**MAGIC LANTERN: Excursions in the Creative Realm**

**Stop Press!!!**

The following is from yesterday, Thursday, November 13, and a more auspicious introduction to this address is one 1 would find difficult to imagine. Just listen to this, a report from THISDAY newspaper. Headlined **"Unmanned Space Probe Lands on Comet"**, the report reads:

The European Space Agency's Philae lander has made space history by successfully reaching the surface of comet 67P Chiyyumov-Gerasimenko. The landing, which took Place at 11.03 AMET was accompanied by rapturous scenes at the ESA's control room in Darmstadt, Germany.

Philae is the first probe to land on a comet.

Consider yourselves forgiven for pondering the question - what has this playwright to do with space rockets? You would have been even more astounded, could you have watched him four days ago, chewing his lips at Heathrow airport as he followed the make-or-mar fortunes of the space probe Philae, launched ten lunar years ago, as it made its final descent on the comet 67P when it appeared that, while the harpoons of the space probe fastened, the anchors did not "shoot". The difference between the anchors and the harpoons did not concern him in the least all it meant for him was that something had gone wrong, and he was now silently haranguing his god Ogun, whom he had assigned to all space ventures, to fix whatever it was, so that he could enjoy the vicarious fulfillment - the latest of many - of watching a man-made object hook onto a celestial body a body estimated to be 2.5miles wide in deep space, then waltz together through the cosmos at 84,000 miles an hour. Think of it! 311 million miles to rendez-vous with one of those rare "manifestations streaking across the sky in a fanfare of sparks, a phenomenon that has inspired poets, sages, and dreamers, among them William Shakespeare, eliciting from the pen of that poet for all time the - admittedly - feudalistic lines:

When beggars die, there are no comets seen The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.....

But now consider the transformation! The hands at the control centre on earth, in the city of Darmstadt, could be descended from beggars, vagrants, farmers, factory workers, petty chiefs, blue aristocracy and so on, so are the hands that dreamt, designed built and set on its micro-precision trajectory the terrestrial object that made this historic journey, to unite with the fiery body, the comet, on its own voyage of consummation with - no less than the majestic orb that gave its name to the solar system, lifegiver to the planet you and I inhabit -the Magic Lantern of the entire universe - the Sun!

And now, I invite you to take a walk with me - beginning where it all begins - in the mystery rooms of childhood. In those colonial days -1 am certain some of us here recall - unless you came from one of those special homes - usually missionary homes, me homes of ,been-to' families or others belonging to those we called the 'colonial aristocrats', there was no such thing as a children's playroom, no toy room stacked with the latest gadgetry. There were no prototypes of today's logo sets, no early models of Kubrick's cubes, no mechanical dolls, toy cars or railways engines and coaches, no jig-saw puzzles where the pieces eventually metamorphosed into exotic sceneries, no plasticine - the 'oyinbo' clay which you could knead into all sorts of creatures and objects without getting your fingers caked with loam. Hardly ever picture books, no room festooned in postcards and coloured maps, no battery operated mini-dioramas that created a fictional world - from all of which a child's aesthetic sensibilities were formed. The majority of our households were totally bereft of such exotic knick-knacks.

Nonetheless, it would be correct to claim that we also did possess them and a lot more besides. We possessed them because childhood was, still is, and will ever remain the autonomous republic of make-believe. In the world of make-believe, anything is possible. There may have been no physical playthings but - we were riot without imagination, and mat primal realm, the imagination, is the child's playroom, the warehouse of rare beings and entities that gradually fade away with adulthood. Eventually they vanish altogether - for most - under the sheer burden of survival and/or the prior claims of earning a livelihood. A few, just a handful, convert such a resented necessity into an instrument of its own neutralization - that is, they make the exercise of the imagination provide them a creative living - writers, musicians, poets, painters, designers etc. - now, that is what qualifies to be known as-poetic vengeance!

Actually, in my own case, childhood sort of scraped the peripheries of the kind of household I spelt put earlier, We lived within a missionary compound and therefore owned, or would encounter form time to time, in homes with a similar background, quite a few of those rudimentary toys. l recall that we had toy soldiers, hardly ever numerically sufficient to stage a minor skirmish, much less a full-scale war, but again, guess what happened! Imagination once again took over. We were never content with what those toy figures were meant to represent in real life. Instead, we opened out the transformative potential of the colorful miniaturized beings beyond their physical limitations, beyond their permanently frozen expressions and postures. We changed their designated characters into others to render vivid the stories and exploits that we had heard or read about. My recollection today is that those toy figures were inducements embedded in tins of lozenges that appeared with the passage of a mystery aunt of ours - another source of limitless speculations - who breezed in and out of our home from time to time and further fired our imagination. The presents she brought for the family were as exotic as was her name - 'Dot'. What a disappointment, how close our world came to crashing don when we discovered that 'Dot' was not her real name but the shortened form for a familiar Yoruba name - 'Dotun'. We preferred her as 'Dot', like a dot on an atlas map, a punctuation mark that lacked dimension, yet was infinite with exotic evocations, with breath and scents of whatever geography we could conjure up around this petite being who supplied the lozenges, toffees, and mints, spicing our routine world with the rare and wild.

