

Scatology and Eschatology in Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother...*

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Kofi Awoonor is Ghana's leading poet, but he has also produced stories, short plays, and two novels. His major poetry collections are: *Rediscovery*, 1964; *Night of My Blood*, 1971; *Ride Me, Memory*, 1973; and *The House by the Sea*, 1978. Educated at the University of Legon, Ghana, the University of London, and the State University of New York, Kofi Awoonor has held academic posts in Ghana and the United States, and has served as managing editor of the journals *Okyeame* and *Transition*. He has recently completed a second novel, *Comes the Traveller at Last*. His poetic novel *This Earth, My Brother...* (1972), Richard Priebe has argued, establishes clear links between its hero's ultimate eschatological transformation and an implied social regeneration. Priebe sees Awoonor's protagonist, the lawyer Amamu, as a religious sacrifice who, because he represents "the greatest loss to the community, stands out as the most efficacious offering" and whose death "adumbrates an ultimate salvation for his land since he is better able as an ancestral force to effect the changes he had not the power to effect while living."¹ Additionally, in his discussion of the novel's scatology, he claims that the author's sardonic parody of a line from Eliot-- "Fear death by shit trucks"--"reveals both the scatological and eschatological nature" of the novel's reality.² Plausible though all this may sound in the light of African theology, it seems tenuously theoretical when put beside what is actually realized in the novel, where the social and spiritual, the natural and supernatural, decay and deliverance, appear to be pulling in opposite directions.

Scatology in West African fiction usually has a solid material dimension and this is perhaps most marked in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), where it is used to represent the historical legacy of corruption and is marshalled into a systematic vision of history as a cycle of consumption, waste, and disposal, meticulously correspondent with the human physiological circuit of ingestion and evacuation. It is also evident in Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voice* (1970), where the cathartic evacuation of a corrupt society's moral pollution is similarly imaged in excretory terms and its accumulated evils as human dirt and excrement. The visionary hero Okolo, who seeks the purification of his village community, is advised about the goal of his search: "You can only this thing find in rubbish heaps or in night soil dumps, and those who go there do not come back. If they do, everybody will run away from them--the high and even the low--because of the stench."³ Thus, in trying to rid his society of its burden of pollution, Okolo himself becomes, in the words of the village elders, "the stinking thing," and his efforts at purification lead to his martyrdom at their hands, although his fate hints at a collective regeneration and renewal similar to that ironically conferred by the ritual pattern of purification in Armah's novel. Okolo's vision does not die, for his words take root in the communal conscience, and it is clear that the days of the corrupt order are numbered.

¹ Richard Priebe, "Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother...* as an African Dirge," *Benin Review* 1(1974): 97, 99.

² Priebe 99.

³ Gabriel Okara, *The Voice* (London: Heinemann, 1970) 83.

"You know time finishes," a friend tells him earlier in the novel, and the period of the terminated time remains equivocal.⁴

In Awoonor's novel, however, the oppositions are of a different order. Here, the scatological presentation of the visible, historical world is countered and, to some extent, overridden by eschatological considerations of the life of the spirit in another, unseen one. The naturalistic prose chapters carry Amamu forward through the vignettes of a representative colonial childhood and adolescence, in the course of which the debris of colonial history and its legacy in postcolonial Ghana is accumulated and stored in the novel's collective consciousness. But in contradistinction with this linear movement, the book's poetic interludes carry Amamu back in a circle to a visionary rediscovery of his lost childhood cousin Dede who, in his personal subconscious, is identified with figures from a pre-European African mythology--notably Mammy Water, the mermaid or Woman of the Sea with magical, supernatural powers--⁵ which has survived the depredations of a century of colonialism. The Westernized linear time of the prose narrative is, in Gerald Moore's words, "only a measure of the intervals between moments of vision."⁶ This cycle of return to a reborn childhood is, moreover, complicated by being tied to a parallel eschatological cycle: the visionary liberation achieved by what Amamu refers to as the assumption of the "body" of Dede's death can be purchased only by his own passage through madness and bodily death, and this death is presented as a process through which Amamu is reborn into the spirit world from which he arrives in the village of Deme in the first chapter.

Amamu's pattern of personal return is superimposed upon the disposal of a communal historical burden: Dede's death from malnutrition in 1944 marks the centenary of the colonial invasion of Ghana and is seen both as the culminating legacy of a century of material theft, pillage, and neglect, and as a brutal curtailment of what appears in some passages of the novel to be a precolonial African innocence: "And on that magnificent continent, the diamond diggers and washers, the gold-miners, the copper-miners, the farmers on the great European-organised plantations toil from sunrise to sundown so that their infants can die early of malnutrition. . . . So my cousin love, she who came from the sea at the hour the moon slashes the sea in two beneath the shadow of my almond died, long long ago I cannot remember. As infants we run through the naked land naked . . ."⁷ Independent Ghana struggles into a horrific rebirth after the long and deadly colonial gestation: "Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother. This revolting malevolence is thy mother. She begat thee from her womb after a pregnancy of a hundred and thirteen years. She begat thee after a long parturition she begat you into her dust, and you woke up after the eighth day screaming on a dunghill" (28). The final metaphor, which is graphically literalized in Amamu's final journey through the nightmare landscape of Nima, carries corruption beyond colonialism to its inheritors. Awoonor, like Armah, is fond of long-distance retrospections to slave-dealing ancestral prototypes which attach precolonial and neocolonial evils to colonial ones: Nkrumah's escape contingency is "an improvement on the same tunnel through which the slaves were shipped in ancient days" and he rules from "the same castle where the slave ship anchored, and received their cargoes through the tunnels to the Americas" (27, 30). Furthermore, as in the dunghill worlds of the Armah and Okara novels, the vast entropized weight of material corruption which is the legacy of the colonial era takes the form of the city's mounting mass of human excrement, the

⁴ Okara, *The Voice* 30.

