. He beat her, hoping that this would drive her away. Wangari stuck on. Eventually,
Waruhiu ordered her to leave his home and condemned mother and son to a life of everlasting wandering on God's earth. But Wangari did not wander for long; surely she could find welcome in the Gikuyu land? "Waruhiu thinks I will die because I am poor and have nothing to eat", she one day said to herself, sitting on a stone near Elburgon station. "But there is no home with a boy-child where the head of a he-goat shall not cook." She patted the child to her breast and threw an unspoken challenge to Waruhiu by boarding a train which took her to Thabai.

Wangari sent her son to school. But Gikonyo did not stay there for long because his mother had not enough money for fees. Fortunately at school he had learnt a little carpentry, and this he determined to use and make a living.

He loved carpentry. Holding a plane, smoothing a piece of wood, all this sent a thrill of fear and wonder through the young man. The smell of wood fascinated him. Soon his senses developed sharp discrimination, so that he could tell any type of wood by a mere sniff. Not that the young carpenter made it appear so easy. In fact, Gikonyo acted a small ritual and the performance varied depending on who was present. The drama went like this.

A woman has brought a piece of wood—she wants to know what type of wood it is. The carpenter takes it, gives it a casual glance, and then carelessly flings it into a pile of the other pieces. He continues with the job in progress. The woman stands there, admiring the movement of his muscles. After a while he lifts the piece of wood, its far end resting on the table. He shuts the left eye and peers at the wood with his half-open right eye. Then he closes his right eye and repeats the performance with the other eye. This finished, he knocks at it swiftly, rhythmically, with the knuckle of the right front finger, as if he is exorcising spirits from the wood. Next he takes the hammer; strike, listen, strike, listen. Then he sniffs the wood carefully (that is, professionally), and gives it back to the woman. He resumes the other job.

"What is the wood? It is podo?", the woman ventures to ask, overwhelmed by the professional sniffs and pauses.

"Podo? Hmm. Bring it." He sniffs at it again, slowly turns
the wood round and round, nodding his head knowingly. Then he spends a few minutes explaining why the piece of wood is not podo.

"It's camphor. Have you ever heard of it? Grows mostly in the high ground in the Aberdares and around Mount Kenya. Very good timber. Why else do you think the white people appropriated that land to themselves?", the carpenter pronounced with quiet wisdom.

The workshop was a small table set against the wall of Gikonyo's hut. Towards sunset, Wangari always came to the workshop, rummaged through the wood shavings, hoping to collect one or two unwanted pieces for the fire.

"Do you need this?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh, leave that, mother. You never see a piece of wood but you think of burning it. They cost money, you know. But that is what a woman will never understand."

"What about this?" Wangari was not easily daunted. She loved to hear the voice of the son admonishing her.

"All right. But don't come again."

On the following day, at about the same time, she would be there. She picked a saw or a hammer and examined it carefully, as if it was a mysterious object. Gikonyo would be forced to laugh.

"I believe you would have made a good carpenter, mother."

"Whatever we say, these people are truly clever. How did they think of such tools which can cut anything?" Wangari always referred to white men as "these people".

"Go and cook. These things are beyond women."

"Do you need this piece here?"

"O, mother!"

Gikonyo's secret ambition was to own a piece of land where he could settle his mother. This needed money. As he grew up, this ambition to acquire wealth increased whenever he saw or thought of Mumbi, a girl whose voice and face caused an anguished throb in him. But he thought his heart was beating in the wilderness. Surely Mumbi, the most beautiful girl on the ridge, would never deign to bring him a calabash filled with cool water and say, "Drink this for me". Nevertheless, he waited and groped his way slowly. He saw Mumbi moving in
the country paths among the pea-flowers, and green beans and maize plants, and he braced himself to make his desires known. But courage failed him. He greeted her and passed on.

