

ambivalent, and the regime never succeeded in clearly defining itself. Other failures were legion: “The [work] absences, the cynicism, the corruption, and the incompetence outweighed the rest in building a legacy for those Italians who survived into the new Republic in 1946. Every one of the great slogans of Fascism turned out to be false.”

And yet in contemporary Italy, the neo-Fascist group now known as the Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance), supposedly reconstructed along democratic lines, was politically respectable enough to occupy the right flank of Silvio Berlusconi’s right-of-center coalition. It attained this respectability without ever having explicitly rejected Mussolini’s misdeeds. Il Duce’s granddaughter is a parliamentarian. Is all forgiven? No—just swept under the carpet. Hence, Bosworth. The nation that turns its back on its past has its history written by foreigners.

—Roland Flamini

## ARTS & LETTERS

### An African Adulthood

WOLE SOYINKA, WHO IN 1986 became Africa’s first recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, has long been one of the continent’s most imaginative writers. He also embodies the effort by its native cultures to reclaim their identities after colonialism by a return to the rhythms of native ritual. It’s a complicated task, as Soyinka illustrates repeatedly in this third installment of his memoirs.

The tale of his first professional homecoming is typical. After early studies at the elite Government College in Ibadan, in western Nigeria, near his birthplace, Soyinka had gone to England to earn a degree in drama from the University of Leeds. He then worked a few years at London’s Royal Court Theatre before returning to Nigeria with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. He had also won a competition to produce a play as part of the new nation’s independence day celebrations on October 1, 1960. *A Dance of the Forests* presented Africa’s

#### YOU MUST SET FORTH AT DAWN: A Memoir.

By Wole Soyinka.  
Random House.  
528 pp. \$26.95



Nigerian author and playwright Wole Soyinka continues to lend his support to causes, such as this Lagos protest against fuel prices last year.

“recurrent cycle of stupidities” through a complex use of Yoruba traditions combined with European modernism. Nigeria’s new rulers, recognizing themselves in the drama’s depiction of corruption and abuse of power, branded it subversive on the basis of rehearsals and canceled the performance. Pan-Africanists meanwhile attacked the play’s embrace of Western dramaturgical devices.

Despite this initial setback, Soyinka persevered in his pursuit of an Africa where traditional cultures freely assimilate those elements of modernity consistent with their own proud identities. This vision draws on the writer’s own fruitful encounters between a rich African heritage and the “greats” of the Western literary and modernist canon. Soyinka’s first memoir, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), told how these two influences mingled from the beginning. Born in 1934, Soyinka grew up at the Anglican mission of Aké, where his father was headmaster of the primary school and his mother, nicknamed “Wild Christian,” was a social worker. Though raised in an English-speaking and Christian environment, Soyinka regularly visited his father’s ancestral home in Ìsarà and nourished an affinity for the mythic, ritual, and cultural world of the Yoruba, where sorcerers, spirits, and gods were living realities.

A second memoir followed, in 1994, describing his early pro-democracy activities (*Ibadan: The Penkele Years—A Memoir, 1946–1965*) and the difficulties they caused him. Soyinka’s appeal for peace during the 1967 Biafran conflict led to his arrest and two years’ imprisonment, most of it spent in solitary

confinement. The exile that followed was the start of a period of extraordinary literary productivity as well as political activism. That period, the subject of the current memoir, brought Soyinka into contact, and eventual conflict, with Nigeria's increasingly corrupt and abusive regimes, culminating in repeated bitter exiles, emotional returns, and his own sentencing to death in absentia by the brutal General Sani Abacha. (The memoir's title evokes Soyinka's repeated flights from repressive regimes; his preferred ploy was to pretend to head off into the bush to hunt.) In 1995, Abacha executed Soyinka's fellow playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other human rights activists.

In his 1986 Nobel Lecture, Soyinka shattered taboos by reminding his audience that many of the most revered names of the European Enlightenment—including Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, and Voltaire—were “unabashed theorists of racial superiority and denigrators of the African history and being.” However, he quickly reassured his listeners that his purpose was “not really to indict the past, but to summon it to the attention of a suicidal, anachronistic present.” This new memoir is not an easy read, but it is a profoundly rewarding one. Soyinka weaves the adventures of his adult life into a rich, dramatic narrative that is evocative of African storytelling by word of mouth. Perhaps he intends the complex tapestry of *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* to be understood in the same light: as the synthesis of a wealth of ancient myths and traditions with the best of humanism and modernity, addressing the drama that is not only the author's life but Africa's contemporary reality.

—J. Peter Pham

## Unhappy Endings

IT'S COMMON TO THINK OF the late works of creative geniuses as mature, luminous, settled, like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Rembrandt's last canvases. Edward Said (1935–2003), the literary critic and Middle East polemicist, had a different and darker vision. For some great artists, he believed, old age brings works of art that feel not serene but

belated, “untimely,” at odds with the world around them and full of “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradictions.” He quotes the German critic Theodor Adorno: “In the history of art late works are the catastrophes.”

The idea makes intuitive sense—why shouldn't artists, like other mortals, have their certainties thrown into confusion by the approach of death? Even the greatest creative spirits may feel rebellious, or simply detached from a changing world, as they age. Said sees these emotions in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, in the late works of Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Strauss, in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard* (1958), and in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912).

The meaning of lateness seems to shift from chapter to chapter of this book—with some excuse, since Said died before finishing it, and his wife, along with friend and colleague Michael Wood, assembled the book from lectures, articles, and seminar notes. And the readings can be idiosyncratic.

Beethoven's late *Missa Solemnis* and *Hammerklavier Sonata*, for instance, express for Said the quality of lateness because of their technical difficulty and their “disjointed, even distracted sense of internal continuity.” With Strauss, it's just the opposite: The works are ambrosial, and highly popular, but “late” because they flee the world around them to hide in the anachronistic harmonies of the 18th century.

Sometimes the shifting meanings make the idea richer. Said contends that Mann's *Death in Venice* contains qualities of lateness—the loss of previous certainties, the clash of opposites without resolution—even though it was written early in Mann's career. Those qualities emerge more plainly, he writes, in Benjamin Britten's late opera version of the story (1974). He even argues that all of literary modernism has some of this “late” quality, turning to primitive beginnings and strange forms as a way for artists to flee a sense of having lived past the logical end of the history of art. At times, the concept seems stretched to the breaking point. But the attractiveness of the central insight

Even the greatest creative spirits may feel rebellious, or simply detached from a changing world, as they age.

**ON LATE STYLE:**  
Music and Literature  
Against the Grain.

By Edward W. Said.  
Pantheon. 208 pp. \$25