

## **The Necessity and Implications of Creative Power or Poetic Authority in Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek**

Fred Opali  
*Polytechnic of Namibia*

### **Abstract**

Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek see Ogun and Lawino as their deities without whose blessing they cannot create poetry. My paper treats the case in which Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek in their anxiety, pursue the creative tradition practised by the major English Romantics. In the same vein they express the need to attain authority to create poetry before beginning to speak for and on behalf of their trapped societies. As its theoretical base, the paper is informed by intertextuality as espoused especially by Harold Bloom and Jonathan Culler in their theories of influence. The paper begins by a brief presentation of the contexts that inform and significantly enrich the poetry of Soyinka and p'Bitek. From this position, the paper then considers the process, necessity, and implications of attaining creative power or poetic authority and concludes by examining the necessity in the mind of the poet-initiate in the creative process of a presence or equivalence. It observes that it is only creative artists in this condition who can attain poetic authority. Throughout the paper, the extent to which Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek extend the range of romantic continuity and intra-poetic relations in their poetry is indicated. The paper concludes by giving a brief evaluation of the Romantic inclination that the two poets display.

### **Rationale for romantic continuity in Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek**

This paper argues that common bonds link Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek to English Romantics; the poetry they write displays significant and instructive Romantic continuity; the lines of continuity, correspondences, and intra-poetic relations are manifested both consciously and unconsciously, owing largely, to the economic, socio-political and educational contexts within which the two poets lived, wrote, and published.

At a conscious level, it is evident that the bonds that link the two African poets to their romantic precursors are largely economic and socio-political. Events in post-independent Africa were excruciating. The harmonious relationship the writer had with political leaders a few years following independence came to a head from the

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*Fred Opali* has an M.A. in Poetry and a Dip. Ed. in English from Makerere University. He is Deputy Director and Head of the Department of the Department of Communication at the Polytechnic of Namibia. He currently teaches Critical Thinking and is working on a Ph.D. thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand. He taught English/Literature and English Education at Makerere University and the University of Botswana for several years before becoming the Polytechnic's first Registrar in 1997. His published works are in African Poetry and English Romanticism. E-Mail: [fopali@polytechnic.edu.na](mailto:fopali@polytechnic.edu.na) or [fopali@iafrica.com.na](mailto:fopali@iafrica.com.na)

mid-sixties. Within a short period of independence, the continent was characterised by military dictatorship, poverty, wars, and rumours about wars. For the ordinary man and the writer, economic life left a lot to be desired. Alienation, mistrust, anxiety, dejection, and hopelessness were the order of life. These issues also marked life in Romantic England from about 1750 to 1850. It is little wonder, owing to the transcendental nature of human life and experience, that in their poetry, as they respond to the events of their time, Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek emulate the English Romantics.

Educationally, it is clear that the policy, practice, and reception of colonial English education in Africa that was replicated in British colonies of Africa right from the mid-forties also informs the kind of poetry that Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek write. In schools, teachers' colleges, and university colleges of the University of London [like Ibadan, the Gold Coast, Rhodesia, and Makerere] teachers, tutors, and Professors "... stuffed down [Romantic poems in the students' reluctant throats]".<sup>1</sup> David Rubadiri confirms the effects of this education. Commenting on creative writing during this period, he asserts that writing caught on after independence in East Africa as elsewhere in Africa, all right, but

... the trends of writing were individualistic – they were personal. If anyone sat down to write a poem, he wrote about himself.... A boy wrote a poem because his whole literary tradition had moulded him to try and emulate the only literature that he had come in contact with. So people wrote like Keats and Wordsworth with whom they had come in contact on roses and sunsets and moonshine, and this sort of subject all on a very personal sort of basis. They received encouragement from expatriate teachers, because this was the only kind of literary tradition with which all the people had been brought up.<sup>2</sup>

### **The necessity of creative power or poetic authority and the process and implications of attaining it**

Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek see Ogun and Lawino as their deities without whose blessing they cannot create poetry. Both poets demonstrate that if they are to act as social barometers or spokesmen for their impoverished societies and Africa as a whole, it is necessary to attain authority to create poetry from such deities as Ogun and Lawino. I see that this is a continuity in direct relationship with their Romantic masters or precursors.

Having read especially Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek are thus aware of the need for a romantic poet to undergo transformation and gain a new selfhood before he begins to create. In this process, the poet gains *authority* to practise his craft and legislate for mankind. Such authority is granted by Ogun in the case of Soyinka and Lawino and Acoli traditional culture in the case of Okot p'Bitek. Before such authority is granted, the poet-to-be has to experience excruciating processes of the transformation of his mind. This is necessary so that his mind is renovated, and, when renovated or purified, can create poetry and communicate with both his deity and mankind or his society.

Soyinka begins the process rather philosophically. In a Romantic vein, he declares:

. . . as the creation snake  
Spawned tail in mouth, wind chisels and rain pastes  
Rust from steel and bones wake dormant seeds  
And suspended lives. I heard

The silence yield to substance<sup>3</sup>

Wole Soyinka is regarded ". . . the barometer of the social conscience of the nation"<sup>4</sup> and Okot p'Bitek affirms that a creative artist is ". . . the foundation of society."<sup>5</sup> The first view here is Babangida's acknowledgement of Soyinka's artistic significance reflected in his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, and the second, is Okot p'Bitek's own realization of the place of an artist in society. Both views underline that artefacts are indeed "barometers" by means of which the conditions and various tempers of society are measured, and, more, that works of art are "foundations" or bases upon which civil society is often constructed. In other words, artists like Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek are torch-bearers, light, and leaders in society. They are, as poets, rulers, in an important sense.

