

WITH McLuhan in Nigeria

ITEM I: AN EYE FOR AN EAR?

by

Joseph Kinner

There are times when all forms of human transport become lamentably inadequate, be they planes or rockets. One wishes merely to take thought and (1)

Pause.

Wonder in the solitude of the moment, wander through the multi-hues of its existence, past a world filled with time, past present, past the future passed and present in a world of timelessness, (2) abstract conception of definite moment present absent, abstract conception of definite point present absent, (3) and come, in the light of stark transition, to a voice, poised, like the world, between the colorful nuances of then and

Now silence, suspended in the moment, rent by word sabers that knife through sound and space, rush to thresholds, and echo down canals which empty into a

Magical world of resonant oral word, eared day-in, day-out, in the wrap-around, implicit world of auditory space, place of no fixed focus, without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing, not boxed in pictorial space, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment (4) by

Dusk shadow and substance appear one, figures are and are not, we cautiously peer between the covers, careful not to disturb, not to speak, and attempt to see, pinpoint, abstract, locate objects in physical space, against a background, while

*Oral man,
Pre-literate,
Takes strains
To ear,*

and

Note: Auditory space can be filled with the sound that has no "object," such as the eye demands. It need not be

representational, but can speak, as it were, directly to emotion, (5)

In depth, in flexible expressions, in speech, cool medium, (6) involves, in a web of kinship, intricate participation, cooperation intense, in fact, interdependant, interrelated, in oral society

The child observes the parent, smells of recent rains reach simultaneously the ancient memories tasted when?, unremembered, fleeting thoughts, but we stop and

Note: The negro surpasses the European in the exquisite keenness of his senses, (7)

and observe the child grasp the object, master now of the subject, subject now of the masters, listen, as they TELL the tales and myths that set forth and explain the workings of the universe and the system of values by which the people live

In West Africa where

The way of life of most West Africans remained true to the traditions of their past. Most people went on living by the rules and laws laid down in the time of their ancestors. These laws and rules came from the long slow growth of their civilization and they offered what could often be a calm way of life, prosperous and easy-going, peaceful and self-confident. They pointed repeatedly to the interests of the whole community of the dead, the living, and the yet unborn; and they bade men and women serve the interests of their community, (8)

Inexorably altered throughout the nineteenth century by missionaries, purveyors of Western "education", values, and aspirations, eye-men, from an alien optical culture, ignorant of the multi-dimensions of the auditory world of oral man, unaware that

*In the beginning was the Word,
Spoken,
Visual literate word
Token later,*

*When Alpha bet
A fountain,
Pinning new sounds and sights
On paper,*

*In books,
For centuries,
Eye played
In silence.*

*Through eye teeth
Were gripped the sounds
And other sense since
Have been toned down. (9)*

Bound by form, one-sensed about the way, numbed by the blindness of our sight, trapped in the sheets of one-after-the-other, eye-guess eye-know how eye came to dominate the scale of the Western species, but

*Cyclops then to Africa came,
Wearing new coats of literacy,
And thrust upon the wondermentional canvas of
African beauties
An open-lidded silence.*

*Know eye am the way,
Linear, sequential, left,
To write,
And see the world by day and night. (10)*

*No questions asked!
No statement posed!
No knowledge grasped
What ears behold,*

But thrust again and lay upon the unaccustomed oral society alien language, English, a new medium of communication, phonetically based and

Note: The most revolutionary change in the communication system of Africans as a result of contact with the West has been the introduction of the phonetic system of writing and its tools, (11)

which make a break between eye and ear, between semantic meaning and visual code, and which

Abruptly alter perceptions for

*If a technology is introduced either from within
or from without a culture, and if it gives new
stress or ascendancy to one or another of our
senses, the ratio among all our senses is altered.
We no longer feel the same, nor do our eyes*

and ears and other senses remain the same, (12)

But change the real, focus the lives of proportionately few West Africans upon phonetic literacy, alien medium of new mediums and