Well, we consumed the lozenges and kept the toys. They acquired names and characters that changed with contexts that we ourselves invented. For instance, in one play session\*'a drummer dressed in a uniform from the Crimean war, might be turned into Yarinbo, the wife of Ijapa, the irrepressible tortoise of a million wiles, only to become the giant Goliath the following day. There was no incongruity in our minds. Roles could be determined by the colours or costume but were mostly acts of arbitrary designation - we willed them to become exactly what was required at the moment, even as we fought over who should possess or operate which miniature, transform it into what we wished, press it into service as a character from recollection or invention. I cannot truthfully say that they added any extension to my aesthetic armoury, despite the fact that the contest for possession was often determined by the colours of the costumes, or physical postures of the wearers.

However, there was an exception, one play object which stood apart. That came close to qualifying as the one that I would consider my most formative encounter with shapes and colours as discrete entities in the visual ordering of our universe, That instrument was called-the kaleidoscope. With the rapid, truly bewildering evolution of modern play gadgetry- Walkmans, video games etc - both as leisure aids and as functional or instructional tools, it is possible that many of us no longer recall - if at all we did encounter it what this object was like. In any case, each model probably differs from the next in various parts of the world, so, let me describe what mine was like.

It was shaped just like a telescope. You placed pile one eye against the lens and gently turned its tubular frame. With that rotary movement, me various colour transparencies form and reform in their multiple shapes - triangles, rectangles, cones, rhomboids and ovoids in all colours of the spectrum, rising, surmounting and cascading, interchanging with one another in infinite variations and combinations. It provided an endless feast of criss-crossing colour definitions, linear forms and conical, sharp-edged or beveled, and -.tinted, in endless gradations and nuances. Within the kaleidoscope, the imagination was truly let loose and unbridled. You felt free to discern towers, cathedrals, rooftop, market stalls, seas, mountains and valleys and even faces - such as one from my mental album of iconic characters, the parsonage priest, whom all referred to as 'Canon' , and appeared built like his namesake, the cast iron tubular weapon that fired canon balls. The imagination was set free, albeit provoked into being by those slivers of coloured glass that were magically buried within the tube. Naturally, I only discovered much, much later, that this was how magic was effected - just broken pieces of coloured glass mat rotated, fell, and clambered up again as you slowly spun the contrivance.

Our excursion continues, and leads us a new chamber of marvels; While still in primary school, the mind still dominated by the kaleidoscope an itinerant showman came into our school with the real thing -the Magic Lantern. Now, that was the name given it - the Magic Lantern. For this (display, which was -.-.made up of slides projected onto a screen, we were obliged to close the wooden louvred windows so as to darken the schoolroom. The projection began. This time, there was no predilection towards conjuring images put of forms, no function for the imagination - the images Were all ready prepared - and only in black and white. No colours. And the images were set. The slides had done all the work. Mountains. Rivers. Waterfalls. Lakes. Manicured parks. It was more like a geography lesson - albeit without the disciplinary cane for dullards Landmarks from the colonial homestead predominated - Buckingham Palace. Big Ben. The Tower of London. Canterbury cathedral. The British House of Parliament. All remote from the audience, but that colonial distancing was also bridged with human faces - mostly past kings and queens. Explorers. Missionaries. There were photo slides from the ceremonial changing of the guards outside the royal palace.

Thankfully, we were also treated to more than just the colonial fixtures. There were exotica from various lands. I am not sure now, but I believe that the magic lantern show also featured the Seven Wonders of the World. Warriors. Rulers. Mountains. Certainly the Taj Mahal. A Dome. A minaret. The Kaaba. Something or other from Jerusalem. Why have I suddenly become uncertain of some of these specific sites? Memory has something to do with it, but I suspect it is because, in many instances, there was personal superimposition. I had seen them - that is, variations of them - in that earlier, rudimentary, non-specific image spinner - the kaleidoscope of rotating, multi-coloured glass fantasy world. These new realities appeared to have been contained in the earlier inchoate shapes. In that earlier encounter with the kaleidoscope, imagination had intervened and completed the pictures, even inventing new ones.