Wole Soyinka himself has often declared that his ". . . one abiding religion [is] . . . human liberty"<sup>6</sup> In his strains, therefore, the establishment of justice and human liberty becomes a strongly-willed belief, a religion, in which he is, in fact, the chief actor or priest. He is so committed to his vision that silence "in the face of tyranny"<sup>7</sup> is, for a man of conscience like him, tantamount to "committing suicide".<sup>8</sup> A poet must fight relentlessly for the cause of justice. It is little wonder that, in `Nigeria's *penkelemes* (peculiar mess), he took the Nigerian government to court for obstinately refusing to abide by the will of the majority of Nigerians. He considers Nigeria's military government a political mess and an illegal regime.

Okot p'Bitek insists that the role of the artist in society is, by and large, to create *Ber pinyi* and ". . . to reflect seriously on the human predicament in this part of the world [Uganda]"<sup>10</sup>. In his strains too, human contradiction, the plight of the ordinary Ugandan in squalid conditions, is what concerns the artist and the university scholar. He challenges university authorities to make Makerere University a real place of thought on man and human life. His concerns are, indeed, a corroboration of Soyinka's position.

Shelley's honest observation that English Romantic poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world summarises the position of the English Romantics on the role of poets in society and, in this matter, brings Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek closer to their precursors. Poets are honest legislators of the world but are often not so regarded by their societies.

The practice of poetic creation in Romanticism emphasizes, however, that before anyone even considers himself a poet, and, before he even begins to wax lyrical about a poet's role in his society, he must have *poetic authority* to do so. This is granted by a deity or some other mythical source. And, before authority is granted, the poet-to-be has to experience excruciating processes of the transformation of his mind. This is necessary so that his mind is renovated, and, when renovated or

purified, can create poetry and communicate with both his deity and mankind, he, the poet, acting as an intermediary. This implies that it is only those who are clean and pure in mind who can create civil society by means of poetry. This makes poetic creation in Romanticism a special calling.

Wole Soyinka is aware of this Romantic practice. I do not believe that this is due to the transcendental nature of human experience. In his view:

Only one who has himself undergone the experience of disintegration, whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces most inimical to individual assertion, only he can understand and be the force of fusion between the two contradictions. The resulting sensibility is also the sensibility of the artist, and he is a profound artist only to the degree to which he comprehends and expresses this principle of destruction and re-creation.<sup>11</sup>

The denigration of “individual assertion” in this passage and preference for “disintegration” is an affirmation of the need for purification before one can apprehend the “principle of destruction and re-creation” which, in Soyinka’s theory means the cyclic relationship between death “destruction” and life “re-creation”. “Disintegration” involves experiencing excruciating transformation processes and exposing the “spirit” or mind to various tests so as to commune with one’s deity with a view to getting the “sensibility” or power with which to understand and create life. It is only such a person who will “be the force of fusion between the two contradictions.” In other words, it is only the purified person who can understand that life consists of contradiction, namely, death and life. To fuse between the two contradictions is to create poetry and can be done only by he who has experienced the transformation processes of poetic creation. Soyinka also implies that poetic creation is delegated responsibility: one is often acting on behalf of some deity or mythical presence.

Poetic Authority is the imaginative power, licence, or permission conferred upon or granted to the poet-initiate by a deity or some mythical presence so he can both understand the act of creation and, himself create. It is, one may add, the consecration of the poet-initiate. This practice has biblical roots too. Even if Jeremiah delegates his authority to Baruch, the son of Neriah, he gets the authority or the word from the Lord who commands: “Take thee a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee . . . unto this day.”<sup>12</sup> And St John the Divine, hears a great voice, as of a trumpet and is equally commanded: “. . . what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches . . .”<sup>13</sup> So, Jeremiah and St John create or, write with the authority of God. The Romantics and their ephebes extend this precept in various ways.

This creation myth, this “. . . poetic account of . . . creation”,<sup>14</sup> is seen again, in English poetry, in the 1790s. Blake is aware of it and is very close to biblical practice in his “Introduction” to both *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. He is also aware of the need to experience transformative processes before one is consecrated or granted the authority to create. In his view, it is necessary to be cleansed because

Man is born a Spectre or Satan & is

altogether an Evil, & requires a New  
Self hood continually, & must  
continually be changed into<sup>15</sup>  
his contrary.

Man's contrary is the state of purity and it is in it that he can communicate with his God. Blake asserts the need for re-birth in the case of one who needs poetic authority. It is those who are born again or who experience dual existence who can see the kingdom of God. Blake is, finally, aware that in the act of poetic creation, authority is delegated, there are no poets, the poems they write are not theirs, they are only secretaries:

. . . I dare not pretend to be any  
other than the  
Secretary; the *authors*  
*are in Eternity* [emphasis mine].<sup>16</sup>

In another strain, he genuflects and pleads thus:

*Eternals!* I hear your call gladly.  
*Dictate swift winged words* & fear not  
To unfold your dark visions of torment [emphases mine].<sup>17</sup>

The poet's task, according to Blake, is thus to write in a book "swift winged words" that authors, the "Eternals", "dictate" to him. In his pursuits, these words are about human contradictoriness in Romantic England. Blake gives a further portrayal of the nature of a Romantic poet in *The Book of Urizen* and *Milton*.

