

**THE HISTORICAL LESSONS OF PRISON EXPERIENCE IN AFRICAN  
LITERATURE: NGUGI WA THIONGO, BREYTEN BREYTENBACH,  
WOLE SOYINKA**

by

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My entire intellectual formation was of a polemical nature, so that it's impossible for me to think `disinterestedly' or to study for the sake of studying.

-Antonio Gramsci, Letters from Prison

Several recent authoritative judgements have concurred in characterising Antonio Gramsci as the greatest Marxist political thinker of the twentieth century, and his book, *Prison Notebooks*, as the greatest political and cultural document to have emerged from the intellectual circle of Western Marxism: György Lukacs, whose philosophical text, *History and Class Consciousness*, is one of the founding moments of the intellectual system of Western Marxism in having had a profound influence on a whole range of German Marxist intellectuals from Walter Benjamin through Theodor Adorno to Jürgen Habermas, has said of Antonio Gramsci that he was probably the most talented thinker of Lukacs's generation, which includes Ernst Bloch, Karl Korsch, Bertolt Brecht and others(1); Perry Anderson, whose two-volume conceptual study of the formation of international and European state systems from antiquity to the present, *Lineages of the Absolutist State and Passages from Antiquity*, has had no parallel in contemporary world historiography, has remarked of the *Prison Notebook* that it was an epochal work in the tradition of *Capital* (2) Eric Hobsbawm, author of the *Age of Capital* and the *Age of Revolution*, and an outstanding member of the brilliant school of English Marxist historians, has written of Gramsci in the following words: "... an extraordinary philosopher, perhaps a genius, probably the most original communist thinker of the twentieth century in Western Europe."(3) The passage of time has, in the form of consensus, confirmed the solidness of these appraisals and judgements. Today, exactly fifty years after his untimely death at the hands of Mussolini and the then Italian fascist state machinery, Antonio Gramsci is the emblem of deep thinking on philosophical cultural, political and literary matters in Europe as well as in the Third World.

*Prison Notebooks* is probably the greatest document of human thought composed by someone while held in prison. In it, Gramsci developed and theorized a series of

historical concepts which have transformed the whole edifice of historical materialism. Perhaps the most celebrated concept in the West is that of hegemony. (4) With this concept Gramsci sought to articulate and theorize the distinction, for purposes of revolutionary strategy in the West, between the differential historical positioning of the relationship of the State and civil society in both East and West. In the capitalist West it is the complex ensembles of civil society which are predominant, whereas in the then Absolutist East (Russia) it was the repressive nature of the State which held sway. With the concept of hegemony Gramsci intended to indicate the dialectic between coercion and consent by which in the capitalist West the bourgeois class exercised political power over the exploited, proletarian class. The deep influence of this historical concept in the West runs from the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams through the historical studies of E.P. Thompson and Eugene Genovese to the literary studies of Terry Eagleton, Edward W. Said and Fredric Jameson: in short, in the works of some of the best Marxists in the West today. While this concept of hegemony has proved seminal for purposes of revolutionary strategy in the West, the Gramscian concept of passive revolution is beginning to gain influence in historical studies.(5) Gramsci developed this concept of passive revolution to articulate the historical comparability of the French Revolution and the Italian Resorgimento: in other words, to situate the historical moments of the revolutionism of Robespierre and St. Just in contradistinction to the nationalism of Mazzini and Garibaldi. To be sure, the emergence of this concept was necessitated by the need on the part of Gramsci to rationally and historically explain the attaining of state power in Italy by Mussolini. To do this, Gramsci felt compelled to study the nature and process of Italian national unification as the nineteenth century unfolded. Two interrelated concepts developed by Gramsci, which have proved equally influential, are those of traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Here, with Benedetto, Croce and Niccolo, Machiavelli as exemplary figures in the background, Gramsci unravelled the complex interconnections between the historical categories of intellectual and class. The aim was to trace the morphology of the category of intellectual in relation to the historical formation of the category of social class. So when for Gramsci the Party (ICP) is formulated as the Modern Prince, the intent was to chart the differential historical forms of political interventions. Even within this schematic outline and simplistic presentation, it is clear to see the great importance of the Prison Notebooks .