Note: Children were as difficult to entice to school as adults... Moreover, a sense of time and discipline and of the need for regular attendance had to be most patiently instilled in the boys, (13)

who in a visual sense are gripped by the sounds of a time and space unregistered, unknown, and out of all sense rebel against the threatening language of new forms, linear, sequential, narrative, analytical, left

Alone in a room of time and space of his own now, child of phonetic literacy, knows in his book, quietly reads the paper wall and senses

Separate now and then, the intricate intimacy of direct face to face oral communication, personal moments filled with inflections of sorrow and happiness and feelings in between

The covers bind and separate, isolate a new phenomenon, the individual, (14) concept and reality, born upon revolutionary lines which faster and faster attack and inexorably silence the established oral customs, erode the positions of those who literally preach them, rip apart the web of kinship and establish the written epitaph upon the tome of auditory culture

Being destroyed, by phonetic literacy, architect and architecture of alien abstract inner journeys, shape and shaper of resonant oral sounds and dissident sights, form and former of new forms, suspended and flowing in and through Nigeria where

Until 1898 all education was under the direct control of missionaries. As late as 1942 they enrolled 99 per cent of the schools, and more than 97 per cent of the students in Nigeria were enrolled in mission schools. By 1945 there were comparatively few literate Nigerians who had not received all or part of their education in mission schools, (15)

*Virtually all in English,
Read,
Calculate,
Write*

During these years fiction, future subject of this medium, develops slowly, first in the local language and then, from the early 1950's, in English. Virtually all of this comes from Southern Nigeria, (16) terminal geographical point of the first leg of our collective journey, convenient point to ask

*Marshall McLuhan,
What are you doin
Here in Africa?*

The point is, rather, how do we become aware of the effects of alphabet or print or telegraph in shaping our behavior? For it is absurd and ignoble to be shaped by such means. Knowledge does not extend but restrict the areas of determinism. And the influence of unexamined assumptions derived from technology leads quite unnecessarily to maximal determinism in human life. Emancipation from that trap is the goal of all education. (17)

Which brings us back to the original point, the African novel, written in English, specifically the creations of Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi, authors born in 1920 and 1921, respectively and coincidentally, but exceedingly important, in America and Europe, in exactly the same years, the first radio stations were born and sent out the first transmissions, relayed to Nigeria some twenty years later, (18) area where we originally began to point out that the African novel, written in English, provides us with an intriguing point of departure regarding possible answers to the original point which is

1952, Novel year, let us meet

Tutuola, significantly unencumbered by formal education, able thus to leap phonetic buildings at innumerable imaginative bounds, unbound by visual bias and alive in the world of audile, tactile man, feeling with his eyes, seeing with his ears, he faces and turns us

To the forests and the trees, where Palm-wine drinker, young African Ulysses, is found among the pages of his father's mind child. Born within the myriad convolutions and nurtured upon the banks of memories seen, smelled, tasted, felt, heard, you wander, we wonder, about the eternal circumstance of the moment. Time inmeasured, space inknown, no formal chapters bind the magic of acoustic space, place of no fixed focus, place of adventures that violently break the sequential order and logic of ABCD ness,

For Palm-wine drinker is "Father of the gods who could do anything in this world," traditional world of auditory man, he violates efficient cause and effect, journeys in search of his tapster, dead, resurrected in the name of spirit, symbol of life after life after

Education, father of the child lacks it, children of many fathers searching for it, soon to be orphaned from old ways by literacy, phonetic writing, English, new medium of communication, new medium to shape a time and space unknown, visual bag in which to put all the sense, different drum for eyes to play forth

And back upon the branches of trees, deep in the forest, "Father" senses his way, carefully, for in those days

*there were many wild animals and every place
was covered by thick bushes and forests;
again, towns and villages were not near each
other as nowadays, and as I was travelling from
bushes to bushes and from forests to forests and
sleeping inside it for many days and months,
I was sleeping on the branches of trees
because spirits etc, were just like partners,
and to save my life from them; and again
I could spend two or three months before
reaching a town or village, (19)*