Imagination, yes, but even imagination stems from encountered realities. I already had specific, graphic inputs into that fluid habitation of still life. Here is one example, acknowledged in my childhood biography, AKE. Embedded in the walls of the Anglican church into which, as children, we were all dutifully marched every Sunday, were stained-glass windows with portraits of the early missionaries, plus a representation of St. Peter, after whom our church was named. The kaleidoscope therefore was like a restless, three-dimensional tubular housing for the two-dimensional stained-glass window portraits, and thus an incubatory for the latter projected shapes and forms that could also evolve into human definitions. This was how the early contrivance, that rudimentary kaleidoscope became, and remained for me, the true Magic Lantern - in capital letters. The other, advertised as the magic lantern by the traveling showman - try and read that in small letters -never held the same sense of wonder, the same plenitude of possibilities as that first tubular hive of fluid but dynamic shapes and colours that transformed themselves at will, and on which I could impress my own evoked reality-yes, even, including facial expressions, gestures and postures -just as adults, supposedly rational beings - do when looking as clouds- some even going so far as to claim they have seen the face of God in the clouds, or in a lighted church window. By contrast, the mechanical magic lantern - small letters - was programmed, fixed, sealed and delivered. It had little or no magic to it. I felt vindicated when I eventually discovered that it had been saddled with another, and more appropriate name -the projector. Or more specifically - the Slide Projector, The kaleidoscope, however, remained the true Magic Lantern, a limitless warehouse of images, while the so-called magic lantern slid downwards to being a mere mechanical device - exotic, yes, but not magical.

I ought to stop at that stage of development of this technological toy, since I must be careful not to appear to denigrate the utilitarian importance of the latter invention - the slide projector. Among its further refinements are the now near indispensable laptop projectors known as Power Point which projects what we might term digital slides onto a screen - not just images, maps, graphs, statistics etc. but even words - entire sentences, paragraphs and summaries, presumably for the benefit of audiences whose attention span is considered inadequate. You not only hear the words from the presenter, you read them at the same time. Unquestionably that instrument, Power Point, has been at work before in this very hall, maybe educating its audience on the menace of HIV Aids, or Ebola. This, however, is not the occasion to go into the principles of that presumed advance in communication - its pluses and minuses if any, and what effect it might have - or already has – on the reading habits of many, or indeed on the enhancement or retardation of literacy in general, not to touch upon the appreciation of literature itself. We can safely leave those questions to the constituency of book fairs, reading clubs, literary conferences and libraries.

My interest in these technological play things is thus limited for now to the partnership role of technology in the freeing or inhibiting of the imaginative function, a rather paradoxical role, towards which end I have merely drawn upon the rudimentary gadgets that intruded upon, and contributed to the formative existence of the child-one, the kaleidoscope, the other, its problematic twin the one consider a usurper - the magic lantern, better known as the slide projector. In the mission of not only setting free, but actively propagating knowledge universally, there is no question which of the two has the practical advantage. I readily concede that reality: my own field, which is Literature, and which is synonymous with communication, would be painfully restricted without technology. Online publication, for instance, has become a reality of our times. So is the iPad, plus its bewildering array of relations - iDad, iMum and whatever else! I even get asked the question - is our age witnessing the end of the book as we know it today? My answer is always 'Not in the least'. The technological development poses only one problem for us writers: how to ensure that we collect our full royalty entitlements from online publication.

The extract from these beginnings is that the contest- and collaboration - between the two - in effect, between Sciences and the Humanities- provided, I suspect, the grounding for my holistic understanding of the creative process - in itself a near magical operation - and underscores my bewilderment at any effort that is geared towards placing bounds on the protean nature of both. Their contrasting roles notwithstanding, they have become partners as destroyers of boundaries and the liberation of the imagination - in short, a formidable team in the Humanities and the Scientific enterprise. The moveable type in printing revolution began it all centuries ago, literally freeing the word, and knowledge in general, from clerical cloisters. And today?

We must be cautious. Remain on our guard. There are those who claim equal dedication to the elimination of boundaries - but for one sole purpose - the erection of even more rigorous boundaries against the limitless constituency of the mind. After all, some rampaging hordes of - I suppose we must call them - humanity - however else their acts define them, have taken to wading across national boundaries in floods of blood, breaking down national boundaries wherever a breach is on offer - such as troubled nations like Somalia. Or Syria, Iraq. If alarm had not been triggered off early enough, they certainly would have broken down the boundary between Mali and Nigeria. And what do they propose as standard currency within the new formed, unbounded territory? No need for guesswork - their wares are advertised long before arrival - their approach is paved with severed hands, heads, their roads lined with twenty-first century crucifixions. So, yes indeed, you could claim that they also are engaged in the removal of human divisions. However, while we work to break down barriers in order to irradiate the enclaves of atavism with new notions, new vistas of the world, new insights into history, new propositions of human relationships - of gender, race, beliefs, classes, identities, to identify with the individual in a kaleidoscope of humanity - these others would, if they could, seal up all vectors through which knowledge, that primary destroyer of boundaries, passes from human to human, from community to community. They would assault the most basic means to communication - be it the occasional pamphlet, the television, video or the Internet. They would proscribe it, tie its hands behind its back if they could, cut its throat and behead it -ideally publicizing the act through that very technological innovation - Internet - the product of the skills and the vision of others, that they denounce as abominations in the sight of god. They would - and they do - burn down the masts that carry, not just information but the material of knowledge, truncate its mission of sowing the very seeds of enlightenment, of experimentation, of the excitation of explorations into the unknown, in whatever field, and with all the uncertain!" and risks involved in trials and errors. They would restrict knowledge to the narrow dictate.-of primitivism where only learning by rote, and the regurgitation of frozen texts is permitted That expansive world that you and I could make and re-make at will through the exercise of the imagination, right from childhood is - anathema. Indeed, they call it blasphemy. To them the book is - *haram*. Forbidden. They proliferate the world but I believe that, in these parts, they are known as - Boko Haram.

