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Gloria Nne Onyedoriri

EPISTEMIC AND DEONTIC MODALITIES IN AMINATA SOW FALL'S *L'EX-PÈRE DE LA NATION*

ACCORDING TO JOHN LYONS' account of modality (the general principles of which we will outline in the first part of this essay), "the sincerity conditions that are asserted or questioned in the performance of indirect illocutionary acts all have to do with the knowledge, beliefs, will and abilities of the participants; and these . . . are the factors which are involved in epistemic and deontic modality" (Lyons 1977, 786). For example, in English, as well as in French, there are fixed idioms such as "Will you . . .," "Can you . . .," "Is it possible for you to . . .," "I'd like you to . . .," that accompany orders or wishes. This can be explained by the intuitive link between, on the one hand, notions of necessity and obligation that are relevant to the semantic analysis of sentences that contain the verbal auxiliary "should" and, on the other hand, notions of possibility and of permission relevant to the semantic analysis of sentences containing the auxiliary "may" (Lyons 1977, 791). We can say, following Lyons (1977, 787), that the epistemic and deontic modalities are two forms of "traditional modal logic" (that is to say of necessity and possibility). When analyzing epistemic modality for example, we must remember the needs, the expectations and the hopes of the speaker as well as the process of deduction itself (see Lyons 1977, 792).

Lyons distinguishes between "epistemic logic" and "epistemology," both derived from a Greek word meaning "to know": "whereas epistemology is concerned with the nature and source of knowledge, epistemic logic deals with the logical structure of statements which assert or imply that a particular proposition, or set of propositions, is known or believed" (Lyons 1977, 793). Knowing what a proposition means implies knowing the circumstances, the conditions or the possible worlds in which such a proposition could be affirmed as true. And knowing what someone knows or believes implies knowing the "state descriptions" or "possible worlds" (and thus the semantic content) of the propositions which that person subscribes to.

Epistemic logic is intuitively linked to the notion of truth that we see in the alethic modality (*alethic* comes from the Greek *aléthés*, "true," and refers to the "necessary or contingent truth of propositions"). In other words, "if we know or are told that *p* is necessarily true, we can without more ado legitimately assert *p* or use it as a premiss in argument" (Lyons 1977, 788). That is to say, when I affirm *p*, I affirm not only the possibility but also the positive truth value of its certainty by the modal operator "to

know.” For example, “I know there is no king of France.” Our assertion of p seeks to convince others of the truth of p . For it is necessarily true. But if the modal operator is “to believe,” we are in the realm of probability (and not of certitude) and are dealing with what is not necessarily true. In this we would tend to agree with Robert Martin (1987, 53) when he says that

one fundamental characteristic of the operator “to believe” . . . is that its behavior differs noticeably according to whether it is used in the first person present indicative, or else in another grammatical person or another tense . . . For example “he thinks himself capable of finding the solution” leads us to think that he is not really capable. On the other hand “I think I am quite capable of finding the solution” suggests I am indeed capable. [This shows that] outside its use in the first person present indicative the operator “to believe” or “to think” creates an “oblique context” [our translation].

The modal operators “to believe” and “to think” are non-factive predicators because the speaker affirms neither the truth nor the falsehood of the expressed proposition (Lyons 1977, 795).

Also, according to Lyons, “if p is necessarily true, then its negation, $\sim p$, cannot [under any circumstances] possibly be true.” (787) At the same time, it seems that if p is probably true, its negation ($\sim p$), is not necessarily false. Lyons himself admits that “‘it is not possible that p is true’ does not mean the same as ‘it is possible that not- p is true’.” (788) As for the text that we will study here, we will have occasion to observe this epistemic modal logic, especially in its implications and in what Lyons calls “entailments.” Entailments involve, in the analysis of the epistemic, a version of the alethic modality or of logical necessity.

We have in *L'Ex-père de la nation* a protagonist who interiorizes and exteriorizes, or simply lives out the conflicts and the contradictions of the society with which he is supposed to be most familiar, and in which he is supposed to be the light (“the beacon”), the one who is acquainted with the path to spiritual, physical and economic freedom. He is considered the most powerful and to him has been entrusted the people’s destiny. To use some elements of the terminology of Greimas (1983, 90), his life can be defined as a conflict thus:

having-to-do/wanting-to-do

not-knowing-how-to-do/not-being-able-to-do

The major conflict which renders him ineffective and even makes of him a failure, derives from the fact that he does not have the necessary knowledge and is therefore denied the being-able-to-do he desires. He is also confronted by powerful forces, both social and purely cognitive, which possess the knowing-how-to-do *they* desire. This is reflected in their Machiavellian machinations, and leads to the effective denial of his ideals.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that everything is reported from the protagonist's point of view, in spite of the presence of instances of the direct speech of other characters. That is to say that all the discursive acts of the protagonist-narrator constitute a remodelization of all the statements made at the time of the events (his own statements as well as those of others)—statements that already contained an earlier modalization. His discursive acts in this novel arise from his examination of conscience: ". . . while I, His Excellency in disillusion, *I pursue my detours in the labyrinth of my conscience darkened by eight years of rule, drought, hunger and misfortune*" (Sow Fall 1987, 8).¹ Which means that his "I believed"—or "I used to think"—(at the moment of his narration) had been an "I believe" that, as a result of his experiences, became an "I no longer believe," the equivalent of a "now I know." According to Robert Martin (1987, 56-57), one does not have to have a reason for knowing something: hence, one asks "How do you know that?," whereas one asks "Why do you believe that?," which implies that there are reasons for believing something. But these reasons, however numerous and however convincing, are not necessarily enough to convince, even ephemerally. Madiama's initial convictions had apparently been built on such ephemeral reasons. The narrator himself describes for us, by an implicit rhetoric, this state of affairs in his last words in which, speaking of his successor, he analyses the process whereby one unwittingly becomes a victim of the current system:

Those who loved me yesterday accuse me today. They have transferred to Masiri all that they had given me. *Is he naive enough to believe them! He seems to believe it or plays at believing it. He will end up believing before he realizes it. Too bad. . . .* (188)²

When a speaker says of another "he believes that p," that very statement leads us inevitably to envisage what he himself thinks, even though what he thinks is only suggested as a thing unsaid (though very perceptible).

At the beginning the protagonist-narrator of this novel, Madiama, the President of the nation, is not familiar enough with his people (their behavior, their psychology, their real needs) or with the nation he governs (its width and breadth, the different ethnic groups and the politics obtaining with each group). Worse, he does not even know his own capacities. Nor does he know those of his colleagues or those of his own wife. All that he tells us takes either the form of a "they say" (*on-dit*) or of an "I thought" (*je croyais*). We can thus see that he does not, according to the position he takes at the moment of narration, seem to speak from a personal lived experience but from the testimony of others or from his own conjectures. Consider for example the following statements: "I had just realized that I hadn't seized the real dimensions of the country because I had believed it was enough to be a son and to look at one's mother in order to know her." (9)³ Later, speaking of how familiar the country was to Andru, his personal advisor and a colonialist expert, he tells us that Andru had plumbed "depths that I believed I had reached in the most natural way. My ignorance had surprised me."⁴ We are aware that there may be an implicit irony in these statements given that, unlike the latter, he has lived all fifty-eight years of his life in the country when he becomes

President. Moreover, if he had been so unfamiliar with his own country, he could never have been so effective in leading the union movement in the struggle for national liberation.

However, in another passage the President admits: “Andru seemed to me an encyclopedia . . . I *believed* I had found the man I needed. Brilliant, attentive and absolutely devoted to me. I rejoiced. To have such a man at hand seemed to me the best of omens.” (our italics)⁵ The President had already remarked with regard to his personal advisor: “His clear vision and exceptional *knowledge* impressed me. He had insight into all subjects, in all areas. The country had entrusted him with its secrets unreservedly, and none of its remotest corners was unknown to him.” (8)⁶ Later he adds:

Apparently, Andru was not content merely looking; he had studied the country. He had had to knock down a wall and, aware of a distance that had to be overcome, had arrived at depths which I had thought I had reached in an entirely natural way. Sow Fall (1987, 9)⁷

It seems that to understand the apparent contradiction between the implicit irony, the real admiration of Andru and the sincere self-criticism of Madiama, we must remember the difference in meaning in this novel between “being familiar with” (*connaissance*) and “knowing” (*savoir*), in spite of their semantic proximity.⁸ *Connaissance* has an as yet unrealized epistemic potential; it is thus not in itself epistemic; rather it is encyclopedic insofar as it helps to draw up an inventory of raw facts; it is what arises out of familiarity with a situation. Where epistemic logic is concerned, the *connaissance* that I have (of a thing, a person or a situation) allows me to formulate abstractions and generalizations (at the risk of losing the *connaissance* that I have), and therefore to acquire the *savoir* necessary for *savoir-faire* “knowing-how-to-do” and necessary to dominate or control a situation. Being able to draw inferences from the *connaissance* one has (of habits, customs, obligations) would help a ruler, for example, to foresee potential sources of conflict, the real needs of the people and what to expect in case of a crisis. In politics especially, one’s knowledge depends on the knowledge of others and one must know how to make others act, by word or example, since the knowledge (*savoir*) I have should help me to understand the mental processes, the attitudes and the characteristics of others, be they helpers or opponents (*adjuvants* or *opposants*).

