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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Contents

Ayi Kwei Armah
1939-

Ghanian novelist, short story writer, essayist, poet, and scriptwriter.

The following entry presents an overview of Armah's career through 1998. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 5 and 33.

INTRODUCTION

Ayi Kwei Armah is considered one of Africa's leading prose stylists writing in English. His works typically explore postcolonial Africa and focus on human alienation. Though Armah's vision is one of a unified Africa, he writes vehemently of the psychological effects of colonialism on the people of contemporary Ghana and Africa. His works have met with mixed critical reaction but many reviewers laud his stylistic innovations.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Armah was born in 1939 in Takoradi, Ghana. His father is descended from the royal family of the Ga tribe and his mother was a member of the Fante tribe. Armah graduated from Prince of Wales College and received a scholarship to attend Harvard University from 1959 to 1963. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in social studies, graduating cum laude from Harvard in 1963. Armah then worked briefly as a translator in Algeria. When he returned to Ghana in 1964, he became a scriptwriter for Ghana Television where he worked for three years under the supervision of George Awoonor Williams (later known as Kofi Awoonor). In 1966 a coup d'état toppled the government of Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanian leader who held power since 1957 when Ghana gained its independence from Britain. After the coup, Armah worked as a teacher at the Navrongo Secondary School in northern Ghana. In 1967 he moved to France where he worked on the staff of *Jeune Afrique.* The 1966 coup significantly influenced Armah's views about corruption in politics and he harshly criticized Nkrumah's administration in his 1968 novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born.* Armah returned to the United States in 1968 and received a graduate degree in fine arts from Columbia University in 1969. Armah subsequently taught at universities in both the United States and Africa while continuing to write.

MAJOR WORKS

Armah's first three novels are often grouped together in critical commentary. They each are heavily symbolic representations of life in contemporary Africa. The first, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* tells the story of a simple railway clerk during the regime of Kwame Nkrumah. The protagonist, known only as The Man, acts as a representation of the common man Nkrumah has promised to represent. The novel dramatizes the conflict between hope for change and the betrayal of that hope by the nation's leaders and serves as a stinging indictment of the Nkrumah regime. *Fragments* (1970) recounts the story of Baako, who returns to Ghana after studying in New York for five years. His family expects him to flaunt his Western education to gain prestige and wealth for the family. Baako, however, rejects what he sees as the corrupt values of the new Africa and only wishes to live a quiet life. In the end, Baako becomes so alienated he undergoes a breakdown and ends up in an asylum. *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) tells the story of Modin Dofu, an African student studying in the United States who decides to return to Africa after becoming disillusioned with his experience with Western education. He brings his white lover Aimée Reitch, who acts as a representation of the white race in the novel. The return to Africa proves disastrous when the conflict between his rejection of Western values and his involvement with Aimée eventually destroys him. The novel is complex in structure, abandoning the linear progression of Armah's previous works. The emphasis of Armah's later novels is to clearly focus on the idea of returning to traditional African culture as a model for the future. *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) covers one thousand years of African history and approaches epic proportions in its compressed meanings, descriptions of battles, and use of folk mythology. Armah condemns the Arab "predators" and European "destroyers" and calls for the reclamation of Africa's traditional values. *The Healers* (1978) is a fictionalized account of the fall of the Ashanti empire to the British. The novel dramatizes the struggle for African unity. The colonial invaders attempt to manipulate Africa's divisiveness while the healers in the novel attempt to strengthen Africa through inspiration and unity.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Armah's first three novels are generally praised for their artistry. S. Nyamfukudza calls them "intricate in form and distinguished by a highly wrought prose style using violent imagery." While lauding Armah for his artistry and innovation, however, critics often label him a pessimist who offers little hope for the future. Greater critical understanding and acceptance of his agenda were realized with the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers,* although his detractors continued to fault his fictional portrayals of a new sociopolitical order in Africa as vague

and unrealistic. Some reviewers complain of Armah's change in tone in later works, and accuse him of being too idealistic to inspire real change. A few reviewers also note a lack of detail in his vision for Africa's future. Adewale Maja-Pearce said "Armah is a visionary writer in the strict sense. This much at least must be conceded, even if the details of what is effectively promoted as a blueprint for a social and political arrangement are far too vague and simplistic to be convincing at any but the most hopeful level." Some critics contend that Armah presents racist, simplistic views in his works when he portrays all that is black as good, and all that is white as evil and corrupt. Despite these criticisms, Armah is widely appreciated for the strength of his convictions and his desire to promote the betterment of the African continent.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