The propagators of such enclaves are beating at our gates, and new boundaries are springing up not even virtual, but physical. We have one next door to the North - you know it as Sambisa Forest, its unwilling residents, school children from a town called Chibok. And hundreds of others, in a condition of virtual slavery. From within that mined enclave, they make bloody sorties in efforts to extend such boundaries and swallow up institutions such as this, where we are gathered at this very moment. They proscribe this very gathering - it is *haram*.. We would be guilty of the most pitiable crime of complacency if we believe that they will be content to stay behind their present bounds. No. Their vision is truly limitless, it is global, and knowledge is their primal enemy -that much, but not much else, they can and do articulate. And so they shut down sanctuaries of knowledge, violently and brutally, set fire to them, snuff out the lives of the dedicated servitors of knowledge and creativity and enslave their hapless pupils. For them, age is no barrier to inflicting sudden death, which, to summarize, is their only discernable credo. Victims and vectors of a yet undiagnosed twenty-first century morbidity, they kill, not merely children, but childhood. They smash the kaleidoscope of the mind, even in its most rudimentary development.

Even if we, right here in this nation, were not undergoing the same affliction as the humanity across the Euphrates, across the Straits of Bosphorus, we should know that humanity everywhere is engaged today - deny it whoever pleases - in the perennial struggle between Dogma and Exploration, between openness and closure, between Power and Freedom, between the kaleidoscope - which is the true Magic Lantern, and the usurping magic lantern, magical principally by name, seductive in its presentations, but foreclosing the collaborative mission of the imagination - which is the acknowledged foraging ground of both writer and scientist. You are familiar with the former, generally a breed that tends to be more notorious in public perception, the writer to be found at the forefront, seemingly the arrowhead of the mission of enlightenment. However, I take pains always to remind us that we do have 'partners in crime' outside what are generally known as the Arts, or the Humanities - hence my tendency towards such expressions as 'creative mission' and allied evocations. Maybe this is out of a desire to spread the risk factor around, to emphasize the fact that the mission of creative humanity extends beyond the purlieu of only writers, since the essence of progress has always been - to break down barriers. Now here is an often neglected danger that such censors pose to the rest of us: those infidels of creativity, the anti-minds of the world, are invariably the obsessed aspirants to, or custodians of - Power - and their apologists! Sometimes I attempt to understand the reactionary contrariness of Power by proposing that perhaps so much has been achieved by human ingenuity, and so rapidly, that the sluggish anti-minds - anti-minds as in anti-matter - of society feel threatened. Thus, they view creativity itself is an affront, since creativity is dedicated to the constant opening up of territory, and thus constitutes an incessant challenge to the sense of security (or. complacency) that comes with the invocation of boundaries. The essence of discovery is that it is the antithesis of boundary imposition. Power loves boundaries. Power manifests itself within boundaries, is exercised within some form of territorial delimitation. Obsessed with spatial control - and by this we do not refer only to the physical territory but equally to the non-material terrain, such as imagination - Power fulfills its reality in the conviction that it possesses and dominates the infinite space of all potential discovery or apprehension. Its gospel of fixity is lodged in the manipulation of an invisible slide projector from which it dispenses its own limited storage of antiquated, and selective slides. Often, such slides are no more than pages and chapters from doctrinal texts, among them religious Scriptures, upon which their extreme, purblind proselytizers confer the totality of all possible knowledge.

But let us beware - for indeed, Power also lays claim to a form of magic, since it projects a yet unattained destination. In the secular world, this is called Utopia. In the theocratic, it is known as Paradise - other names being Valhalla, Nirvana and so on. For any of these, the here and now does not exist except as a mere passage - or indeed an obstacle that stands in the way of attaining Utopia/Paradise, Scriptures and Ideological Tracts superimpose on the present the sublimity of that Ultimate Destination, even encroach on the province of the kaleidoscope by brainwashing the susceptible into seeing a fantasy land through the seductive tints of stained-glass windows. That vista is however the creation of the privileged receivers of Revelation, the Chosen, who insist that they must never be contradicted or questioned. Beneath all such projections however, allying the secular to the theocratic, is one craving, one coveted, uncompromising objective, especially among the more intolerant versions of such proponents, and that is - Power. And to whom does such power belong? To the Chosen. But who chose them? Whatever they claim, they are self-chosen. Self-appointed. They may evoke as their original sponsor one Super-Being, or Supreme Being by whatever name they choose, an invisible Authority with whom, presumably, they are constantly on a mystic hot-line. Our response, the response of the liberated mind must be simply this: whip out our Mobile phone and say, give me her - or his number. I want to send him - or her - a text.

