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The Poet as a Visionary: a Reading of Wole Soyinka's *Animistic Spells*

Obakanse Lakanse
Lecturer, Department of English, Lagos State, University, LASU (External System), Nigeria
Anthony V. William
Lecturer, Department of English, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, (External System), Nigeria

Abstract:
In the earliest times the poet was originally seen as a seer whose verse gave valuable insights into the future because he looked far better into the present than the average human being. Since then there has been a steady devaluation in the poet's status as seer. Perhaps because of the use to which poetry has been put, perhaps because of the rise in the number of poets. Nonetheless, now and then we have among us the advent of a poet whose verse gives us intriguing insights about our world. Wole Soyinka is one of such poets. Soyinka has been described in a variety of ways by different scholars, but hardly as a visionary, even though large chunks of his verse are about visionary or spiritual experiences. Because he hardly writes about abstract, spiritual experiences, without injecting into the poems the mythic and religious elements of his ethnic provenance, many critics have tended to emphasise unduly his use of mythological materials, thereby confining his verse to a narrower ethic space than they perhaps intended. Therefore taking his poem, "Animistic Spells" as our object of study, our aim in this essay is to avoid seeing his verse through the narrow mythological lens of his ethnic background, and highlight how his verse encapsulates universal human experience. Our choice is informed by our belief that the poem not only ought to be among the poet's most anthologised poems for its artistry, symmetry and brevity but also because it is one of the best examples of Soyinka's verse that both embody a personal religious ideology and intriguing insights about the complexity of our world.

To describe Wole Soyinka as a visionary poet is perhaps a little surprising. So strong is the popular perception of him as a first-rate intellectual, an uncompromising polemicist, a human rights activist, a rugged, masculine individualist and a plethora of other superlative terms with which he has been described. Infact, to couple the term "visionary" with any of the other terms may strike one as a bit of an oxymoron; for to be visionary, at least in the western verse carries a complex of positive and negative connotations. It means a deliberate manipulation and extension of one's consciousness; it means while writing poetry, to go experimenting with drugs in order to effect a perfect flight from reality – Baudelaire, or to go wandering through disreputable streets, drunk and seeking homosexual liaisons, and declaring magisterially "I am Christ!" "I am Blake" – Hart Crane. Or to go on a binge of frolic with drugs, sex, exotic eastern religions and mysticisms – Ginsberge, or to spend years concocting a personal mythology about the circularity of history that few people believe in – Yeats. Most poets of this kind, except perhaps for Yeats, proved to be totally incompetent at handling day to day practical challenges.

Soyinka's flashes of visionary insights certainly differ from those of the category of poets mentioned above. Yet there are certain dark and irrational elements in Soyinka's poetry that we have yet had an opportunity to pay due attention; there are certain Blakean qualities in his poetry that have not enjoyed the tribute of the critic's full attention. Whenever any attention has been paid to this aspect of Soyinka's poetry, it has been construed as arising automatically from the poet's obsessive use of the mythology of his ethnic background, especially that of his patron, Ogun, and so the impression has been created that mythology constitutes almost the sole material with which the poet works. But as it happens the spiritual experiences the poet describes in his poetry we shall on closer attention discover transcend the poet's ideology. Though religious experiences may be relative, spiritual experiences are universal – because they are often experiences, mined from the dark recesses of the mind, from the unfathomable abysses of the night-time worlds and from several and incomprehensible happenings in the cosmos. In a word Wole Soyinka is a visionary poet. C.G. Jung describes the visionary poet as he "who allows us a glimpse into the unfathomable abyss of what has not yet become...", Jung then poses these rhetorical questions: "is it a vision of other worlds or the obscuration of the spirit, or of the beginning of things before the age of man or of the unborn generations of the future: we cannot say it is any or none of these (212).

If we accept Jung's definition of a visionary poet as one 'who allows us a glimpse into the unfathomable abyss of what has not become; the question that then forces itself upon us is what makes a poet visionary? This might seem as much of a riddle as to what makes a man, creative in the first place. Nonetheless, many psychologists have tried to answer the questions in different ways, and almost everyone has tried to link it to some sort of psychic disturbance. Jung would seem to support this, for he opines thus:

It is true that certain possibilities lay in this direction. For it was conceivable that a work of art, no less than a neurosis, might be traced back to those knots, in psychic life that we call complexes. It was Freud's great discovery that neuroses have a causal origin in the psychic realm – that they take their rise from emotional states and from real or imagined childhood experiences (219).