⁵ Kofi Awoonor, Interview by John Goldblatt, *Transition* 41 (1972): 44.

⁶ Gerald Moore, "Death, Convergence and Rebirth in Two Black Novels," *Nigerian Journal of the Humanities* 2 (1978): 6.

⁷ Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth, My Brother*. . . (London: Heinemann, 1972) 148. Further references are given in parentheses in the text of the article.

issue of the death-circuit of the body. The night soil truck rides symbolically at the head of Nkrumah's motorcade, carrying before it the regime's rottenness which Amamu, in his self-appointed task, deems it his duty to carry away. The uncollected refuse and unemptied latrines memorialize the neglected ills of a period still awaiting purgation: "Two septic latrines, a fitting memorial to Nima, the city within a city, Nkrumah once said he would make it. These latrines are ever full. Those in a hurry take a shit right on the floor. Near the septic latrines are huge dunghills which in the language of the Accra City Council are called refuse dumps. No one ever removes refuse from Nima" (152).

But Awoonor's less historically oriented vision does not allow Amamu, after the fashion of Armah's man, to take the view that "out of the decay and the dung there is always a new flowering."⁸ In this novel the dunghill and the butterfly, the night soil dump and the regenerative chrysalis, are antithetical, not complementary images. The wry refrain "Fear death by shit trucks," with its ironical echoes of *The Waste Land* and *The Tempest*, mocks the idea of a miraculous sea change with a young officer's unambiguous death under heaps of the waste which is society's end product (113). Material and magical transformation, death as finality and as process, scatology and eschatology, all seem to be working in opposition. Awoonor's sombre prose places more emphasis on an antiquity of unalleviated suffering, the sheer oppressive weight of past pollutions, and forebodings of some final apocalypse than on regenerative deliverance in the present. Here is Yaro, Amamu's houseboy from the Nima dunghill: "He suddenly looked old; he wore for the first time an indeterminable age, an oldness that was not time's, an agedness of hills and rivers. In that what was the true and more valid self of this peasant turned into a squatter on the dunghill of modern Africa was a final weariness that defied all description. . . . It had to do with a doom, a catastrophe, a total collapse of all things, his world, his all . . ." (175-76). Amamu casts himself as the carrier who has the power to roll back the years on this mountain of unpurged misery, but his vocabulary is mystical rather than material, theological rather than historical: "It seemed suddenly that the centuries and the years of pain of which he was the inheritor, and the woes for which he was singled out to be carrier and the sacrifice, were being rolled away, were being faded in that emergence. Here at last, he realised with a certain boyish joy, was the hour of his salvation" (179). "Sacrifice" and "salvation" look to religious and supernatural alternatives and the "emergence" takes place on a personal rather than a public level. Amamu's completion of a religious cycle through death achieves individual communion with his lost lover but has little meaning as a communal act which works towards the restoration of some collective loss: at the realistic level he does not invest his death in the renewed life of society but squanders it. It is perhaps significant that Awoonor's conception of the ritual carrier of pollutions, as expressed elsewhere, is a peculiarly priestly one: "He runs himself into a state of trance and then, in the clear-eyed singular moment, the god of sense descends and communion takes place."⁹ What is envisaged here, as in the novel, is supernatural communion between individual and deity or ancestral spirit, which Amamu achieves in death and which has only a marginal application to social communion. What Soyinka has said about Okara's hero Okolo is, in fact, more relevant to Awoonor's savior: "His will to motion can hardly be calculated in terms of his effect on the community . . . the catalytic effect of his quest on the external world is more expected than fulfilled."¹⁰

It would, of course, be a mistake to take Amamu's vision for that of the novel as a whole. The community of his childhood which he mythicizes into a time of Edenic innocence and invests with the supernatural dimensions of a stage along an eschatological circuit is revealed by the impersonal narrator, at the realistic level, to be spoiled by the drunken abrogation of social duties, bribery, and the desecration of customs even by

⁸ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1975) 85.

⁹ Awoonor, Goldblatt Interview 44.

¹⁰ Wole Soyinka, "And After the Narcissist?" *African Forum* 1.4 (1966): 62.

traditional elders. Certainly the historical pressure in the prose narrative to obliterate the long decay of colonialism, unnaturally preserved in the moribund regime of a leader who "must remain forever" (30), receives no direct impetus from a return journey womb-wards to a precolonial innocence or relief from the prospect of the hereafter. In fact, the horrified protest implicit in the narrative account of the dunghill of the Nima slums partly resists the fatalistic resignation of the eschatology in the poetic interludes and infuses the novel with a more socially oriented, revolutionary spirit. Nevertheless, Amamu's death is still a ritual rather than a social experience, a mystical rather than a material event. During its execution in the novel, societal regeneration is not successfully analogized to the posthumous progress of the spirit, no more than is the eschatological passage to the passage of terminal body wastes. The purification of the body politic in this world and of the individual spirit in the next one, this earth and its shadow spirit world, remain polarized in their mutually exclusive orders of reality.