Mumbi's father, Mbugua, was a well-known elder on the ridge. His home consisted of three huts and two granaries, where crops were stored after harvests. A bush—a dense mass of creepers, brambles, thorn trees, nettles and other stinging plants—formed a natural hedge around the home. Old Thabai, in fact, was a village of such grass-thatched huts, thinly scattered along the ridge. The hedges were hardly ever trimmed and a few wild animals made their lairs there. Mbugua had earned his standing in the village through his own achievements as a warrior and a farmer. His name alone, so it is said, sent fear quivering among the enemy tribes. Those were the days before the white man ended the tribal wars, but Mbugua's reputation survived the peace. His word, in disputes brought to the council of elders for settlement, always carried weight. Wanjiku, his only wife, always called him her young warrior. She was a small woman, a striking contrast to her big-limbed warrior. Her voice was vibrant with warmth and kindness. It was her voice (she used to sing at dance gatherings in her day) that first captured Mbugua's heart. Of their two sons, Kihika and Kariuki, Wangari liked Kariuki mainly because he was younger and the last born. Mbugua secretly admired Kihika as the one most likely to take after him in courage and a well-regulated arrogance.

Kariuki also admired and looked up to Kihika. The boy longed for the time when he would join the ranks of men and be free to touch the sharp breasts of the initiated girls, who often came to their house at night. Kariuki attended school at Manguo, one of the earliest Gikuyu Independent schools in the country. He loved books and in the evening read by the light from the wood fire. But how could he concentrate when all the young men and women of his brother's rika played and told wicked jokes and stories? He was not supposed to see or hear anything. "You will be thrown out of this house, you Kihii", the men would warn him when they caught him laughing. Gikonyo often brought him sweets and things. For this, Kariuki liked the carpenter. Gikonyo used to tell funny
stories which Kariuki really enjoyed. But as months and years went on, Gikonyo became increasingly quiet and rarely spoke if Mumbi was present. It was Karanja, in fact, who took the stage and always sent women into fits of ribald laughter. Karanja had a way of telling stories and episodes so that, even without saying so, he emerged the hero. As a result Kariuki had come to admire him for bravery, wisdom, and versatility.

Homes, like Mumbi’s, with beautiful girls, were popular with young men and women. Wanjiku had to keep a regular supply of food. A home full of children is never lonely, she always said. When men arrived, she excused herself and discreetly left the hut. “Give them food”, she would tell Mumbi.

Mumbi often went to the station platform on Sundays. The rattling train always thrilled her. At times she longed to be the train itself. But she never went to the dances in the forest. She always came back home, after the train, and with one or two other girls would cook or undo and re-do their hair. Her dark eyes had a dreamy look that longed for something the village could not give. She lay in the sun and ardently yearned for a life in which love and heroism, suffering and martyrdom were possible. She was young. She had fed on stories in which Gikuyu women braved the terrors of the forest to save people, of beautiful girls given to the gods as sacrifice before the rains. In the Old Testament she often saw herself as Esther: so she revelled in that moment when Esther finally answers King Ahasueras’s question and dramatically points at Haman, saying: “The adversary and enemy is the wicked Haman.”

She enjoyed the admiration she excited in men’s eyes. When she laughed, she threw back her head and her neck would gleam in the firelight. At such a time, Gikonyo would not trust himself to speak. It was said that Richard, son of Rev. Jackson, had proposed to Mumbi. Jackson was a leading clergyman in Kihingo. It was also rumoured that Richard, who was then in his last year at Siriana Secondary School, would later go to Uganda or England to complete his learning. Anyway, Mumbi declined the offer without hurting his pride. So that they remained good friends. Richard often stole from home at night to go and see Mumbi at Thabai. So Gikonyo asked himself: if she had refused such a man, what chance had he?
He threw himself into work. He made chairs for Thabai people; he repaired their broken cupboards; he fixed new doors and windows to their huts. A woman brought him a broken chair: she wanted a new leg fixed. He looked at it carefully, whistling a popular tune.

“Three shillings”, he said.

“What, three shillings, my son?”

“We cannot make it for nothing, you know.”

“My son, I am your mother. Let me give you a shilling.”

“All right”, he said, knowing that she probably would not pay him, even a shilling.

And the woman would go away, knowing that he would eventually repair the chair (it might take him two months or more) and she would probably only pay him half the amount quoted. If she paid him at all, she would spread out the paying over a number of months.

“At this rate, I shall die poor”, he would complain to his mother.

“It’s nothing”, Wangari often told him. “You know if they had money, they would pay you.”

Feeling tired, he one day brought out his guitar and started to play. He had spent all the morning and afternoon making furniture for a couple recently married. The man had promised to pay at the end of the month. Gikonyo liked his guitar. It was an old one, but he had paid quite a lot of money to the Indian trader.

