The Tick of a Heretic; or, on Using the Poison of Theory in the Post-Colonial Operation

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Abstract

In the apocalyptic final scene of Wole Soyinka's Madmen and Specialists, the Old Man signals his intention to operate on the Cripple with the words: 'Now, let's see what makes a heretic tick'. This statement expresses one of the play's most insistent concerns: the connection between language and power, or, perhaps more accurately, between linguistic play and political resistance. As such, Madmen and Specialists is a key play in any discussion of the relationship between post-colonial literature-in-English, which by its very nature raises the issue of the political function of language, and post-structuralist theory, which spends so much of its time rehearsing the links between discourse and power. In this paper I will quite deliberately adopt a post-structuralist strategy and attempt a dialogistic reading of Madmen and Specialists: firstly, I will strategically deploy a tool crafted from the theories of Foucault and Derrida to re-forge the play's political critique, a critique underestimated because of the theoretical blindness of the Soyinka orthodoxy to date; and, secondly, I will use the text's claims as drama, as a text written for potential performances, to then interrogate the theories themselves, and any claims they might have to either universality or totality? Through its self-reflexive foregrounding of the subversive role of performance, the play serves to 're-materialize' theory again, re-placing it within the material practices that re-produce it, and re-inscribing it upon the performing body of the neo-colonial subject, thereby preventing it from ever being finished or closed. Such a reading might show that the question of the relationship between post-colonial text and (potentially) neo-colonial theory is a complex, dialectical one: that no theory writes triumphantly upon a theory-less, pure pre-colonial space; and that any use of such theory must be specific, strategic and selfconscious.

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In the apocalyptic final scene of Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, the Old Man signals his intention to operate on the Cripple with the words: 'Now, let's see what makes a heretic tick'. This statement expresses one of the play's most insistent concerns: the connection between language and power, or, perhaps more accurately, between linguistic play and political resistance. As such, *Madmen and Specialists* is a key play in any discussion of the relationship between post-colonial literature-in-English, which by its very nature raises the issue of the political function of language, and post-structuralist theory, which spends so much of its time rehearsing the links between discourse and power. In this paper I will quite deliberately adopt a post-structuralist strategy and attempt a dialogistic reading of *Madmen and Specialists*: firstly, I will strategically deploy a tool crafted from the theories of Foucault and Derrida to re-forge the play's political critique, a critique underestimated because of the theoretical blindness of the Soyinka orthodoxy to date; and, secondly, I will use the text's claims as drama, as a text written for potential performances, to then interrogate the theories themselves, and any claims they might have to either universality or totality. Through its self-reflexive foregrounding of the subversive role of performance, the play serves to 're-materialize' theory again, re-placing it within the material practices that re-produce it, and re-inscribing it upon the performing body of the neo-colonial subject, thereby preventing it from ever being finished or closed. Such a reading might show that the question of the relationship between post-colonial text and (potentially) neo-colonial theory is a complex, dialectical one: that no theory writes triumphantly upon a theory-less, pure pre-colonial space; and that any use of such theory must be specific, strategic and self-conscious.

The application of metropolitan literary-theories to post-colonial texts is a controversial issue in current theoretical discussion, and post-structuralism, in all its varieties, is one of the chief bones of ideological contention. However, it is important that we do not conflate two different objections to the use of post-structuralism in discussing post-colonial texts:
that is, there is an argument against European theory in general, and one, a more serious one perhaps, against post-structuralism in particular.

The first argument warns against the ‘Eurocentric’ nature of such theories; what Soyinka has called their implicit (and explicit) ‘missionary’ function. Helen Tiffen and Stephen Slemon put it well in a recent collection of papers on the issue: “‘Theory’ – after Europe – becomes a discursive tool by which dominant culture ideologically reinscribes its imperial centrality.” However, that is not the end of the sentence, for Tiffen and Slemon go on to say: ‘and yet, for all that, “theory” remains a potentially enabling mechanism for furthering the continuing practice of post-colonial critical resistance into new vectors.’ To try and claim a theory-free zone for post-colonial literature is doomed to failure: the practice of post-colonial criticism is already a battle-ground for contesting European and American theories. Indeed, as Chidi Amuta has argued for Africa alone, the neo-colonial market place offers the critic a wide choice of theoretical hats, ranging from Leavisite practical criticism to a Marxist materialism of the most mechanistic kind. Indeed, to argue that such theories can have no validity to post-colonial literature is to ‘other’ the ‘native’ once again, fixing her/him as once again being essentially and naturally ‘different from ‘us’. The danger is that such theories can become new orthodoxies themselves, claiming to have the one true Word instead of the timely, strategic, and above all, materialist ‘heresy’ with which arrogant cultural priesthoods can be unseated.

