Kofi Awoonor's Prison

Martin Tucker

Kofi Awoonor's novels, poems, and literary criticism have been acclaimed in many countries. Nevertheless, he is probably best known in the United States for the harassment and imprisonment he suffered in his native country of Ghana three years ago.

Awoonor was arrested on December 31, 1975, in Cape Coast, Ghana, and held without charges for several months. A number of human rights organizations issued strong protests. Amnesty International, International P.E.N., P.E.N. American Center (Bernard Malamud, Jerzy Kosinski, Muriel Rukeyser, Allen Ginsberg, Alfred Kazin, and Thomas Fleming were among those who spoke out on his behalf), and the Committee to Free Kofi Awoonor, based at Stony Brook on Long Island, were some of the more vocal protestors. When world pressure grew intense, Awoonor was brought to court and accused of harboring for one night and helping to escape across the border a "political criminal," ex-Brigadier Kattah. Awoonor admitted that Kattah stayed at his house one night but denied he engaged in any way in aiding Kattah's political flight. Finally released a year later, Awoonor was allowed to return to his teaching duties at Cape Coast College. Awoonor has been teaching there since, and also touring Europe and the U.S., giving readings of his poems and speaking at writers and Africanists conferences.

On superficial observation Awoonor is a free man and the scars of his confinement not apparent. One would have to look inside the man, or read between the lines in any case, to see if Awoonor has achieved that most mythical of all things, freedom to believe. Tyrannical blocks to freedom are obvious and oppressive and can at least be acknowledged, if not defeated; it is the self-imposed blocks that are not easily admitted and are the more difficult to release.

Most poets will agree that people often get what they yearn for, but at a time and in a way not devoutly desired. Awoonor, in his lyric voice of despair and frustration attendant upon his self-exile in the U.S. for seven years, wrote that "I have wanted the friendship/of the manacle/and the luxurious joy of the rose" ("Poem, Fall '73," in The House by the Sea). Three years later he was to feel actual chains in the homeland he had finally come home to. Throughout the poems of "Before the Journey," the first half of The House by the Sea, Awoonor cries out for some kind of commitment. It is the cry of a man who wishes for bonds—his desired bondage is for community, identification with his brothers. The cry is a plea for recognition, for acceptance by his tribe. It is, of course, in the definition of tribe that Awoonor experiences the difficulty of commitment.

The title of the first part of Awoonor's book is aptly ironic. "Before the Journey" refers not to Awoonor's home or native experiences but to his stay in the United States. Awoonor came to America voluntarily, first as a visiting poet to an international poets festival in New York City and then as professor of comparative literature at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Nevertheless, he regards his time in the U.S. as a penance. His choice was self-exile, but his poetry shows he made his choice as a necessary passage to release from doubt.

In "Before the Journey" Awoonor's images are those of clinging, thrashing, scratching; of dung—good manure and foul earth; of captive birds; of locks and doors; and blood shed on the streets. In one of several poems dedicated to Pablo Neruda, Awoonor talks of himself as "part of the octopus of this undying liberty." In another he reveals that he created his poems to relieve himself "of the mortuary smells/then and now." In still another poem Awoonor identifies with "the captive birds and the exile birds." In one of the most personal poems in the book, "Departure and Prospect," he talks of his seven-year exile—the time allotted for limbo and transition, for standing still in order to move on.

The poems of "Homecoming"—the second half of the book is given this overall title—suggest Awoonor has experienced a revolution of spirit. Yet Awoonor is

Martin Tucker is Chairman of the English Department at Long Island University, a member of the Executive Board of P.E.N. American Center, and author of Africa in Modern Literature.
not simply a man who, tortured by the clang of solitary confinement, has withdrawn into the shell of his own voices. He knows that liberty, "infinite liberty," may mean the "possibility of being murdered in a dark cell." This knowledge does not dissuade him from his allegiance to the creed (which he attributes to Ho Chi Minh) that "nothing is more precious than/independence and liberty." He keeps his vision, his belief intact, by keeping his sights on the birds that fly over the prison yard, the gulls that fly near the jail house by the sea. In spite of the madness that prison mandates in order to sustain one's ounce of sanity on release, Awoonor believes "the birds will fly back soon."

Awoonor has kept faith with his belief in goodness, and in the triumph of goodness, by a willed desire to believe. Many people describe this as religion or faith, defining religion as the belief which tries men's souls and provides a defense for that trial. Awoonor's Christian beliefs and his Ewe roots have sustained him through an ordeal that, as a young man, he knew he someday would have to face: His day in court, in prison were the means by which he accepted his worldly Western views along with an unfettered embrace of his tribal and African ties. Awoonor's entire work, up to and including The House by the Sea, shows a gifted talent searching for unity and harmony of African and European elements of progression and rootedness, of change and tradition. In the past Awoonor directed satire and anger at those who abused one extreme in the name of the other; his prison experience, it appears, has taught him to accept the faults in man and still love him. It is not, however, that Awoonor "loves" his jailer, a tendency that the eminent Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka described in The Man Died, and against which he warned. It is that Awoonor is no longer held back by anger: He does not need to excoriate, he moves on to wherever the beginning is and does not harangue the past any longer.