What makes Antonio Gramsci so exemplary for us in the Third World today, particularly to us Africans, is that each of his scientific concepts was developed to explain particular historical blockages with the aim to overcoming them politically. Here lies the true legacy of Gramsci, rather than the indiscriminate and fashionable application of his concepts which is in vogue in the West today. It is this attempted political and sociological unknottng of historical blockages through praxis which makes Gramsci the premier Marxist within the tradition of Western Marxism. A

recent classic study of this tradition makes clear the greatness of Gramsci: "Gramsci's whole work was unremittingly centered on superstructural objects, but unlike any other theorist in Western Marxism he took the autonomy and efficacy of cultural superstructures as a political problem, to be explicitly theorized as such-- in its relationship to the maintenance or subversion of the social order.... With this set of conceptions, Gramsci alone among its thinkers directly sought to find a theoretical explanation of the basic historical impasse that was the origin and matrix of Western Marxism itself."(6) The historical cogency, sociological richness and literary verve of Gramsci's conceptualizations lies in this fact that they are simultaneously political instrumentarium with which to sever the Gordian knots of historical conundrums. Though having undoubted universal relevance, they are instruments of a particular moment. This makes all the more bizarre the recent emergence of Gramsci Industry in Italy and in the West. It is all the more salutary that Tom Nairn has recently attempted to show the particularity of the political and national determinations of Gramsci's theorizations and conceptualizations.(7) Nonetheless, within the context of Marxist international culture, Prison Notebooks has yet to exhaust its lessons for us. The lessons that should be constantly re-learned.

## I

For within another political and historical context, and in another Marxist tradition, Gramsci's Prison Notebooks has facilitated the emergence of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. The Western Marxism of Antonio Gramsci has made possible the consolidation of African Marxism in Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In another context, I have attempted to show the conceptual forms of African Marxism founded by Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral.(8) What the Kenyan has learned from the Italian is to examine and articulate the critical issues of and within the cultural superstructures as a political problem which is resolvable only historically: in other words, resolvable through class struggle and political practice. Equally, the African has learned from György Lukacs, the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, that it is not adequate merely to import Marxism from the outside, for the fundamental task is the reconstruction of our new cultural histories.(9) It is these two fundamental lessons which informed *Detained*, however much that Ngugi wa Thiong'o has never in his writings up to the present alluded to these Marxist thinkers. Perhaps it ought to be emphasised that although the historical conceptions already mentioned in *Prison Notebooks* command our attention today, the book also contains passages of tremendous literary power which reconstruct Italy's cultural history. Maybe these pages should be at the center of our attention, since they seem to possess an urgency which is not immediately apparent in the other equally enthralling pages.

That *Detained* is one of the great books to come out of Africa, only a few would

seriously dispute. In this category, it belongs together with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World*, and a few others. The novelty of this book within this galaxy of books, is that it is not only the first book in Africa to present a conceptually pitched and politically informed cultural history of a particular country, but also and centrally important, is that national cultural history is viewed from a continental perspective. It is here that lies its greatness. Equally impressive, is that it articulates a Marxist perspective within which the complex national components of a culture are integrated. Thirdly, the book persistently insists that the categories of culture and language are centrally determined by class in ways not easily apparent. Perhaps, rather than cataloging its endless merits, which undoubtedly are very impressive, it may be better to quote a central paragraph which is towards the end of the book. It is this passage which determines the structure of *Detained* and the politics of culture present therein: "My reception of his (President Jomo Kenyatta's) death was then one of sadness: here was a black Moses who had been called by history to lead his people to the promised land of no exploitation, no oppression, but who failed to rise to the occasion, who ended up surrounding himself with colonial chiefs, home guards and traitors; who ended up being described by the British bourgeoisie as their best friend in Africa, to the extent of his body being carried to the grave, not on the arms of the Kenyan people, but on a carriage provided by the Queen of England, the symbolic head of the British exploiting classes. Kenyatta was a twentieth-century tragic figure: he could have been a Lenin, a Mao Tse-Tung or a Ho Chi Minh; but he ended being a Chiang Kai-shek, a Park Chung Hee, or a Pinochet. He chose the Lilliputian approval of the Blundells and the Macdonalds of the colonial world, warming himself in the reactionary gratitude of Euro-American exploiters and oppressors rather than in the eternal titanic applause of the Kenyan people, sunning himself in the revolutionary gratitude of all oppressed and exploited. For me, his death, even though he had wrongly jailed me, was not an occasion for rejoicing but one that called for a serious re-evaluation of our history; to see the balance of losses and gains, and work out the options open to us for the future of our children and country." (10, p. 162-163) There isn't much to dispute with in the justness of this carefully graded historical judgement.