He played softly, singing to himself, trying a new tune. Soon he was absorbed in his voice and playing, and the hardness began to leave his muscles. The sun was settling, the lengthened shadows of trees and houses were slowly merging.

Then the shavings rustled. Gikonyo started, and was a little embarrassed and excited at seeing Mumbi. She held an unfinished pullover against her breast.

“Why did you stop?” she smiled.

“Oh, I didn’t want you to hear my carpenter’s voice and see my hands destroying both the song and the strings.”

“Is that why you never speak when you come to our place?”

There was a malicious twinkle in her eyes.

“Don’t I?”
“You should know... Anyway, I stood there all the time and heard you sing and play. It was good.”

“My voice or hands?”

“Both.”

“How do you know whether my playing is good or bad? You never come to the dances on Sunday.”

“Ah, true, I never do. But do you think all other men are as mean as you? Karanja often plays to me alone at home. I sit, I knit my pullover, he plays. He is a good player.”

“He is a good player”, Gikonyo agreed curtly. Mumbi did not notice Gikonyo swallowing something in his throat. For at that time her mood had changed from playfulness to seriousness.

“But you also played—I never knew you could play so—and it was moving perhaps because you were playing to yourself.” She said with a frankness that touched Gikonyo, in fact it pleased him.

“Maybe sometimes I can play to you.”

“Play now, please play it to me”, she said eagerly. And Gikonyo took this for a challenge, he feared strength would desert him.

“Then you must sing as I play. Your voice is so nice”, he said, and took the instrument.

But he found his hands were shaking. He strummed the strings a little, desperately trying to steady himself. Mumbi waited for him to play the tune. As his confidence rose, Gikonyo suddenly felt as if Thabai had suspended all activities, the vibration surely went into the heart of the land. Mumbi’s voice sent a shudder down his back. His fingers and heart were full. So he groped, slowly, surely, in the dark, towards Mumbi. He struck, he appealed, he knew his heart fed power to his fingers. He was light inside, almost gay.

And Mumbi’s voice trembled with passion as she weaved it round the vibrating strings. She felt the workshop, Thabai, earth, heaven, felt their unity. Then suddenly her heart was whipped up, she now rode on strange waves: alone defying the wind and the rain; alone, fighting hunger and thirst in the desert; alone, struggling with strange glad tidings to her people.
The song ended. Gikonyo could almost touch the solid twilight calm.

"How is it the country is so quiet and peaceful now"; she asked.

"It is always so before darkness falls."

"You know, I felt like Ruth gathering sheaves to herself in the field."

"I believe you'll go to heaven. You always talk the bible."

"Don't mock", she went on seriously. "Do you think it will always be like this, I mean the land?"

"I don't know, Mumbi", he answered, catching the solemnity from her. "Haven't you heard the new song?"

"Which? Sing it."

"You know it too. I believe it is Kihika who introduced it here. I only remember the words of the chorus:

Gikuyu na Mumbi
Gikuyu na Mumbi
Gikuyu na Mumbi
Nikihiu ngwatio.

It was Mumbi who now broke the solemnity. She was laughing quietly.

"What is it?"

"Oh, Carpenter, Carpenter. So you know why I came?"

"I don't", he said, puzzled.

"But you sing to me and Gikuyu, telling us it is burnt at the handle."

At that point Wangari, who had gone to fetch water from the river, appeared on the scene. She was pleased to see Mumbi.

"You should have borne a girl instead of having a lazy male", Mumbi teased her.

"It's my misfortune", Wangari answered back, laughing.

"But it's nothing. The needs of an old woman are few. And that man is so lazy that he never wastes water in washing himself or his clothes."

"You are unfair to me, mother. You'll make all the girls run away from me."

"Shall I make you a cup of tea?"
“No”, Mumbi said quickly. “I must be home before darkness falls.”

She turned to a small basket she was carrying and took out a panga.

“You see this panga needs a wooden handle. The old one was burnt in the fire by mistake. My mother wants it quickly because it is the only one she has got for cultivating.”

Gikonyo took the panga and examined it critically.

“How much?” Mumbi asked.

“Don’t break your heart over that. This is nothing.”

“But you cannot work for nothing?”

“I am not an Indian shopkeeper”, he said irritably.

Karanja, Kihika and Gitogo and one other man came. Gikonyo’s workshop was another place where young men used to gather for gossip, Karanja called out to Wangari.

“Mother of men, we have come, make us tea.”