Wordsworth is aware of this creation myth in *Lines: composed a few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* and in *The Prelude 1805/1850*; Coleridge in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "Kubla Khan", and *Dejection: An Ode*; Byron in *Childe Harold Contos III and IV* and *Manfred*; Shelley in *The Revolt of Islam*, *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, *Ode to the West Wind*, and *To a Skylark*; and, Keats, in *Endymion*. All these major Romantics demonstrate that the process of gaining poetic authority makes the creation of Romantic poems superior science and Romanticism itself a science. Attainment of authority is, in other words, by subjection to clear, logical, and detailed processes akin to those of a man of science in his laboratory. Manfred, one of these romantic scientists, declares:

. . . my . . . power  
[Is] purchased . . . by superior science . . . penance, daring  
. . . length of watching, strength of mind, and skill  
In knowledge of our fathers . . .<sup>18</sup>

And, in an equally scientific mood, Wordsworth records:

I looked for universal things . . .  
And turning the mind in upon itself,  
Pored, watched, expected, listened, spread my thoughts,

And spread them with a wider creeping . . .<sup>19</sup>

In both cases, we see that there are five stages that the poet-initiate experiences before he receives poetic authority or superior science as Blake, Byron, and Wordsworth put it.

The five stages in the case of Byron are “penance”, “daring”, “length of watching”, “strength of mind,” and “skill/In knowledge of our fathers,” and, in the case of Wordsworth, ‘poring’, ‘watching’, ‘expecting’, ‘listening’, and ‘spreading one’s thoughts’. There is similarity in these stages. The need for “penance” and “daring” in Byron is related to the need for ‘poring’ or engaging in meditation in Wordsworth. Both of them subscribe to the need for “watching” in the process of attaining authority. “Strength of mind” in Byron’s account is related to ‘expecting’ and ‘listening’ in that of Wordsworth, and, his “skill/In knowledge of our fathers” is similar to ‘spreading one’s thoughts, and spreading them with a wider creeping’ in Wordsworth. It is by means of these steps that superior science or authority may be “purchased”. The idea of ‘purchasing’ authority implies loss and gain, engaging in visions of life and death, and losing the “unnatural self”<sup>20</sup> so as to gain a new selfhood<sup>21</sup> or a “magic cloak”<sup>22</sup> in the case of Soyinka. It also implies sacrifice. It is a man of this experience who can be consecrated.

Wole Soyinka and Okot p’Bitek demonstrate that they are informed by these Romantic truths, but do not follow them closely, step by step. They follow their precursors up to certain points and then swerve to give superior science its African bent. In Soyinka’s practice, for example, superior science is given its African variety: it is called “the mystic creativity of science”.<sup>23</sup> This is one of the principles that Ogun, Soyinka’s deity of poetic creation, teaches his acolyte and poet-initiate. It means understanding the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in man. It is only this poet-initiate, who can apprehend the philosophy of continuity in life.

And this is precisely what is happening in the statement above, taken from *Idanre* (note 3). Ogun, ‘the essence of creativity itself’, is taking the person of the extract, Soyinka himself, through anguishing processes that lead to his consecration. In true Romantic fashion, the poet-initiate is reduced to watching, boring, expecting, listening, and, to a large extent, spreading his thoughts far and wide as the “creation snake” performs its task. Fused with the snake’s activity is the context of civil war and destruction, life and death in Nigeria of the mid-sixties that culminated in the death of the poet, Christopher Okigbo and the incarceration of Wole Soyinka.

Ogun is both a multifarious and a multiform god. In this extract, he appears as a snake and Soyinka’s task is to attend to his functions here. It is not for nothing that Soyinka’s creative works display snakes. It goes to show what kind of man Soyinka is. He is as mystical as his deity. Snakes have followed him right from his childhood.<sup>24</sup> He knows the mystical meaning of these happenings even if he says they are rather ‘abnormal’. In various African oral traditions, a snake is a deity and is revered as such.

The activity of the “creation snake” is mysterious. It is said to appear “spawned tail in mouth”. To “spawn” connotes giving birth, often in large numbers as a fish

produces many eggs. What is mysterious here is that the snake gives birth with its tail in the mouth. The image that this activity gives is circular; therefore, the snake's activity engages it in creation, but also in destruction. It is a fusion of what Soyinka calls the creative-destructive principle. He is a silent watcher in the drama of the snake but is, in the final analysis, also an eloquent participant. This is how he will understand the principle of poetic creation and creates with authority. The circularity of the snake's action also means the continuity of life from one stage to another.

The second act in this mystical drama is that performed by nature. "Wind" is said to "chisel" "rust from steel and bones." "Steel and bones" are the results of the carnage and the material destruction of the Nigerian civil war of the mid-sixties. Wind acts on these wastes by shaping or chiselling them so the dust and rust can fertilize the earth and new life may sprout. Wind is thus the agent of change. In a cyclic manner, it too, is engaged in creation and destruction, or life and death. "Rain" on the other hand, is engaged in 'pasting' "rust from steel and bones" to the earth so that seeds may wake to new life. As Jones has observed, "rain . . . in Soyinka's symbolism represents a life-giving force."<sup>25</sup> This is a correct observation, but it is good to add that rain not only gives life; its action in the extract is also destructive. So, it is in the same pattern as the snake and wind . . . they are cyclic in nature and action. The same is also true of "rust" in the extract. Rust signifies some one-time living object, but in the passage, it indicates death and decay, so it is in also the same pattern as the snake, wind, and rain. It indicates cyclic continuity of life. Jones' reading of it is again perceptive.