What is indisputably crucial to observe is that the historical logic of this assessment led Ngugi wa Thiong'o to do the following things: to examine the class coordinates of Kenyan national history; to trace the pedigree of colonial culture in Kenya and its subsequent superimposition on, and simultaneous destruction of, Kenyan national culture (itself composed of a complex tablieu of ethnic cultures constituting the singular unit); to define the role of language in a re-emerging national culture; to locate and differentiate the forms and modes of cultural imperialism; to situate the Mau Mau national rebellion within the theoretical structure of Kenyan national history; to formulate a social typology of the

intelligenstia in Kenya and then situate it in a comparative perspective of African intellectual history; and lastly but not least, to assist in the emergence of new formations of cultural resistance. Without doubt, no such a cultural programme has been undertaken within the sociological coordinates of African intellectual and cultural history. Its continuity with the legacy of *The Wretched of the Earth* is apparent, in its definition of culture as a revolutionary process and praxis forged continually by the dispossessed and oppressed.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's point of departure in *Detained* is to state categorically that no country can consider itself politically free while its culture and economy is subordinated to foreign imperial interests (p.xv). In articulating this position, Ngugi wa Thiong'o contrasts his anti-imperialist stand to Ali Mazrui's pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist position. For the past twenty-five years Ali Mazrui has been an American-sponsored intellectual brake on the development of revolutionary culture and progressive thought in Africa. The conscious intent of the intellectual work of Ali Mazrui, which undoubtedly in America is grossly overrated and happily has left no legacies on the African continent, has been to derail the development of African Marxist culture. In another context, the nihilism and philistinism of Ali Mazrui will be examined in detail. The present tea-port storm over his television series about Africa does not change one iota the deleterious consequences his thought has had on African intellectual systems.

One of the crucial contributions of this book towards reconstructing of our African national cultural histories, is to show the impossibility of by-passing the legacy of white settler cultural production, which despite its negative nature in relation to our indigenous cultures is part of our national cultural frameworks. It is the nature of this negativity itself that should be historically explained. One of the reasons for the negativity of white settler culture, was that invariably it aligned itself with foreign imperial interests against the national interests of the indigenous people. In short, it was a parasitic culture which supported the European imperial systems in exploiting the African people. Of course there were exceptions to this historical uniformity. Secondly, this culture of imperial domination constantly portrayed Africans as no better or no more civilized than animals. The classic examples of this phenomenon in Kenya are Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen. Of the former, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has pertinently written: "The highest they reached in creative literature was perhaps Elspeth Huxley and she is really a scribbler of tourist guides and anaemic settler polemics blown up to size of books. The most creative things about her writing are her titles--- *The Flame Trees of Thika* and *The Mottled Lizard* , for instance---because in them she lets herself be inspired by native life and landscape. Beyond the title and the glossy covers, there is only emptiness, and emptiness as a defence of oppression has never made a great subject for literature."(p.31) The Baroness does not come off better from the strictures of Ngugi wa Thiong'o: "The African is an animal: the settler is

exonerated. Not a single word of condemnation for this practice of colonial justice. No evidence of any discomfiture. And for this, generations of western European critics from Hemingway to John Updike have showered her with praises. Some neo-colonial Africans too. But I err too in saying the African was considered an animal. In reality they loved the unlovable, unredeemable sub-animals merely useful for brute labour. In *Out of Afrika*, Karen Blixen says that her knowledge of wild game was useful in her later contact with Africans!"(p. 36-37) It was in part in response to this repressive white settler culture that Ngugi wa Thiong'o assisted in the emergence of political formations of cultural opposition. It was in this context, that he developed a people's and peasant's theater, which led to his arrest and subsequent detention.

Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*, in the context of explaining, clarifying and elaborating on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, has postulated that in the cultural sphere no social order can exercise absolute hegemony to the extent of preventing the emergence of new formations which are oppositional in intent. In fact, Williams was writing on the well-known interconnection (dialectical) between absolute repression and determine resistance. This dialectic is all the more apparent in the unfolding revolutionary situation in South Africa today, in both the political and cultural spheres. William's concept of new emergent formations is one of the cornerstones of his cultural materialism. In the context of Kenya, including the whole continent of Africa, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's attempt to construct a people's theater based on an authentic reconstruction of that people's material history, was part of a new cultural formation which was in opposition to the dominant neo-cultural products and relations exercising hegemony in Africa today. Hence another novelty of *Detained*, which in fact links it to *Prison Notebooks*, is its brilliant retrieval of a people's history. This act of Ngugi wa Thiong'o has had no precedent in African cultural history, the total incorporation of a people's history in the African theater: in fact, whereas Soyinka's theater has been content only to give a symbolic representation of a people's mythological structure and its ancestral beliefs, Ngugi's theater is a dramatic representation of a people's material history and the forms of class struggle which propel its movement. But before Ngugi could draw the cultural lineaments of his theater, he had to investigate the material forms of a people's history. It is in this context that *Detained* contains vivid, graphic and unforgettable images of historical retrieval. In effect, these pages are a complete rewriting of Kenya's history, its political, economic, social and cultural aspects re-combined to form a new historical synthesis. Undoubtedly, in a non-neo-colonial Kenya, it will be here that that country's people and patriots will find reflected an authentic image of themselves. In this newly re-drawn history, it is not Kenyatta, Mboya, Njonjo, Arap Moi and their sycophants and acolytes who are heroes, but Arap Manyei, Koitalel, Me Kitilili, Makhan Singh, and the Mau Mau leaders. It was this total upturning of Kenya's history which Ngugi portrayed in the people's

theater, that led to his arrest and detention, and the subsequent writing of *Detained in prison*. It must be said, that these pages on Kenyan history, are the most sustained and penetrative pages on class analysis of African history written anywhere. It is not for nothing that Ngugi wa Thiong'o is regarded in many progressive African quarters, and rightly so, as the real continuator of the great legacy of Frantz Fanon.

The setting up of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre and the presentation of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi and Ngaahika Ndeenda* were part of a patriotic and people's culture confronting the neo-colonial culture of Jesus Christ Superstar in Kenyan theatrical space. Ngugi portrays this confrontation in these memorable terms: "This culture generated courage, not fear; defiance of oppression, not submission; pride in self and in one's country, not cowardly acceptance of national humiliation; loyalty to Kenya, not its betrayal to imperialism. And it was precisely in reaction to the people's history as change and the revolutionary culture it generated, that the colonial rulers had tried to humiliate Africa's Sisyphus into accepting the oppressor's view of history---that all efforts to change this reality would end in futility."(p. 66) It was in the context of these conflicts and confrontations that Ngugi wa Thiong'o made a fundamental 'discovery': the existence of a literary tradition in Kenya written in the various Kenyan national languages. This discovery has had profound consequences on Ngugi's subsequent cultural and political orientations. It was because of this that he changed cultural direction, from writing creative works in the English language to writing in the Kikuyu language, one of Kenya's national languages. In *Detained*, one can practically feel the texture of Ngugi's changing cultural and historical consciousness. Of course then, he was not fully conscious of the silent revolution which was then taking place in him. It was only in his subsequent books, *Writer in Politics* and *Barrel of a Pen*, that Ngugi was able to articulate the historical terms of that transformation. Ngugi's latest book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, dramatically announces that even critical works coming from him will no longer also be written in the English language. The transformation has been complete and epoch making.