How did that ancient facilitator of Power - the *taboo* - come to be constructed in social evolution? Since, very often, there is no rational explanation of what is forbidden - unless those who interdict right and left openly admit that their goal is simply to contain challenges to authority and institute absolute obedience - they proceed to invent the taboo - the undoable and the unspeakable. And - going all the way back to whatever serves as equivalents of the medieval phase of such afflicted societies - even the unthinkable! It is difficult for us to believe it today, but at that time when the recently deceased space pioneer and universal protagonist Neil Armstrong was proclaiming his 'giant step for mankind', there were dedicated nay-sayers who raved and ranted that the act of stepping on the moon at all was trampling on the sacred precincts of divinity, and that the world would be punished for its impiety. The envelope of knowledge and enlightenment was being pushed, threatening the 'forbiddens' of superstition, and such human ambition was - *taboo*! Consider, by contrast, the message of Stephen Hawkings to the Paralympics which took place in London two years

"The Paralympic Games is about transforming our perception of the world. We are all different, there is no such thing as a standard or run-of-the-mill human being, but we share the same human spirit. What is important is that we have the ability to create. This creativity can take many forms, from physical achievement to theoretical physics."

Missing from that exhortation would be, for many in my jealous field of occupation -literature, but we can forgive the man who is often referred to as the greatest scientific mind of this era. In any case, Stephen Hawkings probably has literature tucked in somewhere between physical achievement and theoretical physics, so there are really no grounds to complain. Were I the one composing a message for the Paralympics, I would probably have substituted Poetry for quantum Physics, rhapsodized over the poetry discemable in the coordination of human limbs straining against Nature's gravitational dominion- These are mere occupational rivalries - neither is exclusive of the other. What we are obviously agreed on - to quote Hawkings directly' - is "the transformation of our perception of the world" and "the ability to create". For the jealous guardians of the magic lantern - small letters - that human instinct to transform, to re-create, is - taboo-unless of course along narrow, pre-set and inflexible lines. The parameters of transformation are rigidly located in their own pre-set scriptural slides - of which, by the way, lest we forget its own crimes, Secular Doctrinal Ideology under whatever name has proved an equally pernicious supplier - deadly, stultifying and absolutist. Despite its 'scientific' claims, that so-called materialist opponent has operated under no less a superstitious spirit than the theocratic, evoking the domineering territory of the 'taboo' in the realms of creativity.

Of course the taboo has a long history - perhaps it is as old as humanity itself. One is compelled to recall that the instinct to dominate, to restrict, to control - this mysterious, unpredictable and infinitely resourceful impulse to counter the human need for 'venturing' - through imposition of the taboo goes back to those known or guessed-at rudimentary beginnings of society, and culture. In constant opposition is that liberating human propensity known as - **Curiosity**. Curiosity? Does that ring a bell? Something very current, restlessly and compellingly active?

How, obvious, yet summative and appropriate for the restlessness of the human mind it must be deemed, that the most recent - and now so dramatically supplanted! - instrument for the triumphant exploration of the universe should have been named, with a literalness that paradoxically evokes a sense of sublimity - Curiosity! I refer to that dazzling, eloquent, meticulous successor to the first mechanical probe of the lunar landscape. I assume of course that like me, you do follow the space launches no matter where - indeed, that you plan to send up your own rocket one of these days? Awka, after all, is famous for propulsion technology - guns, Egbunigwe etc - so why not an Anambra rocket - but now dedicated to research and human advance? Keep that in sight - but first you must get rid of the taboos and debilitating superstitions. Clean out the Okija shrines and all symbols of morbidity and then, watch the flowering of the creative technologies.

In evoking the restrictive device known as the *taboo*, I do not speak here of the ancient taboo that was an economic device, a means of conserving scarce resources - land, food etc - whatever was essential to the rudimentary community for its very survival. Mythology in the service of restriction - a paradoxical occupation of the imagination, since mythology itself, the art of divine storytelling is itself a creative act - this branch of the literary craftiness comes into play as stories are spun that make the eating of this or that kind of food, the cutting down of some trees, shrub or the other, an act of impiety. No, of course it is not that kind of taboo that was invented for community preservation that bothers the world even today, where even crops are routinely altered genetically for higher and higher yields, as well as to enhance resistance to diseases. We are concerned here with the taboo whose prohibitive inspiration is largely captured in that interdiction of the judeo-christian faith – *thou shah have no other gods but me,* or even that more infamous conimand: *this is the tree of knowledge, therefore eat not of its fruits!* There was at least a charming honesty about those scriptural commandments. Here is a god who says bluntly to his two mortal creations, Adam and Eve - listen here, there is only one cock of the walk, so don't even think of competition! And the second verboten similarly declares the intention of that power to keep a firm hand on enlightenment. Alas, from 'thou shalt have no other gods but me' has emerged, over time, the injunction - 'thou shalt read no other books but mine', 'thou shalt write no other books but mine' all circling around the ultimate interdiction: 'thou shalt think no other thoughts but mine.