Which is in a world that makes no nonsense of spirits, in a world that knows no straight lines, no linear sequence of left to right, no boxed in pictorial space, but dynamic, always in flux, unpredictable, always in a world where no mention is made of alienation, mark of literate, visual man, only in a world that demands keen sensory awareness, intense involvement and in sense participation for

Upon his way we follow, though never clearly or consistently marked, a beautiful girl in an endless forest follows now a beautiful man, now part man, now no man, now skull, now

Right before our eyes the flesh has vanished, the skull is alive, the girl is trapped in a timeless, spaceless, endless forest, and

Do you expect the father of the "Father", his child, to rescue the girl by imaginative request, then imagine the audible and tactile dimensions of Tutuola's inner lens which reach far out to trap the girl by the skull and hold her prisoner, unable to speak or cry out for help

Coming now through the forest and the trees, in a world alive with spirits, "Father" searches, finds, rescues, marries the girl, all in what time and space really unknown but

Race on both for how long and where is logically, rationally unmeasurable, but illusions of precision face us turn after turn, as seven miles from that house, a mile in that bush, a few minutes perhaps, more than four miles travelled, about six miles travelled, no more than one third of a mile on this river bank, a big tree which was about one thousand and fifty feet in length and about two hundred feet in diameter, and forty yards away from it, and finally we are exhausted after following them over and through this heavily-worded terrain of one page (20)

But onward, ever more deeply inward, we follow "Father" and his wife to Wraith Island, where

All the people of the Island were very kind and they loved themselves, their work was only to plant their food, after that, they had no other work more than to play music and dance. They were the most beautiful creatures in the world of the curious creatures and also the most wonderful dancers and musicians, they were playing music and dancing throughout the day and night, (21)

and we observe and note significantly that music and dancing are audible, tactile experiences foremost, that these most beautiful creatures involve, participate, play tones and inflections for the eye that sensuously caresses the image of traditionally beautiful African forms

Left now and write in a different time at a different space meet Drum, Song, and Dance, and

When these three fellows started at the same time, the whole people of the new town, the whole people that rose up from the grave, animals, snakes, spirits and other nameless creatures, were dancing together, with these three fellows and it was that day that I saw that snakes were dancing more than human beings or other creatures, (22)

Realities of another dimension, interplay of all the senses in concert, strange configurations in a whirl of auditory space, familiar to auditory man, visualize, no linear development, no chronology, no analysis, modalities

of visually oriented man, hear instead resonant sounds played in violation of consistent literate thought, and

Meet in Dead's Town the tapster, out of our time and space, listening to the journey being replayed, hazardous difficulties of travelling and living in the bush and branches of trees for "years," and

Back from Dead's Town "Father" and wife with magic egg feed the starving village peoples, and rainfall ends the famine and brings their journey and ours

Together,
Hear the tale,
Wag the head,
Tail off,

in prose form to discuss this medium, folk and tale between two arbitrary covers, say that Tutuola's psycho-dynamic dimensions do not trip upon the stumbling blocks of phonetic literacy, say that the events of chains, sequence, lineality, chronology, do not determine this creation, echo again that this birth is the effort of an imagination still much at home in the auditory world, attuned to different rhythms, far removed

We peer upon *People of the City*, but see beneath the icon of Inferno, archetype of child conceived and cultivated within the whirling cerebral vortex of Cyprian Ekwensi, thirty-three at time of birth, and, in crucial contrast to his contemporary, A. Tutuola, is formally well educated, and trained as a pharmacist in London, yet drugged himself on a train that tracks the mind along phonetic ties that bind the eye