In the case of Madiama, he gives the impression, though ambiguously, of not being personally familiar either with his country or his people. As a result, he easily loses touch with them, becomes a disoriented wanderer, puts himself in the hands of someone who has been able to translate his own *connaissance* into *savoir* and who uses that knowledge to distance the President from his people. Thus a manipulative Andru manages to convince the President (the synecdochic figure of the people) that without his expertise, not only would the head of state be rendered helpless, but the people would be without history or future:

Your country, Excellency, has just received independence. Your power is brand new. It is as though you were standing aloft at the top of a tree without roots. If the tree sways your life is in danger. I am here, Excellency, to give you my humble advice in order to consolidate your regime. (8)⁹

Madiama's discourse also reveals that he lacked an awareness of the political system in place, and was thus unable to reach general conclusions on the basis of his experience at the hospital (as a nurse) or of his experiences as a union leader. All of these experiences might have given him a solid foundation in knowledge. He knew neither the criteria which at that time determined the success of a regime nor the criteria which his collaborators were using to gain public approval. His wife, who was busy profiting from his situation, says, "War is war, and any means will do." (42)¹⁰

As a consequence of this, the President's political motto (Humanity, Justice, Truth) was met with scorn by his wife, with deception by his ministers, and disbelief by his political opponent. Since his personal advisor was doing everything to isolate him from reality, he did not know that it was in fact inhumanity, injustice and deceit that determined social behavior under his regime. His own credulity prevented him from verifying the protests of those around him: "My mother used to say actually that converts are always the ones with the most zeal . . . I believed that that was precisely the case with Maas. There was never any doubt in my mind as to his loyalty." (34)¹¹ And the fact that he could not or would not verify the information he was given, was one of the reasons for his lack of the knowledge needed for knowing-how-to-do. If we take him at his word and accept his re-modalization of propositions and attitudes, when he accuses himself of "wanting to believe that everything was going fine, and of settling comfortably into a peaceful state of mind and phony assurance . . .," we may well describe his attitude toward his duty as follows:

Wanting-to-do/Being-able-to-do

Not-wanting-to-do/Not-knowing-how-to-do

This means that although everything (especially the Machiavellianism of those around him) contradicts his platonic perception of the state as a matter of morality, the Knowledge (of reality, of truth) that he would have acquired had he determined to act would have helped him to know how to act soon enough.

May we speak then, in analyzing Madiama's situation, of entailment (which would involve logical necessity) or rather only of implication (which would essentially involve probability and belief)? In our opinion the political failure of Madiama *entails* a fundamental lack of knowledge, since, at least within the parameters established by the fictional world of the novel, knowing and knowing-how-to-do is necessary for success, and the President's fate would seem inevitable in the light of this lack: at the moment of narration he knows what he did not know how to do. But we will have to be content with a model of probability (and of implication only) to account for the things of which he was aware (*connaissances*), because of the ambiguity of his remodalization of his percep-

tions of beliefs at the beginning of his political career. At the same time his own epistemic relationship with the social reality of his country is further complicated by the actions of his false helpers (*adjuvants*) who were consciously working toward his destruction.

We thus need at this point to examine the structure of the deontic modality as it applies to the President and the other characters, and to their role in this novel. It is our opinion that one should begin with Andru, the President's personal advisor, since Madiama himself says that his misfortune . . . had begun with Andru. Rather than discussing the question of this actential subject (that is Andru as opponent), we have attempted to compare him to the actential subject-hero, the President himself. Firstly, if the narrating subject lacks the personal knowledge needed to incite society as a collective subject or actant, Andru, who is at the same time a figure of colonial authority, declares himself explicitly and implicitly to be the soul of the people. The *Expert* of the nation, who intimately understands the being and the doing of the people ("l'être et le faire"), to borrow the Greimasian expression, also succeeds in convincing the President that his encyclopedic knowledge enables him to take stock of the society in question. Andru then succeeds in using his knowledge, and of those who originally supported the President, including his wife and (in varying ways) the cabinet ministers. He knows how to manipulate people because he knows exactly what interests could enter into conflict.

Secondly, he advises the President not to leave his "château," lest he mix too much with the people ("I already knew that my unofficial outings annoyed him since he had spoken to some ministers who had immediately reported his words to me." [51])¹², and thereby to remain ignorant of the people he governs. The displacements in the narrative sequence imply quest, searching, as well as social and political communication. On the other hand, Andru himself infiltrates the entire country, remaining informed and up-to-date on all matters (see Sow Fall 1987, 52). With the knowledge he acquires, Andru is able to hold the President hostage, so that his advice assumes the form of deontic modality ("Thou shalt not have . . . thou shalt not make . . .," to adopt the formulation of Mosaic law). Thus, his own political will, his desire to isolate the President and to make of him a myth, assumes the form of a responsibility toward the State, and this makes of the State a new actential subject guided by moral principles: "The State demands it, Excellency, reasons of State demand it." After having established some characteristics of deontic modality (from *ta deonta* meaning duties), we will examine three sources of this modality in connection with Madiama, in order to see how the latter reacts to such demands.