Be the above as it may, it is important to realise that artists and writers who have produced some of the greatest works of art (of a visionary nature) in world culture have had to go through some baffling and oppressive experience or another. Examples abound. Eliot's nervous breakdown in London produced 'Wasteland', Pound wrote his formidably complex 'cantos' in prison; Dante wrote his 'Divine Comedy' in exile; Bartok composed a great deal of music in abject poverty and neglect. There are even more excruciating examples; Milton's blindness gave birth to 'Paradise Lost", Beethoven's deafness produced his nine symphonies, Van Gogh's extreme psychic disturbance gave birth to the disturbing visions we see in his paintings, and so on and so forth. Ordeal, it would seem is the principal prerequisite for high visionary achievement in culture.

Wole Soyinka too has had to go through his own visionary ordeal. "Animistic Spells" was among the many poems he wrote in prison in the early seventies when he was kept in solitary confirmed for twenty-two months as a result of his interventions in the Biafran war. The mind-wrecking loneliness must have driven the poet, on to the edge of lunacy. But he was able through sheer will and talent to transfer his loneliness, rage and anguish into something transcendent and lasting in a long series of poems, among which is 'Animistic Spells'. There are two things that need to be immediately said about this poem: One, it has enjoyed very little attention from the critics, and two it has been one of the least anthologised of the poet's short poems. This is rather astonishing because the poem is not only among the poet's best lyrics, it is also the only poem, aside from the large epic gestures we find in "Ogun Abibiman" and 'Idanre", that can be said to capture succinctly, and also in a compart, easily anthologisable form, the poet's large intriguing worldview.

The few critics who have paid the poem any attention have tended to dismiss it as another example of the poet's "obscure and inaccessible diction". Obi Maduakor for instance, in his otherwise commendable critical study of Soyinka's writing, dismisses the poem with these sentences: "The Spells" makes no pretension to meaning; these are heroic cries that reassure the poet of his own existence." One wonders if it can ever be the case that a poet would deliberately set out to write a poem without the least attempt to communicate some sort of meaning, however obscure or inaccessible his lines are. In another place in his book, Maduakor describes "The Spells" as the rantings of a demented psyche.., the soul's speech with itself, verbalisations of the nightmares and hallucinations that invade the mind" (38). These sentences are rather dismissive. *Animistic Spells* may be a sequence of nightmares and hallucinations, yet we know that these things do at times yield us valuable glimpses nay insights into a world that however dark and nocturnal it may be, is not wholly unfamiliar to us. We quote C.G. Jung again:

Man has known of it from time immemorial – here, there and everywhere; for the primitive man today, it is an unquestionable part of his picture of the cosmos. It is only we who have repudiated it because of our fear of superstition and metaphysics, and because we strive to construct a conscious world that is safe and manageable in that natural law holds in it the place of statute law in a commonwealth. Yet even in our midst, the poet now and then catches sight of the figures that people the night-world, the spirits, demons and gods. (216).

We therefore argue in this paper that *Animistic Spells* is not just a mere sequence of 'hallucinations' and 'nightmares' but rather one of those poems so invested with deep, multifarious meanings and insights that with each reading, a whole universe of meaning is revealed, and yet never quite fully. The poem invokes in the reader who is ready to be moved by it, the capacity to participate vicariously in the poet's visionary journey through the dark. The language of the poem and the nature of the experiences the poet narrates are indeed adventurous. And so a critic's vicarious journey through the poem must necessarily be adventurous – here pausing to digest some unexpected insights, there mulling over some stray fragments by the roadside, hurrying over a few challenging blocks in front in his headlong and hypnotic journey towards the poem's destination and then being made suddenly to revert to the road earlier covered or negotiated for fresh and startling revelations in which his whole experience becomes prone to new interpretations. Impressionistic criticism, you may call it, but this is what visionary works do. What is criticism anyway if not as Anatole France puts it "a sensitive soul's adventures through the world's masterpieces". *Animistic Spells* true to its title, is a superb welding of some of the discursive elements that constitute an incantation and the rhythmic and hypnotic nature in which it occurs so that both categories are made equivalents so precisely that their difference is cancelled put – one is the other and both are one.

The poem, however has its difficulties. Like most Soyinka's poems strict line-by-line explication is impossible. The best approach will be to do so stanza-by-stanza. In fact the poet's putting the poem's title in the plural form, underlines the fact each of the stanzas that make up the poem is a unit of thought, but even this proves challenging at times. Symbolic poetry such as *Animistic Spells*, we know often transcends its literal or denotative meaning in a very complex way. Its meanings can never be fully exhausted. However, as William York Tindall puts it: "What the reader gets from a symbol (symbolic poem) depends not only upon what the author has put into it, but upon the reader's sensitivity and his consequent apprehension of what is there".

