

CONTEMPLATION AS A MEANS OF CREATIVITY AND EMPOWERMENT

IN THE WORK OF

WOLE SOYINKA

VOID MEDITATION

THEORY AND METHOD

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One of the most powerful motifs in the work of the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, in terms of its sheer linguistic exuberance, ideational evocativeness and imagistic dexterity, is his transformation of contemplative traditions, at times alluding specifically to their Christian, Hindu and Buddhist roots, even as these are integrated in his own individualistic and trans-cultural terms.

Anybody studying contemplation as practice and in terms of its cultural history, its psychological significance, or any other context could benefit from reading Soyinka in that light.

I am using contemplating in the specialized sense in which it is used in Christian spirituality, an approach similar to meditation, which it which it can be used in terms of mutual meaning. Contemplation involves an effort to reflect on a subject in order to arrive at a meaning that transcends its immediate expression, to give what is less than a thorough definition. It often reflects on an idea in order to gain entry to a world of meaning to which the idea gives entry, like a door into a vast house of treasure. In this sense, it can be said to be used be central to creativity. What Soyinka shares with explicitly religious practice of this discipline is his use of their techniques or related ones created by himself in pursuing similar goals while operating within a context that does not identify wholly with any religious orientation.

Central to his use of contemplation is his description of what, adapting a term from Buddhism, I would describe as Void Meditation in *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*. I see this essay as one of his most important works, particularly on account of the exceptional seven stanzas of poetry at its conclusion which represent to me one of the best summations of classical Yoruba cosmology in terms of its deities and their associated philosophical values. Its also one of the most evocative brief summations of any cosmology in terms of its deities and their related philosophical conceptions I have ever read. Its also one of his most accessible poems. He combines in that poem the imagistic evocativeness and linguistic suppleness that marks his greatest poetry, but without inhabiting a space of uncompromisingly dense ideational and imagistic allusions and syntactic flourish that makes his work challenging for many readers, although those qualities are at the essence of its power and are most rewarding when one takes the trouble to

enter into the world they invite you to, though careful reading and letting them grow in you.

Soyinka describes his Void Mediation:

"I do not claim to know what has been the experience of others but as a child I found myself indulging in a rather exotic mental exercise. It was an exercise which originated from my attempts to come to concrete terms with the Christian myth of the creation of the world.

....

In the beginning, claim the Christian scriptures, there was Void. Emptiness. My imagination insisted on conjuring up this primeval state and ended up evolving this quite logical exercise. I would shut my eyes, shut off my mind, then try to enter that primeval state of nothingness which the world would have been, before the creation of anything, animate or inanimate. It became a quite compulsive indulgence. I found myself impelled by a curiosity to experience the absolute state of non-being, of total void- no trees, no rocks, no other beings, not even I."

This is sublime. I see this meditation not simply as a means to mentally go back in time but as an imaginative method of seeking to transcend the accretions of living so one can experience, can re-engage, with a primal psychological and perhaps even metaphysical centre beyond the structures created by human social conditioning that began perhaps even before birth through natal and genetic influence.

Just rest from it all, this technique of meditation seems to suggest. Forget the entire rat race and return to the beginning of all, before existence as you know it existed. A vital method of placing oneself in a perspective relating to relationship between nothingness and the aeons of time culminating in the present.

Soyinka elaborates on the meaning of this meditation:

"I can only wonder, at this distant remove, how I would have been affected at that impressionable age, by the knowledge that adults have actually constructed complete philosophical and religious systems in which all material life, including all those dynamic processes for the reproduction of life which in fact constitute our social consciousness or value of being, are actually conceived as a programmed reversion towards that very state of nothingness, the primal zero, which I then tried vainly to experience."

He relates his meditation to

"[Buddhist Mahapralayi] the condition of universal nothingness, the in-folding of the world as well know it into the original womb of darkness, or more accurately, non-darkness and non-light.

...a return to the primal void."

[Involving]

"At one conceptual level or the other...deeply embedded as an article of faith [in Buddhism and Hinduism] a relegation of this material world to a mere staging post, awaiting the drop of the final grain of sand into the lower half of the hour-glass, then universal negation- gently or cataclysmically. Existence, as we know it, comes to the end that was pre-ordained from the beginning of time."

Meditation ritual adapted from Soyinka's *Credo* and his play *Death and the King's Horseman*

The purpose of this ritual is to imaginatively relate with, and perhaps actually experience through repeated practice, the conception of the source of being, beyond being and non-being, as described in Buddhism, the Great Unmanifest, as described in Hermetic Qabalah.

Breathe deeply and slowly about five times to steady your mind.

Reflect briefly on the following ideas:

Void.
Emptiness.
Nothingness,
Non-being,
Total void-
no trees, no rocks, no other beings, not even you.

Detach yourself from the world **by repeating to yourself a number of times these lines** from the Tibetan Buddhist poet Milarepa quoted by Soyinka in *Credo* and *The Man Died*:

I need nothing. I seek nothing. I desire nothing.

Pause in brief silence.

Repeat the following:

The river is never so high that the eyes of a fish are covered.
A child returning homeward craves no leading by the hand.
Gracefully do I arrive at the source of all, gracefully....

When the elephant heads for the jungle,
the tail is too small a handhold for the hunter that would pull him back.
The sun that heads for the sea no longer heeds the prayers of the farmer.
When the river begins to taste the salt of the ocean,
we no longer know what deity to call upon,
the river-god or Olokun, Lord of all Waters.

No arrow flies back to the string.

The kite flies to wide spaces
I have freed myself of earth.

Pause in brief silence.

Then,

Shut your eyes.

Shut off your mind by

Doing nothing.

Ignore all thoughts. Let them come and go.

Remain like this for as long as as you like.