Ngugi's struggle to situate popular culture into a hegemonic order or status in Kenya finds echoes in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. There, the Italian Marxist philosopher had made a distinction between popular culture as 'scientific philosophy'. For him the central question was to locate and a search for historical forms through which spontaneous philosophy could be transformed into a hegemonic scientific philosophy. This is a problem which the Kenyan writer does not seem to be aware of. The fact is that the whole structure of popular culture cannot simply be incorporated into a hegemonic position without eliminating some of its regressive elements. That popular culture (the workers' and peasants' culture) should be positioned into hegemonic dominance cannot be questioned, for it is a

historical imperative. The nature and process of incorporation and transformation of popular culture is the real critical issue. The works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o subsequent to *Detained* are in their own way a search for African centred historical forms of transformation. The importance of *Detained* within the while cycle of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works is that it was here that the historical consciousness of this need was registered in all its importance. The following sentence clearly indicates the profoundly felt need to change a sense of direction: "My seventeen years of writing in a foreign language has not brought us anywhere near the foundations of a true Kenyan literature for Kenyan people."(p. 182) The logic of this principle applies to the whole of Africa where `African' literature is being written in the European languages.

## II

The *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* by Breyten Breytenbach is located within and defines a different historical conjuncture, uniquely distinct from that within which Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained* is situated. If in the former's South African context the politics of white settler colonialism of a special type are hegemonic and dominant, in the latter's context, it is the politics of classic neo-colonialism which predominate. But to fully conceptualize in its true complexity the theoretical structure of the South African social formation, it is necessary to borrow a concept (theoretical and historical) developed by Antonio Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* . With the concept of organic crisis , the Italian political philosopher was attempting to theorize the contradictory essence of a particular historical moment. In the *Prison Notebooks* , Gramsci writes:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This

exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves... and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making efforts to cure them within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts ... form the terrain of the conjunctural and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize.(11)

It is not necessary to enter into argumentation about the historical cogency, conceptual exactness and theoretical lucidity of this concept of organic crisis in so far as its applicability to our historical context, to see that it was the forces of opposition occasioned by such a crisis which Breytenbach was trying to organize secretly through the facilities of the Okhela organisation. It was in this attempt that he was arrested in South Africa, hence the prison experiences related in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* .(12) The form and existential nature of those

prison experiences are not of primary concern for us here; what is crucial, and this makes the reading of the book an unforgettable experience, is the profound reflections of Breytenbach on, the possible patterns of the coming South African revolution, the democratic forms of a post-revolutionary government, the necessarily dialectical conflict and contradiction between communism and nationalism, the non-synchronic unity of race and class, the central political determinants of the Afrikaans language, and the lineages of our cultural history.

It is the examination and philosophical meditation on these interrelated themes, conceptualizations and ideas which makes this book such a remarkable document it is. It is the absence of cant, false pieties and grovelling obsequioses that will make it the controversial test that it deserves to be. On the cultural plane, it remaps a new reading of our cultural history, particularly the role of Afrikaans language within that structure. The central novelty of this reading is that it contradicts the mythology of Afrikaner literary historians who have argued that this great language emerged from the purism of the white nationalism of Afrikanerdom, and has since found its purification in the creative writings of Afrikaner writers stretching from Eugene Marais to Andre Brink. Contradicting this Afrikaner Apartheid mythology, Breytenbach states clearly that Afrikaans was created in the context of a multi-cultural and multi-national process: "The Afrikaner establishment's historians and academicians, the lords of culture and of tribal identity, pretend that Afrikaans is the youngest in the family of Germanic languages. They need to say this because they must accentuate the European heritage and predominance with all its implications of cultural-imperialist 'superiority' not yet disavowed..... The language, however, was born in the mouths of those - imported slaves, local populations - who had command of no European tongue and who needed to communicate in a lingua franca among themselves; who had to be able to understand the Master."(p. 353) Breytenbach argues further, that in fact, the Afrikaans language structurally was influenced by the language of the Malay people and also incorporated into itself the vocabulary from the languages spoken by Blacks and the Khoi-khoi. For him, it is partly this that makes Afrikaans a Creole language. Though Breytenbach does not say so, this formulation totally contradicts what Andre Brink has written on the history of the Afrikaans language in his book, *Mapmakers*. In another context, I have indicated the serious omissions in Brink's formulation, and their political implications.