Therefore, in our study of *The Spells*, we shall through the techniques of close reading make attempts not in the least at arriving at a single meaning abstractable from the poem, rather our attempts shall be predicated on arriving at the level of what is therein the poem from which any other sensitive reader can unfurl his own layer of meaning.

The poem begins in an abrupt, admonitive tone. The poet is about to begin his spiritual journey, taking the reader with him as his co-traveller:

First, you must
Walk among the faceless
Their feet are shod in earth

And dung
Carytids in the anterooms of night's in birth

The journey, the poet seems to be saying must begin in the dark and the unknown 'among the faceless' whose existence, however dark and mysterious it appears to the common eye is still rooted in reality "in earth and dung" the low and anonymous may appear as frozen shadows forever hovering around life's multi-hued flame, "Carrytids in the anteroom of night's inbirth." It is with them that a true spiritual journey commences. 'Caryatids in anteroom of night's inbirth' is a phrase loaded with a lot of paradox and ambiguity. Here we have a simultaneous juxtaposition and fusion of the concrete (caryatids) and the abstract (night's inbirth). Caryatids are pillars in female shapes, anterooms are rooms were people wait to go into a larger one, and night's inbirth is a metaphor of the commencement of an internalised odyssey. To describe 'the faceless' in images associated with women 'caryatids' and 'inbirth' suggests not only that life begins with the sex but also connotes a realm where our true spiritual journey commences, where we wait in the 'anteroom', the finite for our induction into the infinite, 'night's inbirth'.

The next two stanzas denote how "the secret passages of night are strewn with shards". The absence of light and hence direction makes the pilgrims' journey much more unpredictable and trying, and their sense of time seems lost in the darkness, dead "discarding weights of time in clutching and possessing". Though the quest seems long and endless there will surely be "a home coming" The poet seems to say "Respite, before the gathering of the outward crest" And therefore

Eyes
That grow as stamens need
A yeast of pollen. Shun
Visions
Of the unleavened, look sooner on the sun

The poet seems to imply that there already exists among the pilgrims an anxiety for a quick arrival, and they need to be encouraged in their optimism for self-realisation. "Eyes that grow as stamens need/A yeast of pollen/shun/visions of the unleavened, look sooner on the sun".

The next stanza confronts us abruptly with the ultimate opposite of the "night's in birth'

Death
Embraces you and I
A twilight cone is
Meeting-place
The silent junction of the grey abyss

The stark transition from the concept discoursed in the preceding stanzas to its stark antithesis in the stanza above would seem to suggest that the poet views our journey on earth as one merely from "the cradle to the grave". The isolation of the word 'Death' holds a lot of significance; it enacts the apartness and isolation of the awesome concept it connotes. Here the poet directly enjoins us to accept the inevitability of our mortality, describing death 'as a twilight cone where meetings take place, and then toughens his description with another effective image "The silent junction of the grey abyss".

The next three stanzas dwell on the nature of memories and intuition. The pilgrims having arrived "at the silent junction of the grey abyss" are now left only with hues, echoes and glimpses of their past.

The past
Dissolves in lacquered notes
Lips on woodwind, ears
Of grain
Swaying to clues in a veil of rust

Memories are what enable us to make sense of the world and intuition is what sometimes yields us clues and intimations about the universe from apparently trivial objects and incidents to which we attach little importance. Speaking about memories, Brester Ghielin opines thus:

This great psychic reservoir is not static like a letter file or still like a pond. Certain changes evidently go on in it continually. Everyone knows from experience how a memory may alter, not merely fading but suffering distortion (22)

And so the poet having arrived at that twilight zone where all concrete realities dissolve, vanishing into that phosphorent sea below the verge of consciousness, he is now left with a chaos of nebulous thoughts and ideas, indistinct feelings and sensations. The poet seems to be yearning for some irretrievable past, a mythical realm of timeless temporality; the realm that Ruth Reyna describes as "timeless not in the sense of endless duration, but in the sense of completeness, requiring neither a before nor an after" (1971:258). The images employed here are deliberately light, fleeting and hazy. They encompass almost all the senses as well: auditory; (lips on woodwind, ears of grain/swaying to echoes/, olfactory, /incense of pines/wood smoke/ visual, a veil of rust' and so forth. Implicit in these stanzas is the abiding tension between the temporal and the external; a glimpse into the mysteries of time.

In his classic essay, *Evolution, myth and Poetic Vision*, W.J. Ong dwells on man's innate desire to throw off the trappings of time. He writes:

Time poses many problems for man, not the least of which is that of irresistibility and irreversibility: man in time is moved willy-nilly and cannot recover a moment of the past. He is caught, carried on despite himself, and hence not a little terrified. Resort to mythologies, which associate temporal events with the atemporal, in effect disarms time, affording relief from its threat. This

mythological flight from the ravages of time may at a later date be rationalised by various cyclic theories, which have haunted man's philosophising from antiquity to the present (p. 220).