In the spirit of poetic creation, Soyinka, the silent participant in the drama of existence in the passage, can be seen as the "dormant seeds/ and suspended lives". "Dormancy" and "Suspension" do not mean death: they mean the presence of life that only requires an amount of stimulation. The drama of the passage bears us out here. It is at this level that we see that getting poetic authority also needs a degree of participation from whomsoever needs to be consecrated. Soyinka is not "dormant" in the experience here. His life is not "suspended". He participates in the creative acts of nature and his deity. There is, in his mind, therefore, a "workmanship that reconciles"<sup>26</sup> various actions in this drama so he can realize authority. He demonstrates that consecration is a two-way process: one must give so as to receive.

It is after that degree of sacrifice, listening, length of watching, and participating that he is granted poetic authority. In the extract, this is signified by his "hearing" the "silence" or the drama of creation yield to "substance" or life.

Soyinka thus emerges from this experience maturer than his precursors. He has, through participation, already mastered the creative-destructive principle which is the kernel of the continuity of life. That is how nature and Ogun consecrate their initiate in the case of Soyinka, and, this is how his treatment of this Romantic cult differs from that of his precursors. He swerves from their main path, to a significant extent, and corrects their creative pattern. In his view, the poet-initiate must *participate* in the creative act before he is given the licence or authority to practise. It is in this respect that his creative voice is new and original. And this is how he continues the Romantic tradition in his view. This is how Okot p'Bitek also believes

artists, these “most powerful, sensitive, and imaginative minds”<sup>27</sup> can gain poetic authority.

For Wole Soyinka, the sources of poetic authority or existences from which authority is got are nature and his usual presence and male deity, Ogun. For Okot p’Bitek, the sources are nature, ancestors, and his female deity, Lawino.

Lawino is as multifarious as Ogun. She is Okot p’Bitek’s biological mother, who, we are told, is the force behind his artistic creation. She is the heroine of *Song of Lawino*, but above all, she is *Jok*, a deity. Ocol dislikes her because there is *Jok* in her head. Ocol knows that this is true because Lawino is his wife and he knows her only too well.

The name Lawino in Acoli means “1a” [of] “wino” [luck], that is, ‘of luck’, a lucky person. But it is not as simple as that: in Acoli philosophy “luck” is closely associated with divinity, no matter what degree of it. This is corroborated by Okot p’Bitek’s own knowledge of this name. According to him, the name “Lawino means a girl born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck . . . The term [also] refers to the nice little foldings on a girl’s neck a sign of great beauty.”<sup>28</sup> The circumstances of her birth are rather mystical because they are not usual happenings. They relate to her supernatural qualities just as Soyinka’s association with snakes right from his childhood indicates his mystical nature as an artist.

Okot p’Bitek hardly realizes that his artistic creation is his deity and creative essence. After having been created, Lawino seems to have directed the development of Okot p’Bitek’s artistic works. She becomes more powerful than her creator and is the essence, springboard, foundation, and philosophy upon which Okot p’Bitek’s *Songs* depend.

Here, again, is a case where, as a latter-day romantic, Okot p’Bitek follows his precursors to a point, but redefines their practice in a new, antithetical sense. To create a deity and make her one’s own artistic spirit and creative essence is new, indicating thus p’Bitek’s treatment of the Romantic tradition in his Acoli, African context. He also differs from Soyinka in his regard.

Lawino challenges the Hunchback<sup>29</sup> to name his source for the creation of “Skyland, Earth, Moon, [and] Stars”.<sup>30</sup> She maintains a negative view of the Christianity preached by the Hunchback and dismisses him because, unlike her, the Hunchback, *Rubanga*, cannot name the source of his creation and his abode. To Lawino, the claims of Rubanga, this Christian God, are far-fetched.

She answers the telling questions put to the Christian God by asserting that for the Acoli, authority for artistic creation comes

From the mouth of the Oyitino River  
The places [is]  
. . . well-known among potters.<sup>31</sup>

Lawino’s mother is a potter; her occupation is to create pots. But p’Bitek’s translation here differs significantly from the Acoli version. What p’Bitek calls “potters” are, in the Acoli version, called “lu-cwec”<sup>32</sup> that is, “lu” [those who] “cwec” [create], thus



“lu-cwec” means “creators” and the line should have read “. . .well-known among creators.”

In spite of this limitation, Lawino makes her point. The source of authority for artistic creation is granted by nature, by, indeed “. . .the mouth of the Oyitino River.” Living close to many rivers as they do, the Acoli of Northern Uganda believe that clan spirits often live in rivers. Authority from Oyitino River is thus from both nature and deities or spirits. Artists who can communicate with such spirits are themselves regarded as agents of *Jok*. Lawino’s mother is one such artist.

From this agency, we learn that poets, creative artists, are themselves also spirit-mediums. The Romantics agree with this viewpoint, so does Soyinka.

In another experience, p’Bitek shows that poetic authority is granted by nature. Lawino, p’Bitek’s creative voice, challenges her husband:

Ocol, my husband. . .  
Take courage,  
Take a small amount of millet porridge . . .  
Drink some fish soup  
slowly, slowly  
You will recover.

Chew the roots of *omwombye* [mango]  
It is very bitter  
But it will clear your throat.

Let them prepare the *malakwang*<sup>4</sup> dish [\* bitter-to-sour green vegetable]  
Eat the roots of *lurono* [in the same class as *malakwang*]  
And the roots of your tongue  
Will be loosened.<sup>33</sup>

Ocol lost his manhood, according to Lawino, at the university library at Makerere. In other words, university education has so westernised Ocol that he is alienated from both his wife and children. He is also alienated from his society. His tongue has become bitter: his daily task is to abuse his wife. In Acoli culture he is therefore not a man, he is dead.