The real center-piece of *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* is the whole-scale critique of the South African Communist Party mounted by Breyten Breytenbach. Among the charges he levels at it, the following are among the most important: that the SAVCP has the financial structure and the secretariat of the African National Congress (ANC) under its absolute control; that the SACP outlines and enforces the ideology that governs the structures of the ANC; that the SACP is the most loyal party to the foreign interests of the Soviet Union; that the

SACP supported the intervention of Soviet Union in Hungary and in Czechoslovakia; that, in effect, it had no focussed cultural policy; and lastly, that it would want in the post-Apartheid era to replicate in South Africa the State controlled socialist economies presently characteristic of the East European countries. There is no solid substantiation of most of these accusations.(p. 74-78) It was because of these perceived shortcomings that Breytenbach and other people the Okhela organisation, whose task it was to organize white resistance to Apartheid and the capitalist state in South Africa. The Manifesto of the Okhela group is published as an appendix to the book. What is truly a left critique of the ANC, is in many ways a replication of the principles outlined in The Freedom Charter. The real political and historical exigencies governing both these documents are determined by these two dates of 1955 and 1975. In fact, the Okhelo-Manifesto is a petulant child of The Freedom Charter. There is no fundamental contradiction between the two documents. What ought to be clear, is that it is The Freedom Charter, with the modifications of 1969 and 1986, which is the blueprint of the constitution in a post-Apartheid South Africa. Breytenbach can hardly dispute with this view. He is in search for democratic forms of criticism within the dialectics of the national liberation struggle in South Africa. Witness these profoundly sobering and brilliant notations towards the end of "A Note for Azania". Their provocativeness and originality is what makes them so exhilarating to read: "So what do you do as an individual, as a writer perhaps?... You are African. Assume that full. Solutions must be found within the country, with the people, all the people. Nobody is clean. No heaven exists. Combat dogmatism. Try to force a dialogue, try to keep it open.... Strive for the growing realization, through heritage and through struggle, of one South African cultural identity composed of an incredibly rich variety of sources and expressions. Promote tolerance.... Be patient and realize that there will never be a perfect society anywhere . ..... Survive, so as to continue to struggle. Try to see it as a continuous process , not a rigid goal or structure.....if you want to remain whole, recognize the humanity of your enemy.... After all, we are blood brothers and sisters."(p. 360) Few on the democratic left in South Africa would disagree with such an appraisal and evaluation.

The real historical lesson to be drawn from Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* , is not the politically unfounded criticism of the ANC, but rather, the historical necessity of implanting in South Africa a democratic Marxist culture which can withstand the extremism and the fanaticism of any kind, which are presently plaguing our country, and which, to be sure, will continue plaguing the country for the foreseeable future. This democratic, and in some ways utopian culture, it is hoped, will make it impossible to transmit these nihilisms and anarchisms in the post-Apartheid and post-revolutionary South Africa. This democratic Marxist culture can draw its lessons in the present historical and political struggles, and from the writings of, for example, Jose Marti,