Can this Soyinka's yearning for the mythical past be linked to the excruciating loneliness and stillness of existence in being kept in solitary confinement for twenty-two months, and so be interpreted as a fantasised retreat from time's relentless flow?

Fragments
We cannot hold, linger
Parings of intuition
Footsteps
Passing and re-passing the door of recognition

The ambiguities of the ten stanzas that follow are indeed formidable. In these stanzas resides the climax of the poet's experience, and an increase in the poem's complexity and depth of expression. It is as though having reached that preverbal realm of psychic awareness and comprehensiveness in which one loses all words, and is left seething with a host of contradictory feelings and sensations, the poet is speechless at his helplessness and simply flings at us the teeming symbols and images that haunt the hinterland of his brain. One of such stanzas runs thus:

Line
Of the withered bough
Hill and broken valleys
Dearth
On thirsty palm to furrows of the earth

All we get from the above stanza are words, phrases and striking images – "withered bough", "hill", "broken valleys", "thirsty palm", "furrows and "the earth". The nine other stanzas are rather like this.

In attempting to grapple with his experience, Soyinka creates a world of dense amplitude in these stanzas. He deliberately compresses his lines and employs images and symbols that evoke multiple suggestions and associations in order to express "the weird paradoxicality of his vision". Here are images of light and darkness, of birth and death, of decay and renewal. Here are a mystic's intimations and presentments with deep riveting insights. We quote Jung for the last time. Still writing on poets whose primordial experience allows a glimpse into the frightening abysses of the night-time world, Jung has this to say:

The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness; it cannot be fathomed and therefore requires mythological imagery to give it form. In itself it offers no words or images, for it is a vision seen "as in a glass darkly". It is merely a deep presentiment that strives to find expression. It is like a whirlwind that seizes everything within reach and by carrying it aloft, assumes a viable shape. Since the particular expression can never exhaust the possibilities of the vision, but falls far short of it in richness of content, the poet must have at his disposal a huge store of material if he is to communicate even a few of his intimations. What is more, he must resort to an imagery that is difficult to handle and full of contradictions in order to express the weird paradoxicality of his vision (217)

The next section of the poem, comprising only two stanzas, deals with the sufferings and death that are the inevitable lot of human kind. Christ-like figure is here evoked of one who shall bear the burden of "the sacrifice". Soyinka clearly here alludes to his patron, Ogun whose successful invasion of the dark irrational forces that inhabited the gulf of transition, paved the way for other gods and by extension the entire humanity.

Offerings
That cling to us teach
To give is to suffer
To share
A bitter foretaste of the death we bear.
Altar-vessel
Of one skull shall bear
Offerings for the ascent
Multitudes
Shall dance on the flesh remains of a cosmic dare

The poem ends on a sobering symbolic note; the binary divisions of all the experience that the poet appears to have undergone – birth/death, light/darkness, good/evil etc now find their confirmation in a glimpsed metaphysical reality; a paradox of decay and growth: three millet stalks recently withered by a storm have begun already to spout new ears whose grains will in turn become "ripened" and "closer to the ground". What does Soyinka wish us to grasp by ending the poem with this symbol? Is it the ciclicity of human experience, encapsulated in "the strange loop" phenomenon in philosophy that describes an experience in which after traversing upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started? Or is it that, implicit in the symbol is the representation of the infinite in the finite and verse versa? Or the fact that every being possesses within him the germ of his destruction? Perhaps it is one or all of these, and more.

Apart from the high-mindedness of its content, *The Spells* is a product of superb technical artistry and symmetry, the juxtaposition of longer and shorter lines, the experiments with rhythms and rhymes and the sheer rhetorical vigours of the lines make the poem one of the best that Soyinka has ever written. Soyinka has a unique poetic style; it is the poet's habit that after giving us a description of a phenomenon, usually in an extended image, he rounds it off with another much more effective image in what almost amounts to a repetition. It is a style he repeats even in his prose writings, especially in "interpreters" and "the man died".

In sum, *Animistic Spells* is a quest poem denoting a sequence of events, both spiritual and physical through which the poet journeys towards not only self-discovery, but also towards grasping some metaphysical reality about the cosmos, and so must be understood as deriving from the same impulse which produced "Ogun Abibi man" and 'Idanre" poems. There is doubt that the poem makes a great demand on the reader, but with a little perseverance, the reader is rewarded with great intriguing insights about our world.

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