However, post-structuralism has its particular risks. The warnings against its uncritical use are loud and legion. Craig Tapping, for example, notes that ‘despite theory’s refutation of such absolute and logocentric categories as these – “truth” or “meaning”, “purpose” or “justification” – the new literatures ... are generated from cultures for whom such terms as “authority” and “truth” are empirically urgent in their demands’. Similarly, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra have noted the implicit tendency in post-colonial theory for ‘Political insurgency ... [to be] ... replaced by discursive radicalism’; and for the ‘post-colonial’ to be ‘reduced to a purely textual phenomenon’. These criticisms, and there are numerous others, are well aimed: post-structuralism can easily end in making the specific, local struggles of post-colonial peoples just another scene in the great play of difference. Nevertheless, it must also be said that some of the ‘common-sense’ assumptions subverted by post-structuralism are alive and well and holding court in post-colonial literary debate; among them the notion of an authentic, essential voice, the idea of ‘presence’, the virtue of representation and the search for an organic tradition as an alternative to that of Eliot, Arnold and Leavis. These dogma reify the practice of literature, separating it from the exploitative, oppressive apparatus of the neo-colonial society in which it plays an important part. The discourse of post-structuralism, when used strategically and with awareness of its own ‘con-
structured' nature, can help re-materialize post-colonial literature, re-placing it within the material institutions which produce it as a 'discourse'.

Dismissed so often as pessimistic, nihilistic and/or absurdist, *Madmen and Specialists* is not a play a critic immediately thinks of when searching for an example of the post-colonial text. For example, Obi Maduakor, in linking the play with the work of the absurdist, comments that 'pessimism and cynicism have been nurtured to a point in both Soyinka himself and the characters that discussion and meaningful exchange are thought to be unnecessary'. However, if approached not in search of essences or identity, but from the perspective of post-structuralist theory, the play can be seen as more radical than wrist-splitting. It is ironic, given Soyinka's own well publicized distrust of European theories and their 'missionary' potential that so much of *Madmen and Specialists* seems to echo the concerns of French post-structuralist Michel Foucault's: the concentration on the figure of 'the specialist', the concern with 'practice' and the ironic play on what we might call, after Foucault, the 'politics of truth'. Moreover, the concern with 'priesthood' of the power-elite, with the religious function of language, and with the gaps within language, reminds the reader of the work of yet another French post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida.

In a paper this size, is impossible to deal with these theories in any great detail. However, I am more interested in appropriating some of the concepts and insights of these theories in the interest of a re-staging of *Madmen and Specialists*, than with providing an adequate reading of the theories themselves. What I find useful in Foucault's work is his linking of power, discourse and knowledge. Power, he argues, does not principally act repressively, but productively:

it doesn't weigh on us as a force that says no, but ... it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression

The way this power works is through a whole 'network' of 'technologies' of power, which involve the 'surveillance', 'discipline' and even the 'production' of the 'subject' him/herself. In books dealing with some of the most significant of these 'technologies', Foucault has detailed the social production of the institutions of medicine, madness, criminality and sexuality. The importance of these 'genealogies', as Foucault calls them, is that they show how the modern state itself works in detail, common to both so-called capitalist and communist states. Here a rigidly Marxist analysis fails to detail both the scope of the issue, and also to deal with power's 'specificity, its techniques and tactics': the way it works 'concretely'. Where Soviet socialist power was in question, its opponents called it totalitarianism; power in Western capitalism was denounced by the Marxists as class domination; but the mechanics of power in
themselves were never analysed.' In a sense, a Marxist response is not 'materialist' enough, failing to detail the way in which 'power' actually marks the body of social subjects. This is a particularly valuable aid in reading Soyinka, for one of the strongest political criticisms of his work is that it is also not 'materialist' enough.

What these technologies establish, moreover, are what Foucault calls 'regimes of truth'. In this sense, "Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. Here Foucault's concentration on 'discourse' is especially useful, for it reminds us that what a society deems 'true', its 'knowledges', is a matter of language, and not just language operating in a vacuum, but as part of a whole material, economic, and political network of material 'practices'. Foucault continues to list some of the characteristics of the current Western 'regime':

Truth is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, not withstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ('ideological' struggles).