"La mort passe sous les blancs" (essay) 1960
"Contact" (short story) 1965
"Asemka" (short story) 1966
"African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?" (essay) 1967
"Pour les ibo, le régime de la haine silencieuse" (essay) 1967
"An African Fable" (short story) 1968
The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born (novel) 1968
"Yaw Manu's Charm" (short story) 1968
"Fanon: The Awakener" (essay) 1969
"A Mystification: African Independence Revalued" (essay) 1969
"The Offal Kind" (short story) 1969
"Aftermath" (poem) 1970
Fragments (novel) 1970
Why Are We So Blest? (novel) 1972
Two Thousand Seasons (novel) 1973
"Sundiata, An Epic of Old Mali" (essay) 1974
"Chaka" (essay) 1975
"Larsony, or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction" (essay) 1976
The Healers (novel) 1978
"Halfway to Nirvana" (short story) 1984
"Islam and 'Ceddo'" (essay) 1984
"Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-à-vis African Revolutionary Theory and Praxis" (essay) 1984
"The Caliban Complex" (essay) 1985
"Flood and Famine, Drought and Glut" (essay) 1985
"The Lazy School of Literary Criticism" (essay) 1985
"One Large Problem" (essay) 1985
"One Writer's Education" (essay) 1985
"The Oxygen of Translation" (essay) 1985
"The Teaching of Creative Writing" (essay) 1985
"Africa and the Francophone Dream" (essay) 1986
"Dakar Hieroglyphs" (essay) 1986
"Third World Hoax" (essay) 1986
"Writers as Professionals" (essay) 1986
"Seed Time" (poem) 1988
"Doctor Kamikaze" (short story) 1989
"Speed" (poem) 1989

CRITICISM

S. Nyamfukudza (review date 7 March 1980)

SOURCE: "Drought & Rain" in *New Statesman,* Vol. 99, No. 2555, March 7, 1980, pp. 362-63.

[*In the following review, Nyamfukudza discusses Armah's* Two Thousand Seasons *and* The Healers.]

The first three novels by Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, intricate in form and distinguished by a highly wrought prose style using violent imagery, were all vividly emphatic artifacts. With outspoken courage and unrelenting commitment, he grappled seriously with the waste, corruption and inefficiency resulting from the cultural confusion which is the post-colonial inheritance of Black Africa. Bereft of any sense of community or direction, the educated élites and the masses are shown as actively engaged in their own betrayal, collaborating in the neo-colonial plunder and impoverishment of their national heritages. His protagonists, anguished and fragile beings, are consumed in ineffectual quests for personal (and by implication) national salvation. The presentation of this predicament has been fitfully enlivened by his own brand of somewhat dark humour.

Two Thousand Seasons presents a considerable departure from what he has done before. Indeed, one of the questions likely to preoccupy the reader is whether it is a novel at all. The collective racial memory of the black people is given voice through their pilgrimage of self-assertion in received versions of the long years of collision, destruction and enslavement by the white man, 'the destroyers', both Arab and Caucasian, who have colonised and plundered Africa. The distinction between We, Us, the Black people—the plural narrative voice of the novel—and Them, the white destroyers, is absolute and uncompromising. The quest is largely a spiritual one, to recapture as well as create a saving vision of a time when black people were one and their relationship was one of 'reciprocity' between individuals, variously termed 'the way', 'our way'.

The story itself is of a group migrating south to the coast, presumably the West African coast, from Arab invaders, only to collide with white slave-dealers raiding inland. A period of capture and enslavement follows, but the prisoners escape from the ship due to take them across the Atlantic and from then on wage a guerrilla struggle against the white men and a collaborating local chief. Strong meat

indeed, but what the reader is likely to find even less comfortable is the abandonment of naturalistic delineation of individual character, setting and time itself, as the story ranges back and forth, speaking insistently to the present. The message is relentlessly at the fore-front and we are much closer to the traditional tribal story teller, whose purpose is to educate and preserve the group's identity, history and traditions, than to any familiar novelistic form.