To renovate Ocol and make him both creative and understand what Soyinka calls the creative-destructive principle or the continuity of life amidst human contradictions, he is supposed to humble himself and seek authority from nature. “Millet porridge” and “fish soup” will make him recover his manhood. “The [bitter] roots of *omwombye*” will clear his throat, and, “*malakwang*” and “the roots of *lurono*” will loosen the roots of his tongue.

Once Ocol takes courage to have his manhood restored, throat cleared and tongue loosened, he will then have power, energy, and the licence to create and re-create life as nature and the snake do in *Idanre*.

Ancestors are also named as the sources of poetic or creative authority. In her strains, Lawino asks Ocol to

Beg forgiveness from [his ancestors]  
And ask them to give [him]  
A new spear  
A new spear with a sharp and hard point  
A spear that will crack the rock.<sup>34</sup>

It is appropriate that Ocol is sent to his ancestors because they have already experienced what Ocol has not: the cyclic nature of life and death, the creative - destructive principle of life. But before he is granted audience, Lawino teaches him to lose or humble himself before he declares the purpose of his visit. In this way, he will be granted "a new spear . . . that will crack the rock". The spear signifies authority to create and destroy life in line with Soyinka's philosophy. This spear can also be seen in a sexual sense as the restoration of Ocol's manhood, and when this is done, he will, once again, be able to lead a normal creative existence.

From these sources we can see how Okot p'Bitek uses Lawino and Ocol to pursue the question of poetic authority. He distances himself, becomes a silent observer like Soyinka in *Idanre*, but also like him, implicitly participates in the drama of artistic creation in which his mouthpieces are involved. He thus re-examines the creation myth of the Romantics and the matter of authority in an African context. In departing from the normal path of his precursors, he finds his true and original voice.

Attainment of poetic authority enables Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek, in their new self-hoods; indeed, in their states of innocence and purity to try their hands at poetic practice in interesting ways. In their hands, poetry becomes more lyrical as its creation is a result of a participatory act that involves the poet, his deity, and an assumed audience.

Participatory creation through which authority is granted takes place, according to Soyinka, at night. This is the time Ogun comes to his altar:

He comes, who scrapes no earth dung from his feet

.....  
Night is our tryst when sounds are clear  
and silences ring pure tones as the pause  
Of iron bells.<sup>35</sup>

Consecration is a feast, a harvest, a reward for the successful test of the human spirit and mind. This is why Ogun comes to his altar in this warm, conciliatory mood. He does not scrape "earth dung from his feet" in recognition of man's oneness with the earth. Eternals, ancestors, and the dead who inform our daily existence are in the earth. We, the living, are cyclically related to the earth. We occupy this world, a little space, but our final journey through which we gain more knowledge about life, is to the earth, from which we 'paradoxically' again come back to teach our relations who are still alive. In other words, there is a continuous, circular relation, between the living and the dead. Ogun is aware of this truth and the knowledge that is gained from this relationship. Such knowledge gives him more than enough power so he can pass some of it to his poet- initiate. In addition, the participation of

the eternal or the living-dead signified by the ever presence of the "earth dung" in the drama of poetic creation indisputably gives validity to poetic authority received by the initiate.

"Night" is the appropriate time for the drama of poetic creation. It is a time cherished by artistic creators: the eternal, Ogun, and Soyinka, for a number of reasons. First, it is the time when cyclic relationship between the living and the dead takes place, often in the form of dreams. It is thus a time when knowledge about the reality of life; that it consists of contradictions, destruction and re-creation, is communicated to the living who are prepared to receive such knowledge.

Secondly, "night" as the opposite of "day" again communicates Soyinka's view that life should be seen as infinite, cyclic, continuous. The darkness of night is obviated by the light of day. And light does not necessarily have to be received in the morning, hours after midnight. Those who participate in the act of poetic creation can receive such 'light' anytime, even at night. The granting of authority at night is an example of this truth. "Dawn", Soyinka teaches us, can break at any time.

Thirdly, night is appropriate because it is the time "when sounds are clear." These are the teachings of Ogun, the sounds of nature, and the communication of eternal and the living-dead. The spirit of he who is to be consecrated is to be tested by exposure to these sounds. They are a means by which he is taught the tools of his poetic craftsmanship after which authority or the licence to practice creation is granted. He gains his lessons by, indeed, "listening", "watching", "patience", "expecting" "poring", and "spreading his mind far and wide" as Byron, Wordsworth, and other major Romantics teach us.

Finally, night is suitable because it is a time when "silences ring pure tones". To get a sense of the quality of these tones, they are likened to "the pause/Of iron bells". The simile is effective in the sense that it enables us to apprehend the nature of creation. "Silences" are both moments of rest between various creation acts and the singleness of purpose, the mental concentration, that is required by a creator. But "silences" also indicate destruction. In the forging of an artefact, the artist destroys, shapes, kneads so as to create newness, life. This is consistent with what Ogun and nature do in the poem *Idanre* from Soyinka's volume of poetry, *Idanre and Other Poems*. By means of these "silences" the poet-initiate is made to realize and grasp the importance of content and form in a work of art.

Apart from implicit reference to night as a time for poetic creation in *The Revolt of Islam*,<sup>36</sup> there are almost no such accounts in the works of the major Romantics. In this aspect also, in specifying 'night' as the time for creation and attainment of authority, Soyinka revises his precursors by correcting and refining their precepts.