Awoonor expresses his pilgrimage most profoundly in the last poem in the volume. "The Wayfarer Comes Home (A Poem in Five Movements)" shows Awoonor has not forgotten the temporal concerns of the poet: He still hears the guns killing children, and he prophesies the fall of tyrants wherever they are in Africa. But his allegiance is to a new movement, a movement that subsumes all other movements. It is to a faith that overwhelms but does not run wild:

But I raise up now
the dying animal of love.
The sun proclaims me a claimant
to an ancient stool,
releases me from all foreign vows.

Awoonor's use of lament and litany, of the dirge, as his personal song is part of a tradition he carefully acknowledged years ago. The dirge, as Awoonor wrote in The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara (1975); "is a lament for the dead....The Ewe dirge reveals the loneliness and sorrow of death, traditional world views of what the next stage of the journey is, and finally a message or prayer. The dead person is a traveller from the living to the ancestors; he is given inti-
mate messages to deliver to those who had gone ahead.”

Awoonor’s use of death, and of pilgrimage, then, should not be construed as a Christian allegory, a penance for the sins of the earth. Yet even Awoonor, I believe, would not deny Christian as well as Ewe roots in his work. Awoonor has said that one of his earliest poems, “Songs of Sorrows,” was an attempt to “incorporate the features of the Ewe dirge, borrowing liberally from Vinoko Akpalu’s work (much of which has entered into the public domain), into a song of lament.” He has described the lament as a personal song, distinguished from the communal roots of African song.

Several months ago Awoonor wrote to me as editor of Confrontation, a literary journal published by Long Island University, his definition of the awesome task of the writer, a task that draws upon a large number of allegiances:

Not for nothing was the WORD an important part of magic. The writer then is the inheritor of both language and historical facts which had long ago achieved their autonomy through usage and ritualization. But he is the one who pushes these beyond the boundaries of the obvious and the mundane through that artistic gift which is both communal and individual in the cojoining of his private talent to the public gifts of language and history (ritualized); he becomes more than a chronicler. He is a technician, magician, mythmaker, shaman, priest, diviner. For his energy pushes the palpably obvious beyond the boundaries of temporal truth into the realm of eternal truths, to the point when his art represents a significant fragment of the communal art as this defines the psychic personality of the group. So the writer’s responsibility goes beyond fidelity to himself. He must keep faith with the community by way of not distorting its artistic impulse in the process of individuating that impulse. It is in the final unification of these two essential elements, in the fusion of the public impulse with the individual and existential energy that true art emerges. That is the only way that art defines both the man and his age, his people.

The development of Awoonor as a writer remarkably illustrates the irony of how he achieved the goals he set for himself. For Awoonor became the spiritual leader/disciple he envisioned only after he accepted the inevitability and tragic enrichment of passive suffering, qualities which in his early work he denigrated. Awoonor’s novel This Earth, My Brother...:

An Allegorical Novel of Africa, for example, is a series of prose poems interrupting and connecting a narrative of Africans in a postindependent country and time beset with problems of identity and rootlessness. In Awoonor’s novel, displacement, or its felt presence, pervades the spirit of educated Ghanaians in the age of transition as it had in the colonial past. Awoonor’s poetry, from its first appearance to its present manifestation, exhibits the theme of exile, death, and longing—both a longing for death that is an end to pain and a longing that is death by nature. Until his most recent poems, Awoonor has seen longueurs as death to the spirit, a waning that erodes the source of life, and yet he cannot deny its secret hiding places, its last ditches of strength in the cavities of his soul. Before The House by the Sea appeared in 1978, his poems showed he was able to keep despair at bay only by allowing periodic torments of anger to flood through and over his being.

In his criticism, most notably in The Breast of the Earth, Awoonor has summarized his belief in the role of the artist as a carrier of the germ of inspiration for his people:

African culture must represent a continuous growth from the past through the present, into the future, bearing select gifts from the various contacts it has made with outside forces and maintaining a unique personality in its verve and dynamism.

The key light in Awoonor’s vision is dynamism, perhaps even a bravado, in battling with present obstacles to a future dreamed. Awoonor’s challenge to African culture was unfurled in 1975, and in the concluding chapter of his book he defined his terms thus: “A writer is primarily a member of his own society and...there is no time when he cannot be committed to ending the sufferings of his people....” But he is the one who pushes these beyond the boundaries of the obvious and the mundane through that artistic gift which is both communal and individual in the cojoining of his private talent to the public gifts of language and history (ritualized); he becomes more than a chronicler. He is a technician, magician, mythmaker, shaman, priest, diviner. For his energy pushes the palpably obvious beyond the boundaries of temporal truth into the realm of eternal truths, to the point when his art represents a significant fragment of the communal art as this defines the psychic personality of the group. So the writer’s responsibility goes beyond fidelity to himself. He must keep faith with the community by way of not distorting its artistic impulse in the process of individuating that impulse. It is in the final unification of these two essential elements, in the fusion of the public impulse with the individual and existential energy that true art emerges. That is the only way that art defines both the man and his age, his people.