Ernst Bloch, Amilcar Cabral, Sandor Petofi, Gyorgy Lukacs, W.E.B. Du Bois, and many others. In other words, the lesson that this remarkable book teaches us all South Africans, and teaches concretely, is the imperativeness of mounting the cultural struggle in parallel fashion with the political and class struggles, but not necessarily subordinating the former to the latter, however much the latter, in many ways, determine the former. This is the profound lesson the *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. In America, a lesson which has been drawn on our behalf from this book, is the supposed treachery and evilness of communism. This supposed ideological and propaganda lesson was painted in bold black and white letters in *The New York Review of Books* also argued that *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* was the best prison book to come out of Africa. This is patently false; the best prison book to come out of Africa is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained*. Nonetheless, within the African context, both these books attempt to define the possible forms of a democratic socialist culture. It is this which situates them within the same political space. Both of them make clear that, a real Africa can only emerge from a democratic integration of its white and black components. Hence, it is bizarre to argue for the superiority of one over the other.

### III

In contrast to the historical perspective that informs the structure of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, and the political axioms that structure the texture of Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, it is the psychological constructs emanating from an earnest moralist that shape the powerful narrative drive of Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (14). Though interrelating to each other within the same continental space, these three prison documents articulate different generic forms: whereas *Detained* reads like a historical appraisal, and *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* like a political manifesto, undoubtedly *The Man Died* reads like a psychological novel. In fact, if we were to trace the ancestry of these great African documents to the remarkable prison writings of the late nineteenth century Russia, with proportions accepted, it is evident that Mikhail Bakunin is the predecessor of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in as much as Alexander Herzen is the ancestor of Breyten Breytenbach, and Fyodor Doestoyevsky is the begetter of Wole Soyinka. The Africa of Chinua Achebe, whatever the differential historical forms encompassing each, finds its hidden historical reflection in the Russia of Anton Chekhov.

Structurally, these great African prison texts are related to each other by the unity of diversity: in *Detained* it is analyticalism which is predominant, in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* it is descriptivism which is pre-eminent, and in *The Man Died* it is dialogism which holds absolute sway. As a consequence, stylistically, whereas Ngugi's prose is viscous and cumbersome, and Breytenbach's is sprightly and bland, that of Soyinka is lucid and simple, shedding

its mannered difficulties. What really distinguishes *The Man Died* from Ngugi's philosophical meditation and Breytenbach's essay, is its deeply felt morality, I repeat morality, and not moralism. In fact, the whole book is a constant refrain of a moral critique of the social forms of political power, of political corruption, of tyrannical power, and of sycophancy and mendacity. What is missing in Soyinka is a historical explanation of these phenomena. It was the moral urgency of stopping the flow of weapons to both the Biafran side and the Federal government during the Nigerian civil war, which led to Woyinka's 28-month incarceration. It was not because of his political commitment to one side against another, which resulted in Soyinka's imprisonment. But this does not in the least lessen the moral integrity of the 1986 Nobel Prize Winner for Literature. On the contrary, this indicates its resiliency. Politically, Soyinka's profound skepticism contrasts itself to Breytenbach's exhausted cynicism and Ngugi's passionate revolutionaryism.

Of all the African books on prison experiences, Soyinka's *The Man Died* is furthest from what could be justifiably called the Gramscian tradition of prison literature, in that in it there is an absence of a socialist perspective and the absence of an appraisal of the national cultural components which, if properly aligned, could have withstood, even possibly prevented the outbreak of a political or/and social crisis. Soyinka hardly ever theorizes, with the aim of resolving their intractability, the relations between cultural processes, political structures and historical forms. The political blockages and incompatibilities that ripped Nigeria apart in the late 1960s, and today hold that country in a state of social and class disequilibrium, are sedimented together with the profoundly complex differential national factors and cultural processes. In Nigeria politics of any kind are held hostage by the explosive cultural discharges. It is all the more necessary to resolve this conundrum. For instance, it has proven impossible to resolve the problem of choosing one or several indigenous Nigerian language(s) as a national language(s). In a recent interview Wole Soyinka has stated that the very attempt to choose one indigenous language as a Nigerian national language is a recipe for a civil war.(15) Hence, it is not possible for him to agree with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's present literary and language project. But this has not prevented Soyinka from advocating on behalf of the Swahili language to be adopted as a continental language.