“Wait a little”, Wangari’s voice reached them from the hut.

“Water is already on the fire.”

Mumbi, who was chatting with Gitogo, using hand signs, said she was going home. The men protested in chorus. But she insisted on getting away.

“All right. I will see you off”, Karanja offered gallantly.

“Come, my faithful”, Mumbi sang out to him. Soon Karanja and Mumbi were lost in the gathering darkness.

“Let us go into the hut”; Gikonyo told the others, his voice unusually low. He was envious of Karanja’s ease and general assurance in the presence of women. Even the thought that Karanja played the guitar to Mumbi gnawed at him unpleasantly.

When Karanja returned, everyone noticed that he was quiet and thoughtful.

“Heh, man”, the man sitting next to him teased him, “have you fallen in love with that girl?”

Everybody, except Gikonyo, laughed. Even Karanja grinned.

Early the next day Gikonyo started work on the handle. Low waves of excitement left his heart in a glow, as he chose a piece of wood on which to work. The touch of wood always made him want to create something. But now he felt as if his life depended on giving himself wholly to the present job.
His hands were firm. He drove the plane (he had recently bought it) against the rough surface, peeling off rolls of shavings on shavings. Gikonyo saw Mumbi's gait, her very gestures, in the feel and the movement of the plane. Her voice was in the air as he bent down and traced the shape of the panga on the wood. His breath gave him power.

And now he exerted that power on the podo wood. He chiselled and scooped out the unwanted parts to make two pieces of the right shapes. He took particular pains over boring the holes. Worms of wood wriggled along the cyclic grooves of the bit and heaved themselves onto the table. The holes were ready. Next he cut three nails, with which he fixed the two pieces of wood onto the panga. As he hammered the thin ends of the nails into caps, another wave of power swept through him. New strength entered his right hand. He brought the hammer down, up, and brought the hammer down. He felt free. Everything, Thabai, the whole world was under the control of his hand. Suddenly the wave of power broke into an ecstasy, an exultation. Peace settled in his heart. He felt a holy calm; he was in love with all the earth.

He thought of taking the panga on Sunday morning. Came the time and doubts began to stab his complacency. He found faults; the smoothness and the fitting had fallen short of the vision in his mind. The handle appeared ordinary, the sort of thing that any carpenter could make. And the wood? It would surely blister a woman's hands within a few minutes of use. He changed into a defiant mood. What did it matter if Mumbi liked it or not? If she did not like the clumsy offering, she ought to do the carpenter's work herself or ask Karanja to help her. In any case she might not be at home. Yes, he would love to find her absent. But as he came to the narrow path leading into the yard through the hedge, he began fearing that she might not be at home; his work would not be complete without her participation.

He found her sitting on a four-legged stool outside her mother's hut. Gikonyo affected a nonchalant air.

"Is your mother in?" he asked casually, his hands itching to show the panga to Mumbi.

"What do you want with mother? Don't you know that she
has got a husband?" Her eyes were laughing at him. Gikonyo would not respond to her smile. He became more solemn, with difficulty.

"Sit down", she said, rising to give him her seat. Then she saw the panga. She rushed forward and took it from his hands. For a moment, she stood there, admiring the new handle. Suddenly she pranced towards the hut shouting, "Mother! Mother! Come and see."

Sweet warmth swelled up in Gikonyo. Joy pained him in the bowels. His work was done. For Mumbi's smile, for that look of appreciation he would go on making chairs, tables, cupboard; restore leaking roofs and falling houses; repair doors and windows in all Thabai without a cent in return. He would never make money, he would remain poor, but he would have her.

He was still standing, revelling in the vague resolutions, when Mumbi came out with another chair and again invited him to sit.

"I am in a great hurry", he protested without conviction.

"Are you going to a wedding?"

"No, not unless yours", he laughed, but remembering Karanja, he stopped and sat down without another word.

"Why all the hurry? We are not going to eat you", she said, vainly attempting to summon anger to her voice, which pleased Gikonyo.

He watched Mumbi do her hair: how he longed to touch it, and at the thought blood rushed to his finger-tips. A small mirror was propped between Mumbi's knees; her hands, bent at the elbows, met over her head and the fingers played with the hair. Occasionally she gave Gikonyo a quick under-glance and a smile. Gikonyo drank in all.