The taboo, prohibition ...evolving into the tradition of the Index of banned books, from medieval times, through the Roman Catholic Inquisition, to be adopted and enforced with unprecedented brutality by - the Taliban and their misbegotten species in today's Boko Haram, Isis and others - simply censorship by any other name - often strikes me as the continuation of this extra-terrestrial- but, paradoxically earth-bound - project, pursued by those who constitute themselves 'The Chosen', the custodians or Revelation among other self-designated beings, self-positioned class monitors or thought police of society. Ask no questions, Do not attempt to unveil what is declared hidden. Suppress your demons of curiosity, do not interrogate what lies beneath the surface. Long before Rene Descartes' arrival on earth, this narrow elite had already anticipated, and mobilized against that philosopher's heretical challenge to orthodoxy, whose ramifications go far, far beyond the original shorthand formulation - *I think. therefore Jam*, Think? That was the first heresy from which all later heresies emerge. If such a notion - independent, unregimented thought, the domain of ideas as the dwelling place of humanity - was sufficient to put the wind up Authority - be it of the religious or the secular kind - imagine the terror of the even wild more primordial challenge of the transformative mind: I create, therefore I am!

***Create*!** There, in my view, we have the critical word. Our physicist, Stephen Hawkings, would be doused in kerosene and burnt alive, still strapped to his magical wheel-chair device from which, despite a physically cruel affliction, the words trickle out through ingenious contraptions, inspiring and validating the existence of others like him. We need examples like his - athlete, astronaut or physicist, geneticist, researchers in every field, to take the heat off the writer, poet, novelist, dramatist/the custodian of the verbal kaleidoscope, our true Magic Lantern, that creature who rearranges the basic material of fragmented glass - the Word - to "transform our perception of the world", create a new order of existence and inspire visions in unsuspected places. This is why placing the writer's mission in the context of routine human creativity - which implicates the making or re-making of things, enables us to expose the self-contradictory and futile motions of censorship, that constrictive instrumentality of Power.

Today, technology has reduced the rampages of the exclusionist policies of closed societies, forcefully challenged the phenomenon of ideological prohibitions - again, of both the secular or theocratic kind. In those stubborn bastions of creative closure, the mind - just like the body in the Olympics - is being increasingly liberated from the control of the presumptions of others or of their arbitrary will. With every new invention, it roams further and further in virtual reality and pursues hidden truths. Virtual reality is the virtuous Nemesis that hovers over stubbornly restrictive cultures such as the theocratic - especially their fundamentalist spores, which increasingly leap centre stage across the world with their violent censorship of knowledge and fear of creativity, their pathetic twitches that lead to restrictions on satellite dishes, make bonfires of radio and video cassettes, films but - most prominently and from the immemorial - books. It was predictable: the first act of the Taliban on over the Afghanistan years ago was: destroy the images next, the turn of the books: Ban or Burn! The neo-Talibans who recently overran Northern Mali did their best to outdo the Taliban. The world was helpless, held its breath prayerfully on the fate of the famous ancient libraries of Timbuktoo - having reduced the monuments to rubble in the first frenzied wave. We knew that the priceless manuscript, manuscript of Timbuktnn was next.

And after Timbuktoo? Or indeed, before Mali? The force that has been rampaging over the past three or four years in parts of our own nation, Nigeria, makes no bones about its mission, proudly defining that mission by its very choice of a name Boko Haram or - the Book is Taboo. True, these throwbacks try to cover up their true mission - as has become fashionable in other notorious solipsist worlds - with the rambling, grandiloquent title of 'Defenders of the Faith and Warriors of the one God through Jihad' etc, etc ad *nauseum*, especially on video pronouncements, but the name by which our own mimic but deadly fatalists are known, and in which they glory through their acts is quite straight to the point: Boko Haram - The book is Taboo. All books, except - needless to say - one, theirs, the Koran, but - to be very specific, their own privileged, selective and distorted reading of the Koran. Some of the spokesmen of the movement have even expanded their strictures to embrace all forms of education or culture that may be deemed western, oblivious to the irony that they themselves assiduously turn to the technology of the West for the dissemination of their; propaganda - television and video especially. But perhaps they are aware of, but relish the contradiction, since their methodology approves of using the enemy's strengths against itself - including its philosophy of an open, multi-textured society, a kaleidoscope of infinite discourse.