In time,
Indeed
In space,
In form

Of narrative,
Allegory
Of good and evil,
Metaphysical journey

Through time and space,
Bound in parts
Over chapters,
And versed

*In prose,
Ascend,
By horizontal stares,
Extend*

*Visual sense,
You see,
But do not touch,
Or hear.*

*Or smell,
Or taste,
But simply sit,
Alone,*

*In time and space,
In special place,
Quietly,
Open,*

*In a sense,
That plays upon
Words,
Two dimensional artifacts*

*Probing a multi-dimensional Universe
The senses interplay,
In concert,
And a different tune,*

*Contrapuntal in nature
Is history,
Born among a veil of tiers
Is reality*

*Hardly jarred
By optical delusions
Alone,
Altered,*

*In fact,
Distorted,
In a sense
Too heavily plied,*

*Upon the pages
The author replied,
On with the novel
And vanished inside*

The Inferno:

The whole poem purports to be a vision of the three realms of the Catholic otherworld, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, and a description of "the state of the soul after death"; yet it is peopled with Dante's contemporaries and, particularly in the materialistic realism of the Inferno, it is torn by issues and feuds of the day, political, religious and personal. It treats of the most universal values - good and evil, man's responsibility, free will and predestination; yet it is intensely personal and political, for it was written out of the anguish of a man who saw his life blighted by the injustice and corruption of his times, (23)

Which are but a brief thought from the specific location of twenty Molomo Street, where

The sounds of "buses, hawkers, locomotives, the grinding of brakes, the hooting of sirens and clanging of church and school bells (24)

toll the credible cacaphony of life within the novel environment of *People of the City*, scene of Amusa Sango's epic mortal journey through the realms of worldly hell, purgatory and paradise, narrative of trial, tribulation and success, sequence of beginning to middle to end.

To begin with Amusa Sango, a young Nigerian dance-band leader and writer leaves the Eastern Greens, where he was born, descends into the earthly hell of the city where his one desire was

peace and the desire to forge ahead. No one would believe this knowing the kind of life he led; that beneath his gay exterior lay a nature serious and determined to carve for itself a place of renown in this city of opportunities, (25)

To meet Aina, beautiful symbolic female counterpart to Cain, we must descend into the Ninth Circle of Hell, and here, fixed in the ice, each according to his guilt, are punished sinners guilty of TREACHERY AGAINST THOSE TO WHOM THEY WERE BOUND BY SPECIAL TIES, and in the first of four concentric rings, fixed firmly in ice, is CAINA, named for Cain, and ascend to learn that

Aina had recently come to the city and was attracted by the men, yet very suspicious of them. Not even the festive throbbing of the drum could break the restraint which her mother, and the countryside, had instilled in her. But Sango was the city man - fast with women, slick with his fairy tales, dextrous with eyes and fingers. It had required all his resources, and when a little after midnight they had parted, Sango had known the hesitancy of her passion, (26)

And we know the restraint has vanished, the symbolic and realistic ties no longer bind, and upon the stroke of twelve one life has ended and another begun, one day ended and another born

Upon the lines of comparison we do not fail to note that temptations of the flesh are rivalled by realities of moral corruption within politics and personal relations, that our twenty-six year old wanderer ceaselessly confronts these problems and descends further into the city to meet

Beatrice the first, poets inspiration, come from Eastern Greens, from the city of coal, to imbibe the "high-life", but very ill she was, and urgently concerned about the type of life she was living, yet knew no other, (27)

Nor does Sango, though journey away from the city briefly to descend into the coal regions among the miners and

Inwardly he determined to do his best for these trusting people. There was standing room only in the worker's train that left the packed platform that morning. Not a word was spoken in the lift, later on, when Sango stood among the miners and made the descent into the bowels of the earth, to those dripping, ozonated crevices where man, crouching, hacks away at the feel of life, unconscious when the support that props up the earth on both sides of him might give way and smother him to oblivion, (28)

And out of this earthly hell into the realm of purgatory, temporary earthly state, Part Two: When all doors are closed, when Sango has no room of his own, no job, and no band, and in the death of De Periera a vision is born and forms the reality of Beatrice the Second, symbol of unity in death of life among