Okot p'Bitek extends the Romantics' view of the process of poetic creation significantly. According to the Romantics, once an artist has experienced superior science and gained authority, all he has to do is to wait for inspiration or the dictation exercise, so, as secretary, he can write in a book what his deity commands. But in p'Bitek's view, once authority is granted, creation is then done slowly, gradually, never in short or long moments of intensity.

Lawino teaches us that after bringing the clay from the mouth of Oyitino river, her mother

. . .leaves it to season overnight  
The next day  
She beats it with the wooden hammer  
And then she moulds  
The pots and dishes<sup>37</sup>

Leaving the clay "to season overnight" is good because this process enables it to take on definite shapes, qualities, and levels. The process also enables the clay to complete the circle of life since it experiences both day and night. In the exercise, the clay in its disintegrative process, images the nature, content, and form of art, well before it is treated to another process, that of being beaten "with the wooden hammer". By the time it is used to mould, not create, works of art, "pots and dishes", it will have experienced the constructive-destructive principle of life and the participating artist will also have had creative authority by watching the clay change through various stages. The artist's experience is corrective and constructive. This is why works of art from such material and process remain infinitely permanent, beautiful, and transcendental. The fact that the works of Lawino's mother never "crack when fired!" is proof of this creative practice.

At another moment, Lawino deeply questions the religious concept of creation:

And when the Hunchback  
Was digging the clay  
*Where did he stand?*  
And when he brought home  
The clay for moulding things  
*Where did he put the clay*  
*To season overnight?*  
*And when he was beating it*  
With the wooden hammer  
On which rock  
*Did the Hunchback put the clay? [emphases mine]*<sup>38</sup>

Lawino borrows Blake's rhythm<sup>39</sup> but uses it to present the nature and processes of creative practice in Acoli traditional context. Blake's rhythm in "The Tyger" is thus a vehicle by means of which Lawino propagates her ideas about artistic creation. In the Acoli sense, when the raw material for creation is seen, the artist has to "stand" in a *special place* so as to dig it, put the clay to season overnight in a *special place*, and beat it on a *special rock*. Lawino's tone suggests that these special places and rock are the altars of a deity or spirit responsible for creation. Acting in the manner suggested by Lawino implies that the deity or spirit is also enabled to participate in the drama of destruction and creation. In this sense the artist will be in a better position to understand the meaning of life and his artefacts will stand the test of time.

It is also clear from Lawino's rendition that the things used for digging material for art must, in a significant way, be related to nature from whom creative authority is also received. She asks:

How did the Hunchback

Dig the clay for moulding things . . . ?  
 [Did he have]  
 The *wooden digging stick*  
 For digging the clay  
 The *wooden hammer*  
 For beating the clay?  
 [Emphases mine]<sup>40</sup>

Lawino teaches her poet- initiate and audience by means of these questions. We learn that the “stick” and “hammer” used to create life should be made of wood. At one level the “wooden stick” and “wooden hammer” are also experienced in the cyclic or infinite nature of life. They destroy so as to create as Ogun and nature do. At another level, the authenticity of artefacts produced by these tools cannot be doubted.

Through Lawino, his creative essence, Okot p’Bitek revises his precursors interestingly. He does not question the beauty and permanence of Romantic artefacts and the process through which authority to create them is granted. He, however, attempts to correct them by indicating that lasting works of art are produced in the manner he indicates. Of especial significance is his need for the artist and poet- initiate, even his audience, to be involved in the processes of both attaining consecration and creating poetry. It is such works of art, which, in his view, will matter in the final analysis and “. . . it is [after all] only the participants in a culture who can pass judgement on it. It is only they who can evaluate how effective the [work of art] is . . .”<sup>41</sup>

### **Equivalence as a means to attaining poetic authority**

There is evidence that gaining poetic authority is not just a matter of chance. It is, in other words, not even being “singled out . . . / For holy services”<sup>42</sup> as Wordsworth would have us believe it. Wordsworth knows that the truth is not as simplistic as he puts it. Anyone who has read him knows that he arrives at this position after a long journey - after having experienced the traumas of receiving authority.

There is need for an equivalence, a presence, a commonness already in the mind of the recipient of poetic authority. Soyinka knows this condition in *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems*, his fourth volume of poetry as he does in *Idanre abd Other Poems*, his first volume of poetry:

I heard it echo  
 In the mind’s secretive dialogue with itself.  
 Better a wait in tense silences,  
 Glimpsing a promise of the future Word,  
 The poem unsung, the verse that kneads  
 Abandoned clay, and brings to pulse  
 The dreamt feast of all humanity.<sup>43</sup>

The word “it” in the first line, or what Soyinka hears, refers to the equivalence or presence that ought to be in the mind of he who strives to attain creative authority. It may be creative vision, mental rapture, or a need for means with which to express the true nature of life in the world of man. Such a presence or equivalence remains obstinately restless until its existence is acknowledged by the host mind. This

presence is, at times, possibility of appointment by god, having felt the potential of some mind to engage in creative pursuits. So, if in this case, the poet-initiate receives authority, it is only really complementary to his potential. When this happens, two presences then people the creative mind of such an artist. This is an established Romantic precept and Soyinka is aware of it. In a creative mood, Wordsworth for example, acknowledges that what gives him more creative power, what propels him forward is “the mind’s/Internal echo of the imperfect sound.”<sup>44</sup> At an earlier moment he feels “within/A corresponding mild creative breeze/A vital breeze. . . .” The fact that this is a common experience amongst creative artists is corroborated by Byron when in the same mood, he declares: “Of its own beauty is the mind diseased.”<sup>45</sup> These statements affirm the presence of a correspondence, a creative potential in their minds as Soyinka communicates in the first two lines of the above passage. In the case of Wordsworth, “the imperfect sound” becomes that of the “creative breeze” while in Byron it is a reflection of the limitations of his own mind.