> Before Anoa's utterance then, our migrations were but an echo to the alternation of drought and rain. Who is calling for examples?

or

> Who asks to hear mention of the predators' names? Who would hear again the names of the predators' chieftains? With which stinking name shall we begin?

The sombre, sometimes outraged biblical cadence of the prose bears the epic on. The theory and attempt are bold and admirable, but the resulting simplification and polarisation are an impoverishment of Armah's art. The message too is none too clear in its implications for the much more complex present.

The Healers, Armah's latest novel, is by contrast, a straightforward historical narrative and deals with the fall of the Ashanti empire under the onslaught of the British. Why was the empire such a pushover for the colonists? Disunity, greed for power and internal contradictions inherent in a slave-holding and war-like society undermined its capacity and spirit for resistance.

The prose is pared down into a beautifully taut and evocative instrument, with the novel at its best in the first half where it revolves round one of the main characters, Densu, disenchanted and ill-at-ease with the manipulative local politics. Ababio, the Machiavel of the novel, comes over as a truly sinister and frightening figure, plotting away against the royal household and ready to ally himself to the invading white men in his quest for power. Densu resists his enticements, choosing instead to dedicate himself to the calling of the healers under the tutelage of one of the sages. They receive such scant recognition that at this stage they have removed to their own healer's village deep in the forest. It is a lonely and ascetic way of life, study and self-communing, knowing oneself and trusting to inspiration rather than leaping into the thick of short-term political battles. Towards the end, when the battles take place, the novel tends to read like a Cowboys-and-Indians tale. It ends on an optimistic note, however, with the villain Ababio exposed and tried, ironically, by his former white allies. Although under the shadow of defeat and alien domination, West Indian slaves and Black Africans dance on the beach in symbolic reconciliation. It seemed hardly possible that Armah's commitment could be pushed further, but so it has, towards a more general and specifically African reading public.

Kofi Owusu (essay date Spring 1988)

SOURCE: "Armah's F-R-A-G-M-E-N-T-S: Madness as Artistic Paradigm," in *Callaloo,* Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring, 1988, pp. 361-70.

[*In the following essay, Owusu analyzes the relationship between madness and artistic creativity as evident in Armah's* Fragments.]

> . . . I essentially am not in madness,
> But mad in craft. . . .
>
> —Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

> The nature of literary genius has always attracted speculation, and it was, as early as the Greeks, conceived of as related to 'madness'. . . . Another early and persistent conception is that of the poet's 'gift' as compensatory: the Muse took away the sight of Demodocos's eyes but 'gave him the lovely gift of song' . . ., as the blinded Tiresias is given prophetic vision.
>
> —Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*

The epigraphs from Shakespeare and Wellek and Warren are intended to provide this essay with both an introduction and a point of departure. Hamlet's "The time is out of joint. O curséd spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" sums up the essential features of Baako's predicament in ***Fragments.*** Both Hamlet and Baako are sensitive protagonists who are shocked by physical and moral corruption in the nuclear and "extended" families. Either would rather "fardels bear" than "his quietus make / With a bare bodkin." In their attempt to stem the overwhelming tide of corruption, they represent "deviations" from the norm; and in trying to establish a new or different order to replace the old, they emblematize "unreason." Society, in its turn, exacts a high price—that of exclusion—from "dangerous" elements like Baako and Hamlet. The former acts out the implications of his name: "Baako" translates into "one," "single," or "solitary." Baako's loneliness and aloneness correspond to Hamlet's.

