## Reading Calibrations: Re-reading for the Social

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n Calibrations, Ato Quayson provides us with a highly stimulating and thought-provoking method by which the literary aesthetic domain is read in order to shed light on larger social processes (xv). Although there is some fluidity in the direction of this movement of thought, the motivating factor, indeed the primary interest in the aesthetic, is to put it to use for an understanding of the "social," which, for Quayson, should be de-linked from the more specific term "society." Calibrations involves a "situated procedure of attempting to wrest something from the aesthetic domain for the analysis and better understanding of the social" (xv). In putting forth this method, which he terms the very thesis of his book (xi), Quayson highlights certain terms that become crucial to an explication of the method. I begin my re-reading by pursuing a quick engagement with a few of these terms as defined by him before proceeding to closely track the method he calls "calibrations."

In explicating "the social" as different from "society," Quayson is at pains to stress that it is from a calibration of the literary that the social comes into view (xxviii). Although he spends less time spelling it out, it is clear that the idea of the literary or the aesthetic is rather one of the text (any text) that the calibrator identifies and closes off as such. In this manner, stories about market women or anecdotes can fulfill this role of the text as "starting point." What is less clear is the way in which such texts, when wrested from outside what is strictly speaking literary, are aestheticized in this account. This point will become pertinent to the application of literary tropes in a narrative from "real life" that is then aestheticized for a reading of the social.

We see some of this difficulty reflected in the way the shift occurs in the presentation of what is to come on Ken Saro-Wiwa's untimely death: "Elements of tragedy as a process rather than merely as a literary genre are outlined to show the degree to which the African post-colony, exemplified in this case by the contradictions that have shaped Nigerian history, produces a tragedy unerringly mimetic of the tragedies we encounter in literary texts" (xxxix). While Quayson correctly indicates that any contextualizing or historicizing of the literary text involves a notion of society which "is saturated with the interests and perspectives of the analyst" (xxix), he seems less concerned with a) the choice of the literary texts for the generation of particular aspects (or vectors) of the social and b) the choice of particular bracketings of the social that are aestheticized into functioning on par with the literary text in the method of calibrations that is elaborated. He goes further to then suggest that

that since both the literary and the context are thus constructed, there is an implicit tautology in the enterprise of reading literature through context or vice versa (since both only serve to expose the "kernel") (see xxx).

For Quayson, "Literature and the social are related to each other because they mutually mirror systemic heterogeneities that manifest themselves as constellated and reconstellating thresholds" (xxxi). It is unclear what exactly the motivation is to separate the literary/aesthetic from "the social" when, in reality, these boundings and narrativizations are carried out as a re-writing in the form of the literary to then extrapolate about not so much the social itself as the notion of History (and historical time) as the condition of its possibility. The difference is that when the "text" is lifted out of society, it functions to signal the thresholds of the specific society, whereas, according to Quayson's formulation, the literary need not (indeed should not) be chosen from a particular region to generate ideas about the social of that region (97–98). In following Althusser's call to interrogate the structure of the whole in order to reveal the particular conception of history that allowed it (see xxx) in the first place, Quayson gives us a clue as to why the literary and social should not in fact be separated in this manner for the method he proposes. In his formulation of the function of literature and the generation of the social, what becomes central is the construction of each as a form of "ideology." The extent to which this is central becomes evident after the detailed description of the distinction of "the social" from "society." It is followed by a section entitled "Calibrations and Dialectical Modalities" where the opening sentence is: "Dialectical embedding becomes central to how I read both literature and society" (xxxi; emphasis added). In this, I see an acknowledgement that, in fact, 1) the idea of "society" is in fact unreachable and it is only by proceeding from the notion of productions of a conception of the social that any kind of action in society can occur; and 2) that for all Quayson's theorizing of the constructedness of the social, the concept of postcolonializing, which is at the heart of much of his writing betrays the latter's deepest desire: to intervene or provide the means for an intervention of some kind into "real societies,"3 even while acknowledging that our access to them is through "the social."

In discussing the issue of translation, Quayson introduces details of his biography, drawing upon his own experiences with colonial-type education in Ghana, and also presents the reader with the situation of having to explain relationships and terms of address to his children. In the first instance, Quayson's experience is one that would resonate with people across the globe and quite particularly with those for whom multilingualism is just another detail of the everyday. The movement between languages, which reveals the incommensurability of certain comparisons and which brings to the forefront concepts that are alien to the (postcolonial) culture in question is one that is of great interest in our field—one need only think of Fanon and Césaire reciting "nos ancêtres les Gaulois . . . ." We might even say that this basic alienation from the educational system signals to the postcolonial subject the earliest intimations of the inadequacy of colonial culture to the proper expression of his/her self.