According to Lyons, "deontic modality is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents." (823) Contrary to epistemic modality, deontic modality does not directly concern the notion of truth—essential to epistemic logic. There exists an intrinsic relationship between deontic modality and the future tense: if *x* directs *y* to act or not to act or to perform a given act, *x* is not describing the present action of *x* but rather expects *x* to fulfill the obligation at a future time. But perhaps the most important characteristic of deontic modality is the fact that it "typically proceeds, or derives, from some source or cause." (824) This source or cause could be a person or an institution, or else, some more or less explicitly formulated body of moral or legal principles. Deontic necessity is expressed, at the lexical level, by formulae

containing the idea of good and evil, or else, at a more specific level, by expressions such as unconstitutional, illegal, improper, or immoral. Lyons adds that the origin of deontic modality is found in the desiderative (which Greimas calls *boulestique* from *hé boulésis*, “intention,” “will,” “goal”) and instrumental function of language, “that is to say, in the use of language, on the one hand, to express or indicate wants and desires and, on the other, to get things done by imposing one’s will on other agents.” (826) Human beings seek to control one another’s behavior, by order and prohibition. Of course the orders and prohibitions do not in themselves lead to compliance. The addressee needs other bases to decide where to comply and where not comply. He must recognize that the sender commands “the authority or power to impose his will upon him.” (827) The source or cause of the obligation or of the deontic necessity would be what established this authority. Compliance with the order or the prohibition depends on the will of the addressee and it is at this point that the should (*devoir*) rejoins the would (*vouloir*).

In *L'Ex-père de la nation*, the first deontic necessity is expressed implicitly at the moment of the President’s oath of office, which is itself given in response to this necessity. The latter is further strengthened by the *vox populi* as the President imagined it: “Remember, dear son of the motherland, that the vessel is heavy, very heavy and that it is empty and that you have the responsibility of filling it to abolish its terrible weight.” Sow Fall (1987, 12)¹³ According to our interpretation, it is by filling this vessel, which represents by metonymy the people itself, as well as its hopes for the future, hopes of dignity and . . . social and spiritual well-being, that Madiama should free the people from the burden of its colonial past. At this point, it is a matter of the obligation which originates from the juridical and traditional institutions which the addressee recognizes as valid causes and sources. He gives his consent and affirms his willingness to behave and to act according to the conditions of the obligation.

The deontic presuppositions according to which the people (following the interpretation of Madiama) entrusts the sacred vase to this character, already implicitly cancel the existence of all conflicting obligations (cf. Lyons 1977, 838). There is already a problem in that other interests are represented in his situation, interests other than those of the people in general: colonial authority, egocentric collaborators, and his wife. The latter holds a grudge against society and not only engages in dishonest practices, but with the help of Andru implicates her husband in shady affairs that are unworthy of a head of state—nepotism, intrigue, graft (see Sow Fall 1987, 43-45). Certain other members of Madiama’s family lead him to practise the abuses he had himself condemned when he was a union leader. Andru’s presence, as a form of colonial authority, gives rise to a strong and effective opposition to the President’s regime. Andru gives him advice for example of which the deontic presuppositions are not compatible with his own: “The State is not a matter of morality.” Thus, Andru’s advice has both epistemic and deontic consequences for the President in the execution of his duties. Furthermore, the excessive optimism expressed by the ministers and deputies (“Everything is going well, Excellency”) prevents him from confronting reality and suggests to us a remodalization of the original deontic by the epistemic:

In the days that followed, the vision I had suppressed kept returning stubbornly, accentuating a feeling of defeat in the combat going on inside my mind: to will to believe that everything was going well and settle into a peaceful state of mind and perhaps a phony sense of security, or to risk all in order to seize the truth that I intuitively felt, that was challenging me, that I was hunting for everywhere, in the files of the ministers, in the reports of the advisors, in the solemn flights of oratory of the deputies, and that eluded me always because it was hidden by knowing hands behind a curtain of thick fog. How to seize that truth! I kept feeling that something essential was slipping through my fingers, and that a powerful and mysterious force was playing on the strings that I was supposed to be holding. Sow Fall (1987, 69)¹⁴

This passage shows us a moral dilemma in which