Baako shares close emotional affinities with the old woman, Naana. And the latter shares with Tiresias both apparently disabling physical blindness and the compensatory "gift" of prophetic vision. Naana links her "blindness" to "madness": "Sometimes I know my blindness was sent to me to save me from the madness that would surely have come with seeing so much that was not to be understood."[1] Her blindness is some sort of heaven-sent shield to protect her from "the madness" which her grandson who, like her, feels intensely but unlike her also "[sees] so much," cannot escape from. One of the salient aspects of the novel, which is remarkable precisely because it is intimated rather than crudely emphasized, is that Naana's *insight* parallels as well as complements Baako's *perception.* The former's insightful reminiscences and philosophizing provide a "frame" for the novel (which begins and ends with "Naana"), while the latter's perception—both his ability to apprehend through sight (unlike

Naana) and his propensity for intuitive recognition (like Naana)—replicates the artist's and, thus, provides a gloss on the "frame" and on the intervening narrative. In the fictional world of ***Fragments,*** "madness" complements "blindness" and both have positive connotations.

Baako's madness has a long list of ancestors and descendants in African literature. Against the eerie background of the talking drums' insistent message, "*Udomo traitor Udomo die,*" Michael Udomo in Peter Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udomo,* goes through the telescoped motions of insanity (". . . he did not know which was heartbeat, which drumbeat") just before his death. The loss of control over his bodily and mental functions reflects Udomo's inability either to control or give direction to the realization of his "dream" he has, thus, outlived his usefulness, and die he must. Variations on Udomo's "insanity" are worked out in the "crack in Ezeulu's mind" (in Achebe's *Arrow of God*), Sekoni's "madness" (in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*), Aduke's "insanity" (in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Toads for Supper*), the antics of Yacobo, the "'mad' Sergeant" (in Robert Serumaga's *Return to the Shadows*), and so on. The impression one gets, then, is that the fictional "African," faced with the nightmare of finding himself, in the words of Kofi Awoonor, "caught in between the anvil and the hammer", decides that he would rather "fardels bear" and goes mad, and/or makes his "quietus" like Amamu in Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother.* . . . What needs to be emphasized, at this juncture, is that the cultural code invoked by these novels is usually one which suggests that

> Those who are dead have never gone away. . . .
> They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.
> The dead are never dead.
>
> (Birago Diop, "Breath")

Peter Abraham's epigraph for *A Wreath for Udomo* provides an ironic gloss on the implications of this code:

> Did we think victory great?
> So it is—But now it seems to me, when it
> cannot be helped, that defeat is great,
> And that death and dismay are great.
>
> (Walt Whitman)

Generally, however, death in African literature appears to be like Ngugi's ". . . grain of wheat" which "is not quickened, except it die[s]." But we need to invoke more than cultural codes to interpret madness, and Armah's ***Fragments*** is as good a starting point as any for an explication of this phenomenon in African literature.

In ***Fragments,*** the phenomenon of madness is multifaceted. Baako is almost always ill at ease, and we get the impression that his "madness" is a reflection of dis-ease; but there is more to it than meets the eye:

> He wanted sleep for a body bruised all over from the fever within, though he was tired of lying helpless so many hours, . . . too ill and too weak to get up. . . . [T]he sheet under him felt wet and clammy from his sweat.
>
> (221)

This excerpt suggests a substantialist definition of madness as a "disease," and this definition co-exists, in the novel, with a functional definition of madness as "'anti-social conduct'":[2]

> This was a rich crowd of guests. . . . Woolen suits, flashing shoes, . . . an authentic cold-climate overcoat from Europe or America . . . , and a magnificent sane man in a university gown . . . , a great rich splendor stifling all these people in the warmth of a beautiful day. . . .
>
> Against all that happiness there was a solitary fool walking into the midst of things wearing only reasonable clothes, a shirt . . . over a pair of shorts.
>
> "At least wear something decent."
>
> The clown, being blind, had had the confidence to be impatient with the entreaty, asking, "What's wrong with this?" and watched pure surprise slide into an overbrave public smile on his mother's face.
>
> (259–60)

The "sanity" of those attending a traditional outdoor ceremony in tropical Africa in "authentic cold-climate overcoat" or "a university gown" contrasts with the "insanity" of Baako's "solitary . . . reasonable[ness]." The guests at this ceremony constitute a microcosm of society. And since, ultimately, it is this society, with its convoluted values gone terribly awry, which passes judgment on Baako, we are also invited to see madness in ***Fragments*** "structurally on the level of society as a whole as the discourse of reason about unreason, [as] an implacable dialectic . . . an obvious paradox" (Barthes 169). Society's unreasoning "reason" condemns Baako's reasoned "unreason" as "madness." Society's warped notion of "reason" defines Baako's "madness"; but the "dialogue" between Baako and the society which consigns him to a mental hospital is "faked," for

