



WOLE SOYINKA

NOBEL LAUREATE FOR LITERATURE

THE BURDEN
OF MEMORY,
THE MUSE OF
FORGIVENESS



The Burden
of Memory,
the Muse
of Forgiveness

Wole Soyinka

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The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness

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Foreword

The lectures in this collection were delivered as the inaugural for the Dubois Institute Macmillan lecture series at Harvard University in April 1997. A mere one year later, the list of personalities summoned to “testify” at this rhetorical Tribunal on Truth and Restitution begins to read like a memorial roll call—Mobutu Sese Seko, Pol Pot, Sanni Abacha, and so on, but most dramatic, and the one truly tragic death of all, Chief Moshood Kasimawo Abiola, the 1993 president-elect of the Nigerian nation.

I have decided to leave the lectures as delivered—that is, to keep such references in the “active sense” in which they were made. Apart

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from underlining the vivid currency of the events evoked in these talks as patterns of inhuman conduct that continue to scar and traumatize individuals and nations in an ever-escalating magnitude of horrors, it serves (dare one hope?) as an unintentional reminder to surviving emulators of the chastening reckoning with mortality that awaits both the sinned and the sinned against.

The scales of reckoning with mortality are never evenly weighted, alas, and thus it is on the shoulders of the living that the burden of justice must continue to rest. Sacrifices to the cause of equity, like Moshood Abiola, or the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight companions, remind us of the continuum of baffling exactions that are wrung from the parties of the wronged, an unfinished business that raises a clamor of responsibility for redress against the peace of survivors.

The world may be forgiven for exuding a sense of euphoria when prison gates, which once appeared to enclose the entirety of a nation, give the appearance of being suddenly flung open, but the task remains for us to ensure that they are never again slammed shut! Let us hope therefore that peoples and nations that are yet weighed

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down by the memories of a recent past understand this. Perhaps the debate that is intended in the following pages may lead to the evolution of mechanisms for the accompanying mission of healing, of reconciling, but also of restitution.

Acknowledgments

When the author is a long-standing friend and colleague, revisiting a book on any shared interest or subject is just like taking up an old argument across a coffee table. It is therefore a double pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to Lilyan Kesteloot, whose seminal work *African Writers in the French Language* proved most useful in the preparation of these lectures and provided references I had long forgotten. Nearly all the discussants I know on the subject of *Negritude*—including its formulators—have undergone some form of conversion (from vestigial to total) from formerly held positions—laudatory or critical. Lilyan Kesteloot is no exception, and I know that she has

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

herself revised some of the analysis laid out in that, her first book on the subject. The views expressed in this collection are therefore mine entirely, as well as the uses to which I have put her comments. Even where there are convergences, it is necessary to state that Ms. Kesteloot cannot thereby be held accountable for their present affirmation.

W.S.

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The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness

Introduction

In the 1992 presidential elections, it would appear that the United States stood a reasonable chance of acquiring a new president in the person of a certain Mr. David Duke. Who knows, it may yet happen. No, perhaps we should consider it unlikely; but the state of Louisiana may eventually settle on him as its governor or reward his industry with a senatorial seat—Mr. Duke appears quite determined to move into the power structure at some level or another. For the moment, however, he may be said to have declined into a state of well-earned obscurity in the United States. Not elsewhere though; not in Germany where, a few years ago, it was reported that he

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had made his presence felt in familiar ideological territory. Even more recently, Mr. Duke appears to have sought a new lease on life in South Africa.

What is remarkable about Mr. Duke and his bid to represent the Republican party as a presidential candidate? Simply that many Americans were startled to learn that he was a prominent and still active member of the Ku Klux Klan. He lost at the primaries of course, but his loss in the governorship race was a narrow one, and that fact remains a frightening reminder of the yet uncompleted business of racism, not only in the United States, but in much of Europe and the recently desegregated society of apartheid South Africa. After Mr. Duke's political setbacks in his own country, he cavorted briefly with the neo-Nazis and skinheads in Germany but found that the Germans, eager to renounce and distance themselves from any glorification of their shameful past, wisely kept him—in the main—at arm's length.

His invasion of South Africa has been very different. It is Mr. Duke's confident plunge—and we cite him only as an illustrative case—into that yet simmering cauldron of racism that presents us here with some uncomfortable ramifications of

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South Africa's ongoing strategies for the reconciliation of that society and, by extension, the reconciliation of races.

Was the mission of Mr. Duke in South Africa by any chance to promote the cause of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission? No. Very much the contrary. Duke was visiting that country to express solidarity with a self-declared independent Free Boer Republic—inspired perhaps by the American Freemen enclave?—which had resolved that apartheid may be officially outlawed in the new South Africa but its extreme right-wing members, densely located in a town royally named Balmoral, had different ideas of what the relationship between races should be. A trace has revealed that some of these defenders of the white American way of life, the so-called Freemen movement, are none other than offshoots of the Ku Klux Klan who have merely exchanged the ludicrous (but once lethal!) duncehead garb of the KKK for the macho camouflage from military surplus stores.

We do not know yet for certain, but it is not taking undue liberty with probability to suggest that Mr. Duke would hardly depart from South Africa without establishing a few branches of the

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Ku Klux Klan. Even if he does not, his presence at this time will undoubtedly inspire the creation of chapters modeled, with a few Boer-culture variations, on the midnight riders of the Deep South *ancien regime*. In any case, boosting his mission, and such mimic tendencies, was an independent donation of several million dollars, the gift of an obscure but compassionate Southern lady to the white enclave to enable it to sustain its existence of defiance of black majority rule and the defense of a white supremacist culture now menaced, in the imagination of its proponents, by the barbaric hordes of a liberated race.

Now, the country of which Mr. Duke is a citizen—and *président manqué*—has a discriminatory list of human types to which it would not grant entry through its borders—such a list once included communists (also apartheid South Africa's bogey). Today, the list includes drug traffickers, hard-core criminals, and terrorists. Would one exaggerate by claiming that the Klu Klux Klan can be classified as a terrorist organization? Mr. Duke preaches a less virulent form of Klanism, we are informed, but the difference is one of those subtle shades that must be considered lost on actual victims of racism anywhere.