The title of Soyinka's Madmen and Specialists itself turns on this very problematic: the link between institutions and discourses of normalization, incarceration, recuperation and knowledge. I would argue that 'the specialist' becomes an even more crucial figure in a post-colonial 'regime of truth', where the demand for such knowledge is so immediate and urgent, and the supply so much less reliable.

The work of Jacques Derrida is perhaps even more elusive than that of Foucault, and the two approaches are certainly not to be seen as being in fundamental agreement. However, Derrida, like Foucault, argues that power is very much a question of language. Indeed, it might be argued that Derrida goes further than Foucault in showing how the 'will to power' is integral to the production of language itself:

the play of differences involves synthesis and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present... This linking, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.
This play of presence and absence, where meaning is produced through an active ‘difference’ from a presence always ‘deferred’, is given the name ‘differance’ by Derrida.¹⁸ By showing that no sign carries within itself the grounds of its own authority, Derrida is able to ‘deconstruct’, through meticulously close reading, those places/spaces in utterances where the structure deconstructs itself; where its claims for closure or totality are shown to depend upon the very term it marginalizes or denies. While the various strategies Derrida uses to undertake this operation are not in any sense identical, they do have the common virtue of showing how linguistic power carries with it its own hubris. Whether through the ‘trace’ of some prior term, or through the ‘supplement’ which displays the insufficiency of the main body of the text, the ‘metaphysical’ discourse is shown to depend on its ‘other’ for its very existence:

All metaphysicians have proceeded this ... good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure.¹⁹

Significantly, while all discourse must in some degree be ‘metaphysical’, Derrida has traced the dominance of one kind of metaphysics in Western culture: that which he labels both ‘logocentric’ and ‘phonocentric’, and by linking this with the related term ‘phallocentric’, he is able to show the links between linguistic, political and sexual power.²⁰ The partnership between the primacy of the Word and the authority of the Father lead us rather obviously to Soyinka.

For, like metaphysical discourse itself, Madmen and Specialists is based on a series of oppositions: moreover, these oppositions centre on the issue of the appropriate practice of ‘knowledge’: between ‘traditional’ father and ‘rebellious’ son; between professional/specialist and the marginalized women/abnormal; and between inside/outside or colonized and colonizer. There are two central traditions of ‘specialization’ in the play: one, which is carried in the male line from Old Bero to his son, and which centres on the key, neo-colonial title of ‘Dr’; and the other which is passed from mother to daughter and stresses the primacy of the ‘earth’ and its seasons.

The battle between father and son in the play should not blind us to their essential identity: they both see knowledge as being a matter for individual transcendence and freedom. In other words, the Father has bred the Son: in the individualistic, idealistic search for truth of the Father is the will to power of the Son; in the Christ-like speciality of the hero-artist-redeemer-professional there is the megalomaniac ‘madness’ of the son. The Specialist is literally the ‘son’ of Soyinka’s own characteristic Oggunian heroes: the celebration of the individual will to ‘power’ taken to its logical conclusions; the ‘Will to know’ even the taste of death. In Old
Bero’s passion for the need to ‘choose’, there are the seeds of his son’s passion for ‘Control’. In the father’s willingness to try anything with argument, there are the beginnings of Bero’s own, more sinister experimentation. If the play questions who is the real ‘madman’ of the title, it also problematizes the issue as to who is the play’s chief ‘specialist’. It is the concept and practice of ‘specialization’ which is the issue here: and the cult of individual mastery and elitism it embodies.

Moreover, it is a ‘specialization’ which speaks also of both metaphysics and colonialism. In Bero’s frantic search for the ‘name’, a quest parodied by his father and ridiculed by Iya Agba, we see the need for the master-word which Derrida sees as the characteristic of metaphysical discourse. Similarly, Bero’s quest for transcendent knowledge can be seen as linked to his neo-colonial status as a ‘Dr’; for in the neo-colonial social formation both power and knowledge are seen to reside elsewhere, within the heart of light at the colonial Centre. By linking this hunt for the single, original and originating Utterance to the torturer’s demand for his prisoner’s withheld secrets, the play is able to foreground the important link between linguistic and more obviously material ‘power’: ‘you analyse, you diagnose, you prescribe’ (MS, Part One, p. 248).