> on the level of the interconstituent dialogue of reason and unreason, . . . we must keep in mind that this dialogue is faked; it involves a great silence, that of the mad: for the mad possess no metalanguage in which to speak of reason.
>
> (Barthes 165)

The tight control that the proponents and representatives of "reason" exercise over the means and modes of discourse is exemplified in the scene in ***Fragments*** in which television sets marked for distribution "'all over the country, in the villages'" (214), are shared among employees of the Broadcasting Corporation itself. The people "all over the country," particularly those in the rural areas, the so-called silent majority, like Baako, the madman, are literally "silent"—silenced by exclusion.

Baako is a writer and so, like his creator, Armah, he belongs to the rather "touchy" tribe of *genus irritabile;* the demential image associated with him is like the "incurable wound" linked to Philoctetes' "unerring bow."[3] When Baako engages Ocran, the artist, in conversation, the strictly literary dimension of madness in ***Fragments*** comes to the fore:

> Ocran gave Baako a tall glass of beer. . . . "So now, Mr. Scribe, what are you going to do? Write by yourself?" . . .
>
> "I don't understand it fully," Baako said. "But I've thought a lot about it. In fact I went all the way round the bend trying to make up my mind."
>
> "It doesn't hurt an artist to taste a bit of madness," Ocran said. "But I thought a decision to write would be a simple thing."
>
> "Not for me. I had a nervous breakdown over it. . . . I felt like I was cracking up when I first realized it fully. It was like being tricked into a trap. . . . I couldn't decide what kind of writing I should spend my lifetime on. . . . After all, I had to ask myself who'd be reading the things I wanted to write. . . . I wouldn't do the usual kind of writing. . . . But if I can write for film instead of . . . the other stuff—it's a much clearer way of saying things to people here."
>
> (113–14)

Baako's "taste . . . of madness" or "nervous breakdown" is directly related to his craft. And he is in good company. The choice between one form of writing or the other, between, say, the novelist and the scriptwriter, is pertinent to recent developments in African literature. A writer like Sembene Ousmane, for example, has sought to resolve this conflict in favor of redirecting his creative energy to making motion pictures in his native Wolof with French and English subtitles. The author of ***Fragments,*** for his part, writes novels which dramatize, without resolving, the tensions generated by the conflicting claims of polemical writing and the strictly literary ("'. . . the ghost of the missionary . . . bullying the artist'" [114]); the techniques of cinematography and the quintessentially novelistic ("' . . . doing film scripts . . . would be superior to writing, just as an artistic opportunity'" [115]); and of non-African idiom and culture-specific African content ("'. . . film scripts . . . would be a matter of images, not words. Nothing necessarily foreign in images, not like English words'" [115]). In short, Armah does not "'do the usual kind of writing'" (114). He does "unusual" things like working with, and at the same time subverting the claims of, imported generic codes and (systems of) language. But since African literature has not as yet developed a credible meta-meta-discourse of the "unusual" corresponding to the meta-meta-discourse of the "usual," it stands the risk of being defined, from the perspective of the neighboring "usual" system, as "deviation." The "usual" system, on the strength of its own norms, "participates in the values of civilization, escapes the fatality of being, conquers the freedom of doing; [while] the other partner is excluded from history, fastened to an essence, either supernatural, or moral, or medical" (Barthes 169). In Armah's ***Fragments,*** madness (the "unusual") is suggestive in the sense in which Carlyle defines "symbol" in *Sartor Resartus:*

> In a symbol there is concealment and yet revelation: here therefore, by silence and by speech acting together, comes a double significance.
>
> (Centenary Edition, 1897, 175)

The "silence" of the mad ("the mad possess no metalanguage in which to speak of reason") and the "speech" of the sane "[act] together" to yield "a double significance." And ***Fragments'***s overarching ironic mode provides for "concealment and . . . revelation." (The reference to *Sartor Resartus* is not adventitious: the revisionist thrust of much of African literature, in part, translates into an attempt to "refashion" assumed notions about literature. The suggestion is that the writer/critic, like Carlyle's "tailor"/"patcher," should be "retailored"/"repatched.")