Then Kihika and Karanja arrived at the scene, and Gikonyo hated them for challenging his monopoly over Mumbi's attentions: why did they have to appear at that moment? Resigning himself to the inevitable, Gikonyo joined in the talk which unerringly led to politics and the gathering storm in the land.
George Awoonor-Williams

Reminiscences of earlier days

I cannot remember my birth, but my mother tells me, by counting her fingers and recollecting the prosperity of her father's farm, that I was not born in a season of famine but of abundance and into a household full of women and laughter, with a benevolent grandmother, who received her first grandchild with the remarkable fussiness that all grandmothers possess.

It was always great fun when we went to collect firewood, the special thin long ones which blaze fiercely for the cooking of corn wine. And she would sit in the compound and welcome us with balls of bean cake.

I must have been four when my grandfather died, the one called the canoe-upsetting hippo. For that was his name ("Nyidevu"). He was a very dark, stocky man, who lingers in my memory as my grandfather, who carried me frequently and one day vanished from us. I do not think I was there when he went away. My mother said she was not there when he went away.

Before he went away, I remember, I used to accompany my uncle, now an engineman in a fishing boat at Tema, to the distant farm called Lave, which means the forest of animals, where we spent many days. There was a never-ending plot of pawpaw and we sat by the fire in the evening, while my grandfather roasted cassava for us to eat.

I have not been there since. It was a wide land, marshy in places and rich in grasscutters, squirrels and birds. My uncle Kwawu was my educator and protector. He was an adept and accurate handler of the catapult, and knew how to set traps for animals.
One day, on the way to Lave, he suddenly put his hand on my shoulders and asked me to stop. We were, as usual, far ahead of the older people. Then he crouched on the ground, and ordered me to do the same. I bent down crouching beside him, my heart beating fast, for I knew not what was happening.

Then he crawled into the bush, and lay still. I always carried his bag of stones for the catapult. He whispered that I should give him one of the stones. We used to spend many hours, preparing our ammunition, smooth clay from the river, which we rolled into round balls to fit the size of the leather sling of the catapult and later dried in the sun. I gave him one and crouched beside him.

Slowly and steadily he put the stone in the sling and aimed. Then I saw the bird, a beautiful feathered type of dove, larger than the doves we see every day, serenely surveying the top of the foliage.

I was happy. My uncle was going to kill it. Then I heard the thud of the stone, as it hit the bird on the left wing, and it fell like a ripe mango without a cry.

To me, Lave was an extension of our life in the village. We missed only the drumming sessions and the roving in the fetish groves after game. These were made up for by the wildness of life and its simplicity, and the pockmarked benignity of grandfather's face in my infant eyes.

I have now forgotten the names of the children I played with, but they certainly were cousins, members of the same hilarious family, ever noisy, ever eating and ever crying and playing.

Then my sister was born. I must have been getting on for six, for after my birth there was a quarrel between my parents. After the big palavers my mother put me on her back and went to her people. But the bitterness diminished, and my sister was the outcome of the reconciliation.

I do not know whether the old people did not realize that we were awake in the birth chamber, the same mud floor with the ikons of grandmother's gods and a corner for the chicken. We watched the birth of a tiny red crying thing, as my mother lay writhing on the mud floor in agony.
We were happy. I think we demanded the next day that she should come with us bird-hunting. Grandmother smiled at us and sent us off with bean cakes.

My mother was the third child of grandfather, he who was called the canoe-upsetting hippo. I cannot recollect him fully. I must have been about four when he died. He was a petty chief, the leader of one section of the village Asiyo.

My grandfather kept a large house, full of laughter and mirth. His arm was strong, but neighbours said his god planted his grinding stone under shady trees. His barn was always full of corn.

He had several farms, which were all hoed, sown and harvested on a communal basis. His wealth was not in money but in food and land; for our people care not much for riches that cannot be shared.

My grandmother Afedomeshi was a tall dark woman who hailed from our royal town Anloga. I remember her vividly because she was always singing funeral dirges; in her favourite one she said that when she died, she would have pity on those who bore her body to the grave.

She was soft-spoken, gentle, unhurried and had none of my father's quick-mindedness and bustle. She bore my grandfather six children, but three died, leaving three. Two of them died during a vicious outbreak of smallpox about 1940.

My grandmother cooked abobo, which she sold in the morning to the children in the neighbourhood.