Against the ‘specialists’, the Old Woman offer a more collective, humble vision of a knowledge linked to the earth and its rhythms: ‘We move as earth moves, nothing more. We age as Earth ages’ (MS, Part Two, p. 273). They accuse Dr. Bero of abusing the resources the earth has lent him: ‘They spat on my hands when I held them out bearing gifts’ (MS, Part Two, p. 283). The play dramatically emphasizes the different basis for the mothers’ knowledge by having two ‘sisters’ who complement each other rather than battle for individual power.

However, what would seem a rather simplistic antithesis between kinds of practice is complicated by the presence of a third group, who operate in the transitional space between the surgery and the Mothers’ hut. The Mendicants are descendants of other scapegoat figures in Soyinka’s work, like Ifada in The Strong Breed and Chume in The Trials of Brother Jero; but here we see a significant strengthening of their role in the drama. The Mendicants work for both Bero and his father: they do the work of the generals while parodying their behaviour; they are incarcerated but they also guard the play’s chief prisoner. In other words, far from being merely passive scapegoats, they actually are the means by which the ‘specialists’ maintain their control. In this sense, as Michael Etherton points out, they can be seen as embodying not merely ‘ideology’, but the more sophisticated notion of ‘hegemony’. However, the play goes further than this, because, like Foucault, it identifies where this ‘hegemony’ is chiefly maintained: that is, within the circulation of ‘discourse’, or around the search for ‘truth’. Here we must further identify ‘As’ itself.

The paradoxical role of ‘As’, it being both power language and the parody of that language, has tended, not surprisingly, to confuse the
play's critics, as it does Bero himself. In attempting to answer the specialist's tortured question, 'What is As... Why As?' (MS, Part Two, p. 266) critics have usually seen it as 'either/or' the discourse of liberation or enslavement. Aderemi Bamikunle sees it as 'the revolutionary movement by which the Old Man tries to open up the minds of the masses to the abuses in the social and political system'.

However, rather than seeing it as 'either/or', it is best seen as 'both/and': that is, the power of 'as' is the propositional notion of the word itself: its protean power of definition; the productive, and thereby limiting, power of discourse. Aafa, not surprisingly as the play's clergyman the chief spokesman of 'As', gives us its history:

In the beginning was the Priesthood, and the Priesthood was one. Then came schism after schism by a parcel of schismatic ticks in the One Body of Priesthood, the political Priesthood went right the spiritual Priesthood went left or vice versa ... the loyalty of homo sapiens was never divided for two parts of a division make a whole and there was no hole in the monolithic solidarity of two halves of the priesthood ... they remained the sole and indivisible one... (MS, Part Two, p. 289)

This pseudo-history which is essentially 'a-history' makes it clear that the actual content of the religion or ideology, whether it be Christianity, Ifa, communism or capitalism, is not actually its important or enduring component; what matters is the function that content serves: the maintenance of power itself. However, this also clearly involves the maintenance of the Priesthood, the bearers of knowledge, through their command of the priestly language: the Old Man, in one of the play's climactic speeches, enacts how language makes its own meaning through marginalization: how the maintenance of power depends on the productive, alienating power of language itself; as the speech puts it in Foucault's own terms, on discursive 'practice'. It is not for nothing that the Specialist is described as a specialist in 'THE TRUTH', who orders people to 'SPEAK'. (MS, Part One, p. 230)

Practice...on the cyst in the system.../ you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood, oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp-post of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO OF NOTHING. (MS, Part Two, p. 292)

Old Bero's conscientization of the Mendicants enacts the linguistic deconstruction enacted in the above speech: it is Bero's guards themselves who become his greatest threat, the physical 'mock of democracy'. Here we see Derrida's 'differance' being performed; the 'othering' process of linguistic
and social production also becomes the ‘absence’ or ‘supplement’ on which the apparent self-sufficiency of the whole can be fragmented: ‘shut that gaping hole we fall through it’ (MS, Part Two, p. 292). Or, in Foucault’s terms, every site of power also makes available the possibility of its own (limited) ‘resistance’.24

Once again, this ‘resistance’ is shown not to be merely linguistic or theatrical, although its theatricality is an essential element of its power. In earlier Soyinka plays, the death of the artist-redeemer merely brings about a change of consciousness; here, it is the community itself who pass sentence on the Beros and then carry out that sentence. Even more significantly, they carry out that sentence in terms which foreground their claim to an alternative tradition of ‘knowledge’ and ‘discourse’; and their sentence includes both father and son in its fire.