Serge Doubrovsky's account of "*l'affaire Picard*" has a bearing on the concerns of this essay:

> [I]t is easy enough to see in what way Roland Barthes and the "new criticism" generally are, to use Raymond Picard's revelatory word, "dangerous." . . . On the one hand . . . they have broken and entered a jealously guarded hunting preserve. And on the other hand they have begun to reexamine the meaning of the critical act itself, to say nothing of denouncing the traditional method of performing it. With the bursting of this double safety lock, with the breaching of this dam, everything else is bound to go down too. . . . The result, in short, is "madness," which is to say a new reason attempting to establish itself. The collective hysteria, the mob fury crying out for Roland Barthes to be burned, . . . to be beheaded, is quite simply . . .: hatred of the Intellectual who questions the foundation of our intellectual comfort.[4]

In ***Fragments,*** Armah compresses the larger issues in the ninth chapter into a pun. The chapter is entitled "Dam" which is a local (Akan) word for "madness" or "insanity"; but in the context of the entire chapter, the word also retains all the connotations of the bursting of a dam: ". . . the huge vomiting fever came draining out of him, tearing itself out of a body too weak to help or resist it, dropping in waves . . . , tasting . . . the thick bitterness of his own closed-up bile. Then he . . . turned the water on . . . [to wash] the vomit down the drain" (227). Baako's passions are spent; he is "drained" literally and figuratively. Soon after this, he is tied up and taken to a mental hospital. The multilingual pun on "dam" thus underlines the substantialist definition of madness as "disease," and marks the point at which the text's activating events reach a climactic fever pitch. Not surprisingly, it is in this same—ninth—chapter that society's fear of Baako is given its most graphic expression:

> "Stay far from him. His bite will make you also maaaaad!"
>
> To this another, closer voice added in sage, quiet tones, "The same thing happens if he should scratch you."
>
> . . .
>
> In a while Araba's sobs subsided and she said in the uncertain silence, "Tie him up." . . .
>
> Now the others were quick with the speed of fearful men about to be released from their fear. While his [Baako's] wrists were being bound, a man in sandals was called to stand on his fingers. . . . The fiber of the twine ate toward the wrist bones, cutting his flesh.
>
> (243, 246–47)

The violence of "fearful men" is the violence of the weak: an impotent society vents its collective spleen on Baako. This society finds Baako as "dangerous" as Picard must have found Barthes. "The collective hysteria" and "the mob fury" referred to by Doubrovsky and dramatized by Armah reflect the "revolt" against "a new reason attempting to establish itself." A variation on the same theme is played out in the death of the child during its "outdooring": the life of this new addition to the family of humans is smothered by rapacious older members of the human family.

Fragments calls for extrapolations from traditional, culture-specific matrices. The outdooring ceremony, for example, plays as crucial a role in the novel's climactic build-up as the libation ceremony plays in Naana's prologizing. Prior to Baako's trip abroad, in the opening chapter, his uncle, Foli, pours libation to invoke the protection of ancestral spirits. Ordinarily, Foli appears to be ensconced in the folly of his waywardness: he is "blemished" (9), a "drunkard" (7), his "voice . . . [is] used so often for deceit" (6), and he bears all the marks of a person who "has always been one to have a spirit flawed by the heaviness of flesh too often listened to" (5). But as the uncle calling "upon the nephew the protection of the old ones gone before" (5), Foli is a very different person:

> . . . that night his words had a perfect completeness that surprised me [Naana] and told me the departed ones are still watching over those they left here above. Even Foli felt their presence. His soul within those hours left the heavy body so as to be with the departed ones. . . . Nothing was said then that was not to be said, and nothing remained unsaid for which there was a need.
>
> (5)

The author employs verbal and contextual echoes to imbue Foli's words ("Nothing was said then that was not to be said, and nothing remained unsaid for which there was a need") with the efficacy which Judaeo-Christians accord the opening of John's gospel ("In the beginning was the word. . . . All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made"). The implications of all this are that there are competing canons, not a single Canon; that there are traditions, not a or the Tradition. Nor are these canons and traditions without points of divergence as well as convergence.