What was striking to me in the autobiographical section of Quayson's description of his experience of translation pertains to the assessment he makes of his children's probable reaction to being presented a Korean "aunt." Surprisingly, he remarks: "The first thing they will ask, and justifiably so in the context of the West, is how this is possible" (xii). In his somewhat nostalgic account, an uncle or aunt was "any older acquaintance of one's parents," and in general used as "a form of respectful

address" (xii). This generalization of the term "aunt or aunty" from English is one of the very interesting tactics that is not restricted to Ghanaian English and occurs in many cultures where the paucity of terms in the English language for the marking of generations in different types of interactions becomes evident. Quayson's remark, then, that "[a] Chinese or Irish person in Africa could be introduced as an uncle or aunt to a local without any sense of contradiction whatsoever" is somewhat less reflective. In Africa, perhaps, it is less likely that the Chinese or Irish person would be an aunt by marriage than it is in the Western context of his children, where an interracial marriage of an African diasporic is far more likely—with large numbers of diasporics being in close proximity with other diasporics and with "indigenous" Westerners in the metropolis. Given this, in the African context, the use of the term "aunty" in the case of the Korean is more likely (though by no means necessarily) activating a form of respect rather than indicating kinship. Quayson's positing of the unquestioned acceptance of interracial entanglement, at the level of the personal, in Africa seems to be somewhat utopian. The rather clear boundaries between groups ("races") in the African context, and indeed in other postcolonies (although the situation in the Creole colonies would require a separate consideration), is buttressed by the more weighted presence of older forms of hierarchies that can come into play in the choosing of partners.4 Returning, then, to the question his Western-raised children might ask, rather than how this is possible, it is more likely to be why they should use the term "aunt" if she is indeed not an aunt. This points to the differential experience of relating to the older generation between Quayson from his childhood in Ghana and that of his children in England—a generational divide that all parents will experience, but which gains particular poignancy in the case of immigrant parents.5

What this moment is revealing of, in the context of the method of calibrating (in bringing up the sense of oscillating between languages) is how difficult, even impossible, it is to conduct such an oscillation between different subject perspectives. What it brings into sharp focus is the role of the calibrator-that Quayson rightly recognizes—as carrying out "a fine-tuning procedure" that "is dependent on a particular interpretative and subjective perspective" (xvi). Discussing history and temporality (invoking Hegel via Althusser), he writes: "[H]istorical process is not like a traffic light, whose color codings are regulated by law and a tacit social understanding, thus rendering the interaction of different categories of road users immediately comprehensible and manageable as such" (xxxiii). I wondered which traffic lights he had in his mind's eye as he wrote these lines. In various postcolonies, traffic lights, while color coded and regulated by law, reveal instead of a tacit social understanding, a dogged disregard for these impositions. Bullock carts and other human-powered "vehicles" refuse to stop at a red light because they would have to dispense considerable energy in order to build up momentum once again when the light turns green. Various animals refuse to honor the "social understanding" Quayson would have us believe is held by all who use the roads. In any case, the numerous pot holes, not to count recalcitrant children, adult gossipers, and stray dogs all provide sufficient distraction for the racy red car, which ignores the red light and almost runs over the woman carrying three pots balanced precariously one on top of the other on her head. If this is a rather light-hearted evocation of traffic lights in the (fictional) postcolony, it serves to indicate that Quayson the calibrator in his "self" as a driver is clearly located in the West rather than in the postcolony, while in thinking the relationship to the older generation falls back on his own experience of relating to elders in Ghana. I evoke these details of the description of calibration to note how, in addition to being impossible to get out of one's own subjective position in the role of calibrator, how also it is extremely difficult to locate (or localize) such a position. The task of calibration (or at least its narration), then, ideally requires a true dialogism initiated from a different subject position to act as a corrective to an elision of the unpredictable role of the calibrator—ideally a corrective that is on-going in a ceaseless taking-up of this narrative by differently located calibrators. It is in the spirit of this task, and ultimately in paying homage to Quayson's work, that I propose a look at his book as *Re-readings* for the Social.

In a brilliant move, Quayson asserts that what is shared between anthropology and literature is the central role of alienation as the motivational impulse. Less convincing, I found, was his take on culture heroism in which the use to which the notions of "privatization" (appropriation?) and the "incoherent" state were being put remained somewhat elusive, at least to this reader. Instead, drawing from his own insight, I would propose a more consequential framing of the trope of culture heroism in the African societies [sic] he examines to be indicative of an unavoidable sense of alienation that pervades the public sphere of the African postcolony-both for the rulers who most often turn out to be totalitarian terrorists and for the people who are to hold up a notion of civil society in the everyday. In this way, the necessity of the leaders' seizing upon modes of self-promotion that speak to an organic sense of personhood and leadership can be productively read in dialogue with the tactics of citizens as they negotiate the bureaucracy that derives from such leadership. In fact, Quayson's remark that "totalitarianism" and "democracy" in Africa fade into each other "because the expressive social imaginary by which the two opposing forms of political arrangements are grasped by ordinary people remain practically the same whichever political order is instituted" (54) can be reexamined. All of the examples and analyses in this chapter point to the way in which both leaders and the polity live in a state of alienation from a politico-cultural milieu that could credibly generate a particular view of the social. By keeping alienation, then, as the central motivating factor for the generation of the culture hero in the avatar in which s/he appears in postcolonial African society, Quayson's trope would immediately be, I believe, far more revealing of the "incoherent" notion of history that throws up "the social" through which it can be grasped.