As I have already commented, it is also significant that the act of judgement co-incides with the Circus’s most convincing performance: where Father does seem to ‘become’ the Son and the Cripple is more than metaphorically ‘practiced’ upon. The full force of the alternative the mothers offer to the words of the specialists is expressed theatrically: that is, through the text-in-performance. It is the subverting ‘discourse’ of the Mendicants’ mime, their satirical songs and puns, and, finally, the insistent, recurring understreams of their chant which fatally challenges Bero’s efforts to ‘proscribe’ and ‘prescribe’ knowledge and language. Bero is at his most frustrated when he cannot ‘shut up’ the surplus of his own ideology: the maddening ‘ticking’ of his heretics. The Mendicants’ very repetition, ‘re-presentation’, of the acts of torture come to represent for him, and the audience, the futility of his own claim to ‘control’. In this sense, the chant is a performative sign of the community’s own refusal to be contained in the ideology of the dominant culture: the ‘gaping’ hole which will not be shut.25

It might well be argued that the mothers themselves represent an essentialism which threatens my ambitious claims for Soyinka’s implicit ‘post-structuralism’. However, this misses the point. For, if Madmen and Specialists shows radically the link between ‘power’, ‘discourse’ and ‘knowledge’, it also can be seen to be offering a vital post-colonial critique of the conservative ‘dog’ within any post-structuralist dogmatizing. Included within the ranks of the specialists must be the theoretician himself (I use the pronoun advisedly). The mothers speak on behalf of the material ‘effects’, that is, the usefulness of any knowledge in a given context. Rather than damning the specialist for being a specialist, they judge him for what he has done with the knowledge that the earth has granted him: ‘what is used for evil is also put to use.’ This is the message of the ‘poison’ parable: ‘Poison has its uses too. You can cure with poison if you use it right. Or kill’ (MS, Part One, p. 233). Judged with the ‘earthly’ knowledge of the mothers, the specialist’s use is seen to be in its effects.
'ab-use'. Rather than any simplistic relativism, the play offers an extremely materialist and practical view of the value of any knowledge.

To this end, the value of *Madmen and Specialists* as a play is to even further 'materialize' these insights, or 'knowledges' of theory's discourse. It is to 'write' the 'body' back into the power/knowledge/discourse formation. What the play shows is not only how discourses of knowledge are used to produce, contain and alienate the body, but also finally how inadequate the discourses are in containing those bodies. In the grain of the mendicants chanting voices, in the subversive grotesqueness of their clowning, in the audio-visual power of the play's final scene, discourse, even counter-discourse, is shown its own hubris. The binary between madmen and specialists is not finally decided in favour of either, but in favour of a third 'knowledge' which stresses the materiality, the unavoidable political implication, of any discursive practice.

In this sense, the play is both post-structural and post-colonial; for it shows how the discourse of liberal, romantic individualism often celebrated by Soyinka himself works to marginalize the objects of that discourse; and how any theory, no matter how useful, is open to 'abuse'; and how any metaphysics, no matter how idealistic, eventually will be confronted by the ominous, explosive ticks of its own heretics. The doctor of literature, the specialist 'Africanist', finds the patients will not lie still on the page-table, but insist on conducting their own medicinal dances. Similarly, through the grotesque 'Circus of As', *Madmen and Specialists* shows the unique role performance can play in the co-operation of such heresies.

**NOTES**

1. All references to the play are from Soyinka, W., 'Madmen and Specialists', in *Six Plays*, (London, 1984), pp. 221-294. Future references will be in the body of the text.

2. The concept is Bakhtin's; however, I am using it here to express a reading strategy in which the route of criticism travels in both directions simultaneously. I use it in preference to the term *dialectic*, which implies a kind of serial progression.


11. Foucault, p. 119.


15. Foucault, p. 133. For a full elaboration of Foucault's notion of 'discourse', see his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.


18. Derrida, p. 28.


24. In a sense, both the bush medicine of the Mothers and the clowning of the Mendicants can be seen as analogous to what Foucault has termed the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'. Cf. *Power/Knowledge*, p. 81.

25. Central to the opposition between the father/son and the sisters is the question of the link between the politics of meaning and the politics of gender. Here communal/revolutionary/material knowledge is seen in terms of the 'feminine', and Dr. Bero's opposition to it a fear of the feminine itself. The full elaboration of this reading is the subject of another paper.