The drama of the libation's rites is vitiated by the novel's inescapable narrativity, while other codes of the genre compromise the orality of the words accompanying the ritual. But the very processes of vitiation and compromise suggest, first, that the "standard" or "normal" notions about the language of fiction need re-assessing and, secondly, that the codes of the genre need re-coding. It is not for nothing that the drink poured for the ancestral gods is not the traditional wine of the palm (tree), but rather "schnapps" (6). The "foreign" gin is to libation what English and the "imported" form of the novel are to ***Fragments***'s culture-specific concerns. The metatext, like the libation ritual, is, thus, neither wholly traditional nor foreign. The conjunction of the competing claims of the foreign and the traditional results in a different kind of writing—an "unusual" kind of writing trying to get itself established. And in this connection, Foli, the most active participant in the libation ritual, lives up to the multiple implications of his name. Within the novel's macrostructure, Foli recalls the French word "folie" and, thus, provides yet another multilingual pun. Foli as "folie" justifies the reference to Roland Barthes's review essay, "Taking Sides," on Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la Folie* (published in America as *Madness and Civilization*). Barthes claims that Foucault's book

> . . . restores to history a fragment of "nature" and transforms into a phenomenon of civilization what we hitherto took for a medical phenomenon: madness. . . . Foucault never treats madness except as a functional reality: for him it is the pure function of a couple formed by reason and unreason, observer and observed. And the observer (the man of reason) has no *objective* privilege over the observed (the madman). It would thus be futile to try to find the modern names for dementia under its old names.
>
> (164–65)

The "French connection" is suggested by the novel under discussion. Baako makes his return trip from New York to Accra via Paris: the connecting flight of his New York—Paris—Paris—Accra trip is made on an "Air Afrique" plane. And the France Baako sees is not without its madmen:

> . . . a man . . . stood facing the quay wall . . . in a frozen attitude of prayer. . . . He wore no shoes, and he had taken off his shirt. . . . Suddenly he broke from his immobile stance and marched directly forward as if . . . to march straight through the high wall. But a step or two from it he stopped just as abruptly as he had begun, and raised his arms above his head worshipfully, supplicating the wall.
>
> (72)

There is something else. The nausea which had accompanied Baako's "nervous breakdown" in America, resurfaces in France ("he felt the vague nausea threatening to return, . . . starting with a tightening sensation somewhere near the top and back of his skull" [58]), and works itself to its logical conclusion in Africa ("There was one sharp needlepoint of pain boring into his skull . . . before the huge vomiting fever came draining out of him" [227]). We need to recall the text's support for a reading of Baako's "nausea" and "nervous breakdown" as the artist's vocational hazard(s), in order to make the point that Baako's debate over "unusual" and "usual" kinds of writing has been evident in America, France, and Africa. And in Africa, as in France and America, "'madness,' which is to say a new reason attempting to establish itself" (Doubrovsky 46), is reflected in the propensity to *foreground* literatures and traditions, and *background* Literature and The Great Tradition.

Fragments assumes that literatures and traditions flourish under the banner of literary protestantism: they thrive at the expense of the catholic assumptions which underpin much of canonized Literature and Tradition. But the text also goes beyond these assumptions by introducing qualifications and suggesting, ultimately, that clear-cut distinctions are too easy:

> The only time she [Juana] had asked him [Baako], he had told her he had been a kind of pagan all his life, and then he had laughed at her for saying she herself was an atheist. "You don't act that way," he had said. "I think you're a Catholic. . . ." He had offered no explanation, but thinking about the words she had found an awkward truth about herself. . . . [T]he meaning of her life remained in her defeated attempts to purify her environment . . . to salvage discrete individuals in the general carnage. Sometimes she could almost understand the salutary cynicism of Protestants, . . . trying for an isolated heaven in the shrinking flight inward.
>
> (176–77)

