



## ***Egbon, Teacher and Mentor, Go Gracefully into the Night!*** **For Abiola Irele (1936-2017)\***

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**I**nclusive of all the members of his immediate family, there were ten of us at his bedside at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. It was Sunday, July 1, 2017 around 5:55 p.m. The doctors having earlier informed us that the end was near, a Roman Catholic “last rite” had been expeditiously arranged. It was conducted by a

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Nigerian priest. When Father Chris had gone through the first stage of the profoundly moving ceremony,

he invited any of us who so desired to speak our farewell to him after which he, the priest, would bring the order or proceedings of the “last rites” to a close.

Members of the family went first, turn by turn. And then, we, friends of the family, each had her or his turn, each woman and man moving close

to the still warm and living body and addressing him as if he could hear us though, scientifically speaking, all cognition had gone from him. As I waited for my turn to say my last words to him, an incredible riot of thoughts and emotions raced through my mind, undergirded by an overwhelming sadness. He was still here, on this side of the great divide; but I, we, all knew that he was slipping away into the night of Time and Being. The work of mourning him had already begun.

I swear that even as I approached him to say my farewell, I had not yet chosen the words to say to him. Unlike him who, with his matchless rationalism and towering intellect, was a believer, I am not a believer, at least not in the sense of organized, formal religion. But at the very moment when I got to his side and laid my hand on his arm, the words came of their own. I felt, I *knew* that I was addressing his spirit, addressing Spirit itself which binds all of us, the living, the dead and the unborn, together. Both the real and the factitious, trivial line separating “believers” and “unbelievers” had vanished as I said the following words to him, simply:

“Egbon, we shall not forget you. I testify that you have left us a prodigious legacy, a bountiful bequest that will never perish. I testify that you crossed many borders, the you are the greatest border crosser of your generation. The innumerable borders that you crossed enabled me and other members of my generation that you inspired to do the same. In the course of those border crossings, you lived life to the fullest. You are now at another border. On behalf of all who are not present here, I ask you to go across this last of all borders gracefully. Go gently and courageously into the shade, Egbon”.

Why did I suddenly have that intuition that in addressing his spirit I was also addressing *Spirit* itself? I do not know. But I have a conjecture: in moments of extreme, ineffable loss and sadness, intimations that we never ordinarily have come to us. We never really know how wide and deep a hold someone who has passed had on us until they’re no longer here. I thought I had learnt this lesson with the passing of my mother in 1992, but there I was on Sunday, July 1, 2017, at that bewildering space of grief again. With that level and space of grief, all that Egbon had meant to me, all that members of my generation had deeply cherished in him was telescoped into one blinding flash of illumination or revelation. What was this revelation? Here it is: only he who contained so vast an accumulation of the profoundly enriching emanations of Spirit as Abiola Irele did could have been a teacher and mentor to so many and also could have been the exemplary and consummate border crosser that he was. Is this an extravagant claim produced by the rush of powerful, confounding emotions like loss, grief, mourning? I don’t think so. At any rate, here are my thoughts on the matter, first gleaned at that numinous moment at his bedside just before his transition but now fleshed out several days after the initial moment of spiritual and cognitive eureka.

At the centre of Irele’s work and accomplishments as a scholar, teacher and critic is Negritude. Indisputably, he is the world’s greatest scholar on Negritude. He worked on all areas of modern and traditional African arts and humanities and of all the constitutive regions of Africa and its Diasporas. But Negritude is at the centre of it all. He started his

career *with* and *on* it and at the end, he was still working tirelessly on it, revising previous work and planning new revaluations. He knew very well that Negritude had and still has many critics, many intellectual detractors, some of them the most brilliant scholars in the field for whom Irele had nothing but great respect. So why did he stick so tirelessly, so immovably from the defence, the promotion of Negritude, especially of Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Césaire?

It is no secret that both Senghor and Césaire are considered two of the greatest modern poets in the French language, just as everyone knows that the two men’s Negritude was based on their love of the French language, culture and civilization. Though Césaire’s Francophilia was more tempered, more critical than Senghor’s, it was nonetheless as constitutive of his Negritude as Senghor’s. We know that Francophilia is a subset of a passionate love affair with European civilization, perhaps the most presumptuous of all the subsets of Western culture. Like Senghor and Césaire, Irele was completely at ease with his Francophilia, his great love of Western culture and civilization, right from the Greek and Roman classics to the great books and men of modern European letters and thought. And music and wine and cinema and cuisine.