The Remarkableness of *The Man Died* lies in its profound portrayal of the mind in a continual state of struggle against the forces of oppression and evilness. On this score, Wole Soyinka is a true heir of Dostoevsky. Whilst Dostoevsky found consolation in reactionary politics and religious fanaticism, Soyinka has found temporary relief in the philosophy of despair and skepticism. But this has not prevented him in being resolute in his stand against the forces (evil) of Apartheid. Witness his Nobel Prize Speech, remarkable in its forthrightness about South Africa.(16) In fact, it would seem that among the first major plays written by him, one was on the politics of Apartheid.(17) Since he felt that it never captured

the full experiential and existential nature of Apartheid from the perspective of Black South Africans, Soyinka tore that play into shreds. For sure, that play must have been governed by a philosophical credo found in this book, which in fact is its moral story "For me, justice is the first condition of humanity."(p.96) The paradox here is that, whilst Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Breyten Breytenbach have embraced the philosophical principles of socialism toward concretizing the realization of this political credo, the Nobel Prize Winner for Literature has not found it necessary to make a historical choice between socialism and capitalism. It is here that in many ways that the effectiveness of Soyinka's cultural politics is weakened.

One looks in vain in *The Man Died* for the reasons which led to the disintegration of Nigeria as a national entity. Nor is there an attempted analysis of the structural factors and social processes which are determinant of the national components of Nigerian culture. Given that Nigeria then had collapsed as a nation, accompanied by atrocities, hatreds and cruelties, it would have been very instructive and fundamental to other African countries, had Soyinka examined the torn texture of Nigerian national culture. One misses an attempted delineation of the answers as to why the Nigerian national structure gave way. The real question which is a challenge to African intellectuals is: how can they construct and solidify, with the popular participation of our people, the national components of our cultures which can withstand the schizophrenic pull of opportunistic bourgeois politics. It is on this very issue that *Detained* has been exemplary.

One unsettling thing about this prison classic from Wole Soyinka is its constant eliding of politics and history into psychology. This dismal of politics and history is a constant factor in Soyinka's creative imagination. Even in some of his great plays mythology is substituted in place of history. Also those plays whose central concern is history, the movement of historical actualities is captured and explained mythologically. Where history is confronted on its own terms, Soyinka views history as a cyclical process rather than a dialectical progression. The real paradox here, and Wole Soyinka is a man of many paradoxes, is that without Bertolt Brecht the great plays of Soyinka could not have been possible, however much deeply rooted they are in Yoruba mythology and African culture. But on the plane of human psychology, Soyinka is truly supreme. In many ways this book of Soyinka's concerns itself with the travails, doubts, hesitations and vicissitudes of the human mind under conditions of horrifying cruelty. *The Man Died* portrays the psychology of the human mind questing and struggling to retain its sanity in the midst of oppressive insanity and madness. Perhaps a passage or two would indicate the brilliance of Soyinka's penetrative imagination: "To survive, but to survive in a transmitted form, full of nebulous wisdoms, corrupted and seduced by sagehood homage, carefully insulated from intimacy with the affairs of men, that kind of

bribery which Oedipus at first snatched at, blinding himself physically to eradicate in entirety the route to socially redemptive action -- this is the preference of all establishment. Against all questioning and change, against concrete redress of the causative factors of any crisis, society protects itself by this diversion of regenerative energies into spirtual in-locked egotism."(p.89) As it can be seen, this passage is replete with mythological references, which hinder it being historically understood. Nonetheless, its literary power is deeply impressive. But of all the three writers considered here, Wole Soyinka is the most distant from the prison literature tradition founded by Antonio Gramsci. Perhaps the distance was necessary in order to situate himself within the Vichian historical cycles.

Without doubt, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* , *Detained* and *The Man Died* have immeasurably enriched the African literary imagination. They have founded a new literary genre in African literature. To be sure, the difference between them lies not so much in the literary genius behind each of them, as much as in the different cultural textures, literary traditions and social context which each of them deep rootedly expresses and conveys. They stand among the high points of African literature.

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