People of the City, Part Three: One Way Out, for Sango meets Beatrice the Second at the age of twenty-seven, the age when Dante, too, had a "marvelous vision" of his Beatrice, prompting him to write the *Vita Nuova*, prompting Sango to marry his Beatrice, leave purgatory, and ascend into a form of earthly paradise where

Our desire is for a new life, a new place of opportunity developing along the lines of freedom of expression, encouragement of talent (music especially), (29)

Focusing the end on an audible, tactile note, which brings us back to the original point that the impact of phonetic literacy has left an indelible mark upon the novel form of *People of the City*, a narrative which develops through time and space, a sequence of events that closely parallel an earlier Western archetype, *the Inferno*, a novel bound in parts and divided into chapters, a form built upon the phonetic alphabet, a novel from which visually gives us an eye for an ear, a medium far removed from the auditory world of oral man, which prompts us to

Note: We are no longer linked to our past by an oral tradition which implies direct contact with others (storytellers, priests, wise men, or elders), but by books amassed in libraries, books from which we endeavor - with extreme difficulty - to form a picture of their authors. And we communicate with the immense majority of our contemporaries by all kinds of intermediaries - written documents or administrative machinery - which undoubtedly vastly extend our contacts but at the same time make those contacts somewhat "unauthentic." This has become typical of the relationship between the citizen and the public authorities.

We should like to avoid describing negatively the tremendous revolution brought about by the invention of writing. But it is essential to realize that writing, while it conferred vast benefits on humanity, did in fact deprive it of something fundamental, (30)

*Which was the word,
Spoken,
In the beginning . . .*

Footnotes

1. Cyprian Ekwensi, *People of the City*, (London, 1954), p. 37.
2. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, (Chicago, 1962), p. 263. See also, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, (Oxford, 1940), pp. 101-107, and Marshall McLuhan, *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations*, (New York, 1967), Item 9.
3. E. Carpenter and M. McLuhan, eds., *Explorations in Communication, An Anthology*, (Boston, 1960), p. 167.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 67. See also Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, (Toronto, 1962), p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
6. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, (New York, 1964), p. 36.
7. Henri Gregoire, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties and Literature of Negroes*, (Baltimore, 1967), p. 35. This is a reprint of the edition printed by Thomas Kirk in Brooklyn, 1810.
8. Basil Davidson, *A History of West Africa to the Nineteenth Century*, (New York, 1965), p. 290. See also, James Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, (Berkeley, 1958), pp. 100-101. Cf. G. Ellis, *Negro Culture in West Africa*, (New York, 1914), p. 120.
9. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 248. Also, McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 33, 58-59.
10. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 248.
11. Leonard Doob, *Communication in Africa - A Search for Boundaries*, (New Haven, 1961), p. 110. Cf. Colin Cherry, *On Human Communication*, (New York, 1957), p. 31.
12. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 24.
13. Sonia Graham, *Government and Mission Education in Northern Nigeria*, (Ibadan, 1966), p. 101. See also, E. Smith, *The Christian Mission in Africa*, (London, 1926), pp. 62-63.
14. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 58. See also, Carpenter and McLuhan, eds., *Explorations in Communication*, pp. 112-113.
15. Coleman, *Nigeria*, pp. 113-114.
16. W.H. Whiteley, *A Selection of African Prose*, (London, 1964), p. 6.
17. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 247.
18. Arno Huth, *Radio Today*, (New York, 1942), p. 121.
19. Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, (London, 1952), p. 9.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

23. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, translated by John Ciardi, (New York, 1954), p. xiv.
24. Ekwensi, *People of the City*, pp. 17-18.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
30. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, (New York, 1963), p. 364.

* * * * *

JOSEPH KINNER is a doctoral candidate in African History at UCLA. He has just returned from a year of field work in Nigeria.