But then also, Irele was a passionate lover and connoisseur of the classics of traditional and modern African art, music, performance and verbal arts. In other words, his Negritude, perhaps unlike Senghor’s and Césaire’s, was based, not on an abstraction, but on lived expressions of a truly cosmopolitan personality. He applied for and won many prestigious awards and grants from the National

Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in the U.S. to direct summer research and teaching programs in classic African linguistic and poetic traditions like the Zulu Izibongo and the Yoruba Ifa and Ijala. As much as delighted greatly in classical and contemporary European symphonic music, he had a passion for the masterpieces of Dun-dun and Bata drum idioms, old and contemporary hits of West African highlife music, and the trailblazing creations of the likes of Afropop stars Angelique Kidjo, Baba Mal and Yussouf N'dour.

Those who did not know at all, or knew very little of these “Negritude” expressions of Irele’s life and work may find his unapologetic, indeed very passionate love affair with French language and culture in particular and Western civilization in general confounding, especially as this sometimes takes a quite extraordinary or indeed spectral quality. One memorable instance of this comes to my mind and I find it both strangely consoling and revealing. We were in a restaurant in a village in the Medoc, a wine region of France near Bordeaux. We were the guests of Alain Ricard who himself passed away last year. The food and the wines were excellent and the company in an agreeable and infectious state of discreet bacchanalia. In such circumstances, Irele usually gets possessed by the spirits of Ogun and Ayan or, if you like, of both Bacchus and Orpheus combined. Spontaneously, he broke into song, into a long, spellbinding rendition of the central aria of Gaetano Donizetti’s “Lucia di Lammermoor”. Everyone inside the restaurant stopped eating, mesmerized by Irele’s flawless, mellifluous singing – in the Italian original of the opera. People walking by in the street outside the restaurant stopped in their

tracks and came to the door and the windows wondering where this music, this voice was coming from. When Irele finished singing, the place erupted into spontaneous, wild and prolonged cheering. When the applause ended, one old man, apparently still in the grip of the performance he had just heard, asked no one in particular, “he was singing in Italian, wasn’t he?” “Yes”, someone answered. “Where is he from?”, the old man continued. “Nigeria”, Alain responded. Silence for a long while. Then the old man said, “only in the Medoc, only in the Medoc can you hear a Nigerian singing heavenly Italian opera!” I could have said to him, “no, not only in the Medoc but also in Ibadan, in Dakar, in Port of Spain, Trinidad”.

You could say of Irele that he was one of a kind. And indeed, I found myself involuntarily muttering these words to no one in particular as we all sat on that fateful day last Sunday as we waited for the doctors to tell us words we were terrified of hearing from them. You would be correct in saying that about Abiola Irele that he was one of a kind, but you wouldn’t be cutting deep enough into the heart of the matter. I have said that I addressed my farewell, my last words, to his spirit and to Spirit itself. I admit that this smacks of a metaphysics of Being, but it is perfectly explicable in terms with which nearly everyone, “believers” and “unbelievers”, can agree. Thus, Spirit here connotes the universal yearning and will to enlightenment, to liberating knowledge, to humanizing generosity, to genuine solicitude and fellowship between all women and men. Irele’s spirit was completely at one with this universal Spirit.

It is constantly and quite correctly stated that Irele was at home

in virtually all the disciplines of the arts, the humanities, the human sciences. His love of the great works of Western learning and civilization was absolutely unapologetic, was indeed as open as it was never flaunted. But he also had a consuming passion for the arts, the knowledge systems of Africa and other regions of the world. One of kind, yes. But more precisely, a prodigious containment of diverse expressions of Spirit. For those wondering why he chose Negritude as the pivot around which virtually all his work revolved, I suggest that this is one clue to explore.

I do not wish to end this tribute on a bitter, carping note. The trope of a “renaissance man” is often used for Irele’s personality and scholarship. This isn’t mistaken. All the same, it ought to be remembered that the great Western scholars, writers, artists and thinkers either from whom the trope was derived or to whom it is applied were/are almost without exception, knowledgeable and versatile *only* in Western languages, traditions, and knowledge bases. But Spirit finds its habitation or location everywhere, the West and the Non-West, the North and the South. Abiola Irele’s brand of Negritude, beyond Senghor’s and Césaire’s, is the most powerful reminder that we have of this liberating truth.

I have not suddenly and with the passing of Irele become a convert to Negritude. Or to the metaphysical and theological universe of “believers”. We had our disagreements, our quarrels and I am not, in my grief at his passing, idealizing him. I am celebrating his life, his achievements, his example. One achievement or example leaves me in great awe and gratitude: more than any other mentor or, later colleague, Irele continuously and



unfailingly attracts new flocks of younger generations of scholars to his work, his interests, his perspectives and his projects. Thus, it is safe to declare: as time passes, the bands of

mourners and celebrants will grow, Egbon. You will not be forgotten.

*Go gracefully into the night, Egbon, mentor, teacher!*

**Note**

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