My grandfather had another wife whom I do not remember well. I knew my mother's half-brothers and half-sister, because we all lived in a huge compound; banana trees grew where the bath-water drained.

There was one Kundo, who died when we were little boys. My mother always told his story. It seemed he loved his drink and, having been warned of poisoning, he carried his own glass in his pocket at one Christmas, and drank from house to house. That night he came home late, refused to eat his supper, put his armchair in the compound and sang funeral songs until he fell asleep.

At dawn, when they went to wake him up to go into his room, he was dead. My mother still insists that on his previous
night's round of drinking somebody gave him diluted shoe polish to drink.

I grew in this household, enjoying the period of the great celebrations of my grandfather's Yewe cult, killing rams, and the long nights of medicine drums. There were occasions on which we sneaked among the grown-ups and watched rites that gave us nightmares afterwards.

The cult house was outside our fence. The seasons of celebrations always fell after the harvests, the time when the initiates were ready to be sent outdoors. There were young boys and girls, who were kept for a period of about one year.

They learn the language of the cult, and are trained in the rituals and observance of the god. They become virtually his children and celebrants, and bear his mark on their back in the form of a cross till their dying day. They are also given names which they bear thereafter, and it is taboo to call them by their old names.

This is regarded a desecration of the god and the punishment can be swift and at times ruthless. They cannot be abused or insulted publicly, for an insult to them is an insult to the god.

When the occasion came for these celebrations, my grandmother always worked harder than usual. Firewood would be collected in great heaps, and in this we, the children, always helped. Foodstuffs needed to be gathered and stored in readiness for the public feast.

Most of the ceremonies always took place in the fastness of the fetish compound and could go on as long as a week. Then the day of the outdooring would come and the sacred ram would be slaughtered. On this day drums would beat from dawn till dusk.

What interested us most was the day of the public feast, when two types of meats were cooked; one was palm soup and the other okro soup, and neither salt nor pepper was used. Then the fires would blaze publicly under huge pots, and the whole area would be filled with the aroma of cooking.

I remember the anxiety with which we anticipated the sharing of the meal. Children from every compound in the area would come and there would be feasting till sundown.
Another great event was the outdooring of the initiates. They passed in a semi-circle, dancing to the slow beat of the Yewe drums. And then the beats would come faster. This was when one of the leaders looked round to see if any of the non-members of the cult had broken any taboos, like coming to the place in European clothes or wearing a hat or shoes.

The drums would beat faster and faster, and some of the devotees would go into a trance. The climax was when the thunder god made his appearance briefly. There was wild and frenzied dancing and the god disappeared again into the fastness of the fetish house.

There were the drumming sessions which we never missed. My mother was in the Oleke group and when they had to drum anywhere, I shed tears if I was going to be left at home. We would go with her to the neighbouring villages.

It was always the season of new moon. I wore my newly washed clothes, smelling of camphor, and joined the grown-ups in the circle, and the drums would beat till late. I would wake up and find myself in my bed at home. I had fallen asleep during the drumming and mother had carried me on her back.

We loved the rains when they came down and soaked the red earth, and the smell of cooking waxed stronger than ever. We would run into the rain naked and play until mother came with a cane. There were the sunny days when we would sneak away to the little stream and swim in its muddy water till sundown.

We were always warned about crocodiles, that could devour us if some evil person put the curse on us, or about getting drowned by the currents that rose during the rainy season. Yet these could not keep us away from our beloved stream.

I remember that funerals and deaths always frightened me; they would carry the dead person possessed by the dead man's spirit that refused to go to the cemetery. The firing of guns, the drunkenness, the wailing of women and the singing of dirges would go on interminably. Then I would start crying, wondering where the dead man was going to, and why they should put him in the ground and cover him with earth. Would he not suffocate, and become restless? Would he not be hungry

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and thirsty and howl? And if he howled nobody would hear him, because they had covered him with earth.

They always put money and other valuable things in the coffin, for, as my grandmother said, he would have to cross a great river, and Kutsiami, the ferryman, could not ferry him across if he could not pay his fare; then his spirit would linger on earth and torment people, and his ghost would haunt the living.

There was never any death without a cause. So, when a person died, the elders would go to the spirit callers, who would ascertain from the departed what had killed him.