Let us address these local Talibans directly or, more accurately, address ourselves, just so that we know - physically, symbolically, and potentially - what is at stake, just so we understand why learning and imagination - of any sort - is the primary enemy of these atavists. 1 urge you to understand that we are not speaking of Islam, or Christianity, not addressing Hinduism or Zoroastrianism when we use expressions such as "fundamentalism" - and interchangeably with "fanaticism", "zealotry" and intolerance. The inability to tolerate an alternative view - this is what assails our very present existence. We are speaking to all fundamentalists and nurturers of intolerance, all those who believe that there is only one book in the world -their Scriptures. They know the truth. They know that when you hold a book in your hands, you indeed hold in your own hands the power - and the duty - of redirecting your destiny. Beyond the actual contents between the covers, a book speaks in a voice of intellectual admonishment to each and every model of intolerance. It speaks to the Christian Talibans in this very part of the nation who glory in demolishing the sculptures of Mbari in the land, claiming that they are heathen manifestations and have no place in the modern world. It says quite simply: you may demolish these material manifestations of a people's antecedent spiritual intuitions, but how many books that celebrate the spirit of Mbari can you destroy? How many bonfires can you raise and how often, to match the pace at which works emerge that celebrate Ala. Or Ikenga. Or Amadiora? Now, understand this - we are not speaking of the modern corruption of - these precedent spiritualities which have mutated into money making cults and filthy cultic practices like Okija - no! We are speaking of mythological constructs that have sustained humanity while it groped for the scientific explanations for mystifying phenomena. We are not speaking of money making delusions that need human eyes, livers, lungs and genitals in an illusion that these will turn followers into multimillionaires overnight, or power hungry perverts in any field!

No! We address those who are so intellectually challenged that they cannot even discriminate but move to destroy what they have never taken the trouble to study or understand. And we say to them, you are engaged in a futile contest. The genie of creativity is out of the bottle and cannot be stuffed back again. How fast can your puny, bigoted hands and misdirected zeal compete with the will that reproduces and regenerates the world-view of the Igbo people? To these rampaging Christians, I direct this simple question: could Chinua Achebe's world famous Things Fall Apart, have emerged without the heritage of the so-called primitives of Umuofia? If the early Christian missionaries had succeeded in doing what many of you - the so-called born-again Christians have chosen to undertake - destroy the manifestations of that Igbo culture by pulverizing such a central cultural precipitate as the Mbari sculptures, would you not feel deprived today of a heritage upon which you can draw to fashion out symbols and images that reach out across language and history to other cultures? Cultural criticism, comparative assessment are of course also part of human discourse, and proof of the human capability for self-interrogation and thus - Change! But what has this to do with the physical destruction of extant evidence of human creativity? On behalf of this and other threatened heritage, we call on communities to stand up against the plague of philistinism that is ripping through these borders before our entire history and inspirational sources are swamped by the noxious tides of fanaticism.

And guess what, the fanatics of two major rival theologies-Christian and moslem - even join forces to pulverize the designated "infidel" spiritual products of their forebears, smashing statues, attacking their seasonal processions and festivals in Ile-Ife, lbadan and other cities. The very sight of such manifestations they claimed, was an offence to their own righteous existence, an impediment to modern progress and an abomination in the sight of their deities, When you surged out again and again-to destroy the shrine built to the Yoruba heroine Moremi - in Offa, Ilorin, Oyo, among other notorious instances - how could you fail to see yourselves as mere petulant agents of discredited aliens whose monumental ignorance of your own historical and spiritual antecedence you thus slavishly attempt to rehabilitate? We say 'discredited' because history states clearly that the assault of these aliens was not impelled by any real spiritual inspiration but by that diabolical dualism of Power and Profit. This duo has shaped the misfortunes of much of the continent we call ours. What then does that make you but forerunners of Boko Haram and allied tendencies?

You cannot however escape that history, a history of which Moremi was the protagonist of her time. It is the narrative of protagonist recovery for the various Moremi of the world - including today's Malala, the heroine of Pakistan! It is that by which our present is measured and our future inspired. You may destroy the statues and the shrines of Moremi, but you cannot wipe out her history, you cannot eliminate the songs to which she has given inspiration nor the drama of her existence that is given new life by dramatists like the late Duro Ladipo. The avatars, the demiurges, the mythological paradigms and the philosophies of a people that these sculptural victims embody in their simple materiality - cannot be eradicated. On the contrary, they remain the shards of rotating coloured glasses from which new images are glimpsed, from which new designs - both physical and symbolic - are inspired. Those who still, even today, indulge in this kind of mindless iconoclasm should look, around today and recognize that they merely anticipated the mission of Boko Haram. They should understand indeed that their spiritual relations softened the ground for the eventual advent of the Taliban in Afghanistan. And they should pause and ask themselves - did the so-called ISIS of today's diabolical infamy simply drop from the clouds, or could it be that even here, on this soil, we joined others in willing their global infestation, in preparing the welcome mat that cushioned their descent?