Baako is "a kind of pagan" who is protestant in outlook; Juana says she is "an atheist," but she doesn't act like one, and when Baako says she is catholic she is confronted with "an awkward truth about herself." It appears, however, that there is "method," even "craft," in this seeming "madness." Before any complications are introduced, the two characters playfully, almost innocently, collaborate, without words, in making a "'Very Catholic' . . . prayer clasp" (176). Quite appropriately, Juana, the psychiatrist, plays the active role while Baako, the artist susceptible to nausea and nervous breakdown, is the passive partner. Soon after this, they make love in the sea—literally—and it is Baako who, in this instance, is more active and imaginative than his partner. The complementariness of psychiatrist and patient reflects the reciprocity of the sexual act, and both complementariness and reciprocity partake of the sea's all-inclusive totality. By analogy, the context of two people wanting to be alone together provides paradox as well as oxymoron, and both paradox and oxymoron are informed by the novel's ironic structure. (We notice how the disparity between what Juana says she is and how she acts—"he had laughed at her for saying she herself was an atheist. 'You don't act that way,' he had said"—hints at the ironic mode).

Fragments suggests that the artist's characteristic disinterestedness and impersonality, like the related notion of aesthetic distance, translate crudely into "the salutory cynicism of Protestants, their ability to kill all empathy" (177). But if the artist, like Baako, is African then he is fundamentally "like a doctor probing into a diseased body, locating a node of sickened nerves" (145): he is administering to the body corporate diseased, and the communal psyche seared, by "years of denigration and self-abasement . . . [f]or no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in [the] soul."[5] Armah's text sponsors the conception of the artist as protestant with catholic commitments. The protestantism of the artist does not, and, indeed, need not detract from his ("catholic") role as healer (cf. Armah's ***The Healers***) or "teacher" (cf. Achebe's essay, "The Novelist as Teacher"). Images of fragmentation, atomism, and centrifugal forces on the one hand, and those of unbroken circle ("The circle was not broken" [5]), reciprocity, and all-inclusive totalities like the sea on the other, co-exist in creative tension throughout the novel. The opening words of the novel are instructive:

> Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. . . . That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the whole great world all things are living things. All that goes returns. He will return.
>
> (1)

"Throws all things apart" echoes Achebe's *Things Fall Apart;* but in this context, what is thrown "apart" is brought "together again." The basis for the tension-generating drama of the Self ("each thing," "things apart," and "he") and the Significant Other ("living things," "things together," and "all") to be played out in the rest of the novel, is evident at the beginning.

To deal with the dialectics and/or dialogics of the Self and the Significant Other, protestantism and catholicism, fragmentation and unbroken circle, unreason and reason, centrifugal and centripetal forces, and so on, Armah adopts irony as a necessary structural device,

> For irony, of all figures, is the one that must always take us out of the text and into codes, contexts, and situations. It is in fact precisely this tendentiousness of irony that makes it an interesting semiotic problem.[6]

Irony brings into play situation as well as the *pragmatics* of situation; codes as well as the *contexts* of codes. Codes in ***Fragments,*** particularly cultural ones, are deliberately loaded. Extrapolations from libation and outdooring ceremonies, for example, have been shown to be crucial to the appreciation of the novel. Additionally, the text's chapter headings in Akan, the local language, are made to carry the burden of "the key organizing ideas in their respective chapters."[7] So central are the novel's cultural codes that de-coding them entails a creative process of re-coding the genre itself. The result of these processes of decoding and re-coding is the transformation of the text into what Baako would describe as something unlike "'the usual kind of writing'" (114); what Henry Gates, Jr. would describe as "a construct neither exactly 'like' its antecedents nor entirely new";[8] and what Serge Doubrovsky would characterize as "'madness,' which is to say a new reason attempting to establish itself" (46).

Interpretations of ***Fragments*** to date have generally tended to exhibit an unwillingness to go beyond perceived correspondences between Ghana and Armah's fictional "Ghana" on the one hand, and the supposed mental and physical conflicts associated with the "been-to" on the other. The *literary* appreciation of the novel has been hampered by the endless accumulation of pre-critical, often