Did he die his own death or was fetish put on him? Then the departed would tell his story, sometimes naming the names of his killers and telling how witchcraft was put on him and the witches ate his intestines gradually, or how she quarrelled with so and so at the riverside and had been killed because of the quarrel, or because of the land case pending at the court in Keta, he had been given to fetish to be killed.

So, even as children, we heard some hair-raising stories of deaths. Then there were those who died the evil death, death by water or victims of gunshots on hunting expeditions, or those who died by accidents, such as fire. They were those who had died the "death of blood".

Custom had it that their bodies should not be brought into the house. A stage was erected outside the house with palm fronds and sticks, and the dead man was laid in state there amidst a lot of gunfire and wailing. The ceremonies would then be performed and the dead man carried into the grave. I had no end of nightmares after witnessing these ceremonies against the express warnings of my mother.

It was around 1939, when my mother and I returned to my father's house. We walked eleven miles, with mother carrying my baby sister on her back, my clothes tied in a neat bundle with mother's head kerchief. I carried them on my head, singing merrily at the beginning of the journey. Soon my feet started to hurt and tears flowed before I made the sound of weeping. Then the journey would be long and weary for me.

That was the year when my eyes had begun to open upon the world, when the simple innocence of childhood was passing
away, to be replaced by awareness, however hazy, of the world around me. I was five, and I was about to go to school. My nose was always running, and I had only one pair of khaki shorts and a sleeping cloth, in which I rolled myself and slept on my green mat every night.
Appendix I

Resolution adopted by the conference

The African–Scandinavian Writers' Conference has gathered writers from Africa and Scandinavia in Stockholm. We welcome this arrangement and express our appreciation of it.

It is as writers that we meet here, and as writers we are especially concerned with the freedom of the artist to express himself, and the wider concern for the freedom of all men to express themselves without arbitrary restraint.

It is therefore fitting that we should, on this occasion, express our condemnation of the restraints that have been imposed on writers, and especially of the bans and prohibitions which have been imposed on writers and writing by the racist régimes of southern Africa.

We applaud any recommendation of Scandinavian artists for a cultural boycott of South Africa, and we ask for a fuller and wider implementation of this throughout the world.

We ask too that writers everywhere should express their opposition to all restraints on freedom, wherever these occur.

Appendix 2

African writers participating in the conference

Jones, Eldred. Professor of English Literature, Fourah Bay University College, Freetown, Sierra Leone.
Mammeri, Mouloud. Born in 1917. Novelist, Professor of Ethnography at Algiers, Algeria.
Memmi, Albert. Novelist, essayist, professor of philosophy. Tunisia.
Simon, Barney. Critic, editor of Classic, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Per Wästberg, born in 1933, is a Swedish novelist and critic. He has published four books on East and Southern Africa and has edited anthologies of African literature.
Appendix 3

Program of the conference

February 6th

10 a.m. Opening session: welcome by Ambassador Kjell Öberg, Stockholm.
Introductory remarks by Per Wästberg, Stockholm.
"Sweden—from underdevelopment to Scandinavian welfare state": lecture by Karl-Gustaf Hildebrand, professor at Uppsala University.
2 p.m. "The writer in a modern African state": lecture by Wole Soyinka, Nigeria.
Discussion.

February 7th

9.30 a.m. "The confrontation between traditional agrarian society and industrialism in Scandinavian literature": lecture by Lars Furuland, Uppsala University.
Discussion.
11.30 a.m. Résumés of modern African literature:
2 p.m. "An essay—recollections of the writer's childhood". Such essays will be presented by various participants, among others, Dennis Brutus and Dan Jacobson (South Africa), James Ngugi (Kenya) and George Awoonor-Williams (Ghana).

February 8th

9.30 a.m. "Man alone—the relationship between individualism and social commitment": discussion, with introductory speeches by Olof Lagercrantz (Sweden), Kateb Yacine (Algeria), Lewis Nkosi (South Africa).
4 p.m. III. North Africa, by Albert Memmi, Tunisia. Discussion.

February 9th

9.30 a.m. “The writer as urban man—his view of society in a state of transition from rural life to an urban way of life”: discussion, with introductory speeches by Mouloud Mammeri (Algeria) and Clas Engström (Sweden).
11.30 a.m. IV. Portuguese-speaking black Africa, by Virgilio de Lemos, Mozambique.
2 p.m. “The decolonisation of African literature”: lecture by Eldred Jones, Sierra Leone. Discussion.
4.30 p.m. Closing session.