By the time Quayson gets to the Saro-Wiwa story, the notion of the social fades somewhat as he examines a moment in recent Nigerian history. In a fascinating bid to couch this story in terms of a "tragedy" (in its literary significance, while maintaining something of its accent in common parlance), Quayson suggests that he wants to "systematically blur the distinctions between the two domains." His purpose, in fact, is to be able to subject the real life event to the kind of seriousness and rigor with which literary tragedy is treated. The question to be posed to this proposal is whether the first step is required for the second. That is, does the Saro-Wiwa event have to be proposed as a tragedy in order to be examined with the type of close attention done in literary studies? I am not convinced it does. In fact, the couching of the Saro-Wiwa story in the terms of a tragedy is revealing of what we can identify as a more basic predilection of the method of calibrations proposed by Quayson, as we will see.

The three aspects of tragedy that are deployed in the transposition or construction proposed are the notion of the arrangement of events that channel the movement of the tragedy; the error of judgment by the tragic hero that humanizes him; and the presentation of ethical qualities. But tragedy also has a very important underlying presumption that should be central to Quayson's project: that is, the larger function of tragedy upholds a certain notion of the social. While the definition and function of catharsis is one of much controversy and study, that the hero's actions, experience and deliberation are presented in a very "calibrated" way in order to arouse a certain reaction in the audience is well accepted. This reaction was to ultimately translate into better functioning (less alienated) individuals in civil society. In fact, I would question Quayson's distinction between literary and real tragedy: "For whereas in the literary domain, the tragedy does not call upon us to take a stance or to act, and allows us to go back to our homes with an abstract feeling of having participated in something of a terrible beauty, the vents of real-life tragedy enjoin a different form of response" (74).6

If Saro-Wiwa is to be truly considered a tragic hero, then General Sani Abacha (or at least forces embodied by him) becomes the author of the events of his life (in the tragic mode—the plot). In this real-life tragedy, it is in the contradiction between this author's "handling" of Saro-Wiwa's life and a re-writing of that tragedy from the emotional response it arouses that a notion of the social is actively transformed. Quayson himself pays little attention to the sequence of events as upholding the tragic plot. Instead, he gets lost in the emotional fervor of the recognition of Saro-Wiwa as hero (see 74–75). Yet, this conclusion to the reading is the most interesting part of the essay in that it identifies in no uncertain terms, and gives voice to the alternate narrative for Saro-Wiwa's life, namely, the courage of his ethical position. This alternative narrative, taken up by journalists, writers, and the Green Peace movement, for example, projects a vision of the social that is not far from being a productive Utopia.

Surprisingly, despite this oscillation (between literary and "real" tragedy) that he suggests, Quayson makes no link of the tragedy of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (treated in the last chapter) and the tragedy of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a particularly fruitful opportunity, one would think, to test out his method of calibrations. The stories of these two tragic heroes have much in common: they both die by hanging; both of them must stand in opposition to the elders of his own clan; both of their deaths occur as an immediate result of other deaths that occur at a public meeting. In each case, Quayson falls somewhat short of subjecting the matter to a rigorous analysis as per the form of tragedy. The criteria he highlights are: 1) the formal structuring of events and 2) demise of the hero as it derives from 3) an error of judgment that he links to the presentation of ethical qualities.

In framing the events leading up to Saro-Wiwa's death at the hands of the Nigerian government, it would be interesting to posit them as all leading up (as plot) to this tragic event. Quayson states that "the form of real-life tragedy has to be interpreted as more the expression of history than of aesthetics" (60), and yet in every historical narrative there is an arrangement that can be grasped aesthetically, so to speak. If this were to be done faithfully in this case, Abacha would become the "author" of Saro-Wiwa's death, finally through a decision made in defiance of world opinion and to silence the more radical youth in his own country. In the fictional Okonkwo's case, similarly, his exile from his clan and his return prepare for the scene of his death. Here, however, Quayson refers to the "rational control of events and their submission to a nonmythical causality" (143). In both cases, the hero dies: Saro-Wiwa at the hands of the state and Okonkwo through suicide. Still, the suicide can be seen as his only way out, given his sense of alienation from the pressure of the clan to which he

belonged. In both cases, the hero is positioned against the elders of his own clan. If Okonkwo's final act (of killing the messengers) was his tragic error, Saro-Wiwa's error was in the militant stance toward the government, against the general level of comfort of the Ogoni elders for such direct opposition. In his haste to make Saro-Wiwa a layperson's hero (a sentiment we all share), Quayson does not properly pursue, even for a theoretical argument, his provocative suggestion of serious analyses of these events in the form of a tragedy. He writes:

And so when the traditional leaders argued that the aggressive politics of Saro-Wiwa would alienate them from the political authorities and that they should take a more measured stance, it was easy for them to fall under suspicion of having been bought off. It is evident that the chiefs were seen, wrongly or rightly, as 'contaminated' by politics [...]. McGreal's argument problematically condemns Saro-Wiwa by re-siting moral responsibility away from the governing political ethos and onto the individual. (72)

Had Quayson properly completed the exercise of following Saro-Wiwa's death as that of a tragic hero, Saro-Wiwa's own rather radically militant stance would not escape the same analyses. That is, his actions can not be seen outside the culture of being "settled" and the struggle of someone in the public eye, leading the idealism of youth against the state, who cannot at any cost be seen as being bought off. So when Quayson calls into question the journalist's condemnation of Saro-Wiwa, by ignoring larger structures and focusing on the individual, he himself places Saro-Wiwa's radical politics at the level of the pure, unadulterated space of the heroic individual rather than, in his own terms, "at the vortex of multiple historical processes and contradictions" (73). For such a positioning would then not be able to consider the hero's radical politics outside of the culture of being settled by the Babangida government (for our purposes, with reference to literary tragedy: outside the circumstances and constraints within which he had to forge his public persona).<sup>10</sup>

For me, the most fascinating aspect of Calibrations has been the central role of some form of alienation to its conception, method, and process. The idea of calibrating comes to the author from his own sense of alienation from the educational set up in postcolonial Ghana (leading him to constantly "translate") through to a sense of alienation he strongly feels in the metropolis. The distance in experience between himself and his children serves as the inspiration of much of the process of calibrating. While he clearly recognizes the role of alienation as driving the narrative of both literature and anthropology, it is less evident that he views this concept as central to his own method. His predilection for tragedy as a trope is also telling in that the death of the hero arises from an acute alienation from the society in which he lives. Calibrations, then, is to be seen from this account as a concerted effort to understand the conditions of possibility of processes that engender alienation, which most evidently become significant to the construction of modern narratives of personhood. The method, focus, and direction of the act of calibrating work to remedy alienation by identifying the particular picture of the social that each such narrative generates, all the while acknowledging that it is such a picture of the social that gives the narrative its coherence. It goes without saying that the move to attenuate alienation exceeds the power of the particular calibrator and his/her task, making calibrations (Calibrations) a bid for collective dialogue and action. It is a bid to which I, for one, begin my response with this "Re-reading for the Social."

## NOTES

- 1. Even though there is occasionally a reference to a movement in the other direction (for instance: "In my reading there is a concomitant fine-tuning of a perspective on the social involved in the reading of the literary" [xvi]), for the most part, the literary/aesthetic is considered "the starting point" (xvi).
  - 2. Even though this term is only mentioned once in this text (see 98).
- 3. It is not insignificant that Quayson served for a period of time on the Editorial Board of the journal *Interventions*.
- 4. In a different section on violence, Quayson himself remarks on the consequences of choosing the "wrong" partner (73).
- 5. For an attempt to theorize from these differential experiences, see R. Radhakrishnan, Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- 6. He himself points to the message of the hanging activated by its "author," the Abacha state: "Hanging Saro-Wiwa was not so much a sign of disrespect for international opinion as a sign to Nigerians themselves that there was no escape from the state's totalitarian apparatus and that no one in the whole wide world could save them. No one" (72).
- 7. This would have been a propitious moment for his suggestion that "it is preferable to systematically blur the distinctions between the two domains by cross-mapping the analysis between them" (59).
- 8. The desire to preserve for Saro-Wiwa ultimate authorship (agency) for his death is related to the purity of purpose that Quayson wishes to bestow upon him, as shall be seen shortly.
- 9. This interpretation is justified by the stand exemplified by the journalist McGreal, who is criticized by Quayson for the responsibility he places on Saro-Wiwa for the climate that led to the murder of the chiefs (71).
  - 10. See Quayson's outlining of Corialanus's public persona, for example (63).
- 11. This bid can be seen in the appeals to interdisciplinarity, the many programmatic conclusions to chapters that I shall not cite here, and, more obviously, in the direct appeal to the reader, the most striking example being, of course: "I now proffer Prufrock's enigmatic invitation in the opening of Eliot's poem: "Let us go then, you and I . . ." (xi).

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