Intolerance, did I mention earlier as the root of current predicament? Yes, but tolerance also, tolerance of the intolerable. Intolerance on one side - yes indeed - but, on the other, a1so tolerance, accommodation, rationalization, complacency and even indulgence - all amounting to passive collaboration and complicity. If a multi-religious political entity called Nigeria, a struggling kaleidoscope of faiths, cultures and histories, had not tolerated the sectarian retrogression of one shard that led it to consolidate itself as a theocratic state - and I refer here to the first renegade Zamfara! - If the dog had stood firm on all four legs and growled to the tail, no, you cannot wag me, would we have come to this pass? I am speaking of a situation where our children, sent to school in pursuit of knowledge, for the nurturing of their gift of imagination, are blown to pieces, openly beheaded, their teachers butchered, their parents executed for their accessory role' of being parents to such pupils, I am speaking of this *very* present where it turns out that our children, routinely assembled in an examination centre, have merely been corralled like sheep for ease of capture, to be brutally displaced, compelled to undergo unspeakable indignities and violations. Just take a look at their drab, cowed presence in the video propaganda of Boko Haram! Is this their ultimate deserving? Does anyone glimpse in their hands even the prospect of any modern equivalent of the rudimentary kaleidoscope – perhaps an ipad?

The magic lantern of childhood opens up a world of marvels, enchantment, and imagination. As reality encroaches, the maturing mind discovers that beneath the glitter lies a world of disenchantment, of banality, even disgust. But the mind continues to turn that tubular contraption, filled with shards of multi-coloured glass, even though they not only dazzle, but wound, and that some of the colours are the colours of bile and blood, also that the hues that run into one another are not simply gradations of the rainbow, but colours of humanity that exist on raw earth, not as idyllic beings suspended in the sky. And, for open minds, curiosity takes over and exploration begins. Mistrust of the settled projector, the stamp of orthodoxy, imposed and inflexible reality - even while temporarily enticing and cosseting - encroaches, and then humanity asks questions. The troubled answers lead to transformation. Today, aided by its precocious product - technology - the process is unstoppable.

How many of you here are space nuts, I do not know. I am, as confessed, unabashedly one. I follow all rocket launches wherever - China, Europe, Soviet Union, the United States and all, sometimes setting an alarm clock to ensure that I am up for the ones that lift off at an unearthly hour in the time-zone I happen to be. I mourn with any launch that goes wrong, celebrate with the successes - fortunately in the majority these days. I even tuned it to NASA", recently, when it sent up some music to her latest - again, please note, now superseded - satellite, so that it could be beamed back to earth and downloaded by anyone on a private receptor - most likely a computer. Naturally I was somewhat envious that a product from my own field - let us say, poetry - had been beaten to the galaxy by a sister art - Music. Still, I tuned in to NASA's recording studio to share the moment and – hmm, well; I must confess that I found neither the lyrics nor the music particularly exciting, pausing only to admit that my tastes in music are somewhat conservative. In any case, I consoled myself by recollecting that the spheres, according to the ancients, have always been the abode of music, though I must add that I have yet to hear such celestial music nor met anyone who has.

This one however, I did hear clearly and distinctly, this music that was a product of human creativity. Heard it loud and clear, a manifestation of man's artistic and technical feat- literally a marriage made in heaven. The title of the solemnizing music for that marriage was appropriate enough - ***Reach for the Stars*** - and what a moving sight it was to see all those dedicated scientific minds humming and swaying to the tune! The studio atmosphere was infectious, for they were celeb rating yet another first in human history, the moment when a work of art was beamed up to a man-made object in outer space, from where it was beamed back again for those of us, the technologically challenged, who can only admire, but not aspire. And here is the point, the heart of our entire discourse this morning: that our neo-barbarians can smash all the "ungodly" studios on earth, destroy the statues of the mythological beings known and unknown, shut down cinemas, television, reduce to rubble even the monuments erected to their own sages, burn down the ancient libraries of Timbuktoo, the product of the exploring minds of their own religious predecessors in all disciplines - mathematics, philosophy, pharmacology, medicine, ecology and so on - the entire gamut of man's intellectual striving. Yet, they can pursue knowledge wherever they find it, incinerate its roots and poison its sources: one thing they cannot do is - they cannot 'reach for the stars'. They cannot reach those scintillating orbs and destroy them, not one! They cannot, ultimately, destroy the kaleidoscope whose shards of infinite variations illuminate the orbit of human creativity. This is one rendition that is totally out of reach of any earthly interventionist censor. It will be fallowed by others. That music will invade our earth and penetrate our senses - which are one feat that the imagined 'music of the spheres' has failed to do throughout millennia of the promulgation of its existence. The majority of us here, in company with even the ground support team of scientists at NASA - or Darmstadt - will visit Mars in our lifetime only in imagination. I watched the - now earlier - Mars landing, like millions, only vicariously, an earth bound creature, reveling in the sublime moment of a feat of human ingenuity that has broken barriers of time and motion. The name that those pioneers gave to that creation, gently probing the surface of Mars at this moment and penetrating through its crust, sniffing, tasting, collecting, analyzing and transmitting images and insights back to others - just 'like the average writer - remains a most befitting name for the existential imperative of mankind at any moment of its history - Curiosity. Nnyocha! I like that name. If there had to be an alternative choice however, I would have proposed, and in capital letters - ***The MAGIC LANTERN!***

**Wole Soyinka**