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The Motif of Resurrection and Forms of Regeneration in the Novels of Wole Soyinka

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Abstract

Soyinka has been interested for many years in states of being which in some way correspond to what he refers to in a seminal essay as the 'fourth stage' of existence. He suggests that there are four stages of human existence: 'The past is the ancestors', the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws ... the fourth area of experience [is] the immeasurable gulf of transition." The fourth stage is that stage of existence which is neither ordinary human life, nor spirit existence, but somewhere between the two: the state of a man who represents a god or a spirit at a festival, for instance, or the state of a man who is passing between life and death in the process of dying or of arriving in this world. It is also the state of the gods as they make the perilous journey from heaven to earth, with Ogun clearing the way and fashioning the bridge — a myth on which Soyinka rests much of the weight of the argument about the nature of Yoruba tragedy which is the point of this essay." Priests, abiku children and some other special persons may be said to inhabit this fourth stage a great deal of the time, that is, they frequently pass beyond this living human existence to the area which is marginal to some other state of existence. The 'fourth stage' is, of its essence, marginal, a betwixt and between state of being. It is a stage of transition, a stage of disintegration and reintegration.
Ces Plaisirs

I want someday to write a passage as poignant as that phrase:

‘these pleasures,’ she wrote,
garlic-stinking vagabond
ancient as the sphinx
winking feline nods at passing fancies
loving cats above all others
and her mother/child the cherished Sido
both of whom she would have eaten
in a flash;

these pleasures: cactuses
that blaze once a decade,
the exhilarating loneliness
of strutting naked round a stage
in lime light, by shaded lamp
across the thick blue pages
over beach bleached sand
through bloodfed fields
disguised, among the dying
charting every sigh
from blushing adolescent thighs
to layered silks supporting sagging flesh
draped across a divan
vain until the very end
where even lust gives way to friendship
and even friends die off
but the mushrooms still thrust their gamey buttons through the earth
if you just know where to look:

these pleasures, which we lightly call
these pleasures, which we lightly
call physical.
Waiting:
Royal Academy, 12.11.88

We wander through The Age of Chivalry: walls full of busy, almond-eyed men,
secure in their faith in their place in the world
their faith that brought grain or acceptance of famine.

You wince and glance round for a seat –
the plinth of a 12th century ironwork gate:
sinuey swans curve through primitive forging.

We're stopped by a guard,
directed to benches in room number five,
'It's coming,' you murmur. Another false start. You rise up, restless.

I love the annunciations:
the word or the dove or the angel
whispering into her ear.

'She didn't even get a fuck,' you twist in pain,
or anticipation of pain,
or simply the wretched weight of waiting.

A man seeing you stroking your belly,
makes space by a battered, wooden St. George
slaying a demurely conceding dragon.

Your eyes have that distant, pupilless look
of worn-out madonnas
on church facades.

'There are no pregnant madonnas,' you say,
'Can you think of a pregnant madonna?'
Then you wince again, and scurry to sit
'This is it.' But it doesn't recur, and we're pressed to give up our places to two old ladies, tired, with less to anticipate.

'Let's go.' If it doesn't come today they'll induce it. This time tomorrow, today will be simply a story: 'The day before you were born.'

As we hurry back through the manuscript room I notice on an intricate page, a tiny creature, etched in gold,

its dainty toe pointed, stepping, tentatively out of the frame...