These moments indicate that poetic authority is granted to only those who are willing to engage in an existence of determined duplicity or doubleness, that is, being aware of oneself and a corresponding presence in one’s own mind. It is easily signified by “the mind’s secretive dialogue with itself” in Soyinka’s experience here.

But Soyinka adds something more to this neat Romantic path. This path is, in his case, not just a matter of art. He also uses it to image some aspect of social reality. And this is important. In the first line above, the word “it” also refers to a work of art, a poem by Odia Ofeimun, in which the poet attacks Nigerian poets who do not live and practice what they write.<sup>46</sup> The view that such poets lie haunts Soyinka and becomes a correspondence in his mind that, in the final analysis, generates the poem “My tongue does not marry slogans” in his volume *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems* which, we see, is dedicated to Odia Ofeimun.

As seen earlier, the process of gaining creative authority also means engagement in “tense silences”. That this becomes repetitive in a number of Soyinka’s poems is an indication of the importance of this stage in the creative process. In this poem, however, Soyinka becomes more explicit than before. He asserts that the result of exposure to anguish in “silences” is the possibility of hearing “the future Word”. In this respect he not only revises his precursors by bringing their experiences into a near one-to-one correspondence with his own, but also traces and revises the biblical sources of creative authority. We know that Blake convinces his audience that his voice is that of a new apocalypse because he has heard the “Holy Word”,<sup>47</sup> the word of his Eternals and gods so he writes with authority, and it is fitting for them to “Mark well [his] words! [since] they are of [their] eternal salvation.”<sup>48</sup> We also know that both St John the Divine in Revelation 1:10-11 and Jeremiah in Jeremiah 36 :1-4 hear the “Holy Word” from God and conduct their business with authority.

Soyinka follows the established creative path to a certain extent but swerves to give it an African variant. The biblical and Romantic worlds use the “holy Word” to create life and grant authority, but Soyinka goes a stage further and fuses the “future word” with the “abandoned clay”, and, in the fusion is able to create the “unsung” poem. In his veins therefore, we see the use of Western and African

traditional sources to both grant authority and re-create life, a practice p'Bitek, seen earlier, also cherishes.

Soyinka's passage above espouses one truth that we have seen repeated in all creative accounts above, namely, the need for the audience, "all humanity", to share or participate in the acts of creation because this is how they will be able to understand their works of art and society well. In Soyinka's own analysis, ". . .the matrix of creativity. . . embraces at all times – both in individual and communal affectiveness – the regenerative potential of society."<sup>49</sup> This position is an effective reinforcement of the readings undertaken in this paper of his views on the attainment of poetic authority and the use to which it can be put in artistic creation. This, interestingly, is to a large extent, the position to which p'Bitek also subscribes.

Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek demonstrate that they are informed by these Romantic truths, but do not follow them closely, step by step. They follow their precursors up to certain points and then swerve to give superior science its African bent. In Soyinka's practice, for example, superior science is given its African variety: it is called "the mystic creativity of science".<sup>50</sup>

Both of them believe that this is what will lead to the creation of valid and realistic artifacts or poetry.

## Conclusion

This paper indicates that Wole Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek continue the Romantic tradition in their poetry due to the post-independence economic and socio-political realities and the colonial English education that they had in their time. In poetry, the colonial English syllabuses at school, college, and university levels emphasized the study of English Romantic poetry. As a result, when Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek tried their hands at poetry, they produced works which in terms of form and content read like poetry written in England between 1750 and 1850. But they do not just imitate their Romantic precursors. As seen in their pursuit of the Romantic creative tradition of the importance of attaining poetic authority before a poet can legislate for his society, they discover and renew themselves. Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek emulate their precursors to a point and swerve to criticise and revise them. In this process, they redefine Romantic poetry and give it newness and a home in Africa. They also gain their originality and distinction. In pursuing Romantic practice which emphasises the need for a poet to attain poetic authority, they establish themselves as distinct poets. It is in their use of Romantic sources in this way that they extend the boundaries of literature and experience. For Soyinka and Okot p'Bitek, exposure to English Literature was thus not bad after all.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Macpherson. "Literature of the People By the People and for the People". Inaugural Lecture delivered at Makerere University. 9 January 1980. 3.

Margaret Macpherson taught at Makerere College School, a secondary school in 1945 and moved to Makerere University College, Dept of English in 1946. She left the Dept of Literature as Prof and Head in 1981.

<sup>2</sup> David Rubadiri. "The Development of Writing in East Africa" *Perspectives on African Literature*. London: Heinemann, 1971. (ed. Christopher Heywood).149.

<sup>3</sup> Wole Soyinka. *Idanre. Idanre and other Poems*. 65.

- <sup>4</sup> Baffour Ankomah. "The man behind Soyinka's Nobel Prize?" *New African* (December 1986): 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Okot p'Bitek. "Artist, the Ruler". *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*. 39.
- <sup>6</sup> John Wakeman. ed. *World Authors 1950–1970*. 1356–57.
- <sup>7</sup> Wole Soyinka. *The Man Died: Prison Notes*. 13 ff.
- <sup>8</sup> Wole Soyinka. Interviewed by Jane Wilkinson. *Talking with African Writers*. 103.
- <sup>9</sup> Okot p'Bitek. "Artist, the Ruler". 40. In Acoli, Okot p'Bitek's language, "ber piny" means 'goodness' or 'beauty'. "Ber piny" is thus a situation in which life is normal, good, and liveable.
- <sup>10</sup> Okot p'Bitek. "Jesus, Respect, and Makerere." To Makerere University Authorities. Quoted by Cliff Lubwa p'Chong in *Artist, the Ruler*. 10
- <sup>11</sup> Wole Soyinka. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. 150.
- <sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 36: 1–2, 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Revelation 1:11.
- <sup>14</sup> Paul A. Cantor. *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism*. ix.
- <sup>15</sup> "Jerusalem: To the Deists". *English Romantic Writers*. ed. D. Perkins. 158.
- <sup>16</sup> Blake to Thomas Butts. Felpham, 6 July 1803. *English Romantic Writers*. ed. D. Perkins. 166.
- <sup>17</sup> "Preludium to the First Book of Urizen". David Perkins. *Ibid.* 83.
- <sup>18</sup> Byron. *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem*. David Perkins. *Ibid.* 828.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Prelude (1805)* – Book Third: Residence at Cambridge ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. 96. Wordsworth also reaches the same conclusion in Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads (1800)*. D. Perkins. *Ibid.* 326.
- <sup>20</sup> Wordsworth *The Prelude (1805)* – Book First: Introduction Childhood and School-time. ed. J. Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and S. Gill. 28.
- <sup>21</sup> Blake. "Jerusalem: To the Deists". D. Perkins. *Ibid.* 158.
- <sup>22</sup> "To the Madmen over the Wall". *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. 18
- <sup>23</sup> *Myth, Literature and the African World*. 157.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years. xiv–xv: There was "the occasion when a snake decided to take shelter from the rain in the prep room, selecting the space beneath [his] feet – perhaps because they didn't touch the ground. (There was yet another that [they] found coiled under [his] pillow when [he] transferred to the new (Field) House). [This appearance of snakes continues] 'all way from Ake' . . . his first autobiography. In Ibadan: *The Penkelemes Years*, they are attached to Maren, a fictionalised person, who Soyinka says is himself.
- <sup>25</sup> E.D. Jones. *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*. Revised Edition. 149.
- <sup>26</sup> Wordsworth. *The Prelude (1805)*: Book First: Introduction. Childhood and School-time. ed. J. Wordsworth. M. H. Abrams, to Soyinka himself, Ogun is ". . . a recognition of a valid aspect, a and S. Gill. 46.
- <sup>27</sup> *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*. 39.
- <sup>28</sup> Bernth Lindors. ed. *Mazungumzo: Interviews with East African Writers, Editors and Scholars*. 135.
- <sup>29</sup> See note on page 150 of *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*: "The name of the Christian God in Lwo [Acoli] is Rubanga. This is also the name of the ghost that causes tuberculosis of the spine, hence Hunchback".
- <sup>30</sup> *Song of Lawino*. Chapter 9: 134–35.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 133.
- <sup>32</sup> *Wer pa Lawino*. 101.



- <sup>33</sup> *Song of Lawino*. Chapter 13:192.
- <sup>34</sup> *Song of Lawino*. Chapter 13: 195.
- <sup>35</sup> Wole Soyinka . *Idanre. Idanre and other poems*. 62.
- <sup>36</sup> P. B. Shelley. "Dedication" and Canto I. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. ed. Thomas Hutchinson.
- <sup>37</sup> *Song of Lawino*. Chapter 9: 134.
- <sup>38</sup> *Song of Lawino* Chapter 9 :134. Repeated, in some sense, on pages 138–40.
- <sup>39</sup> Used by Blake in his 'Song of Experience', "The Tyger".
- <sup>40</sup> *Song of Lawino*. Chapter 9: 139.
- <sup>41</sup> Okot p'Bitek. "African Aesthetics: The Acoli Example". *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*. 37.
- <sup>42</sup> Wordsworth. *The Prelude (1805)*: Book First – Introduction Childhood and School-time. Ed. J. Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and S. Gill. 32.
- <sup>43</sup> My Tongue Does not Marry Slogans. *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*. 50.
- <sup>44</sup> Wordsworth. *The Prelude (1805)*: Book First. Ibid. 32.
- <sup>45</sup> Byron. *Childe Harold Conto IV*. 82.
- <sup>46</sup> Odia Ofeimun. *The Poet Lied. The Poet Lied and Other Poems*. 40–44. Ofeimun remains assertive: ". . . it will be correct to say that [J.P. Clark's] practice of poetry is one of those satirized in the Poet Lied. . . I. wanted to say in that poem that the lives a writer lies must be consistent with the precepts of his art. At the same time, I wanted to say that a writer who does reprehensible things outside his art will find it difficult to write well and truthfully . . . . Poetry can be deployed to make things happen and it can be used to make statesmen and common men wiser." Ibid. 168–69.
- <sup>47</sup> "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*. *English Romantics Writers*. E.d. D. Perkins. 57.
- <sup>48</sup> Milton: Book First. Ibid. 116 ff.
- <sup>49</sup> Wole Soyinka. "Drama and the Idioms of Liberation: Proletarian Illusions." *Art, Dialogue & Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. 60.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid. *Myth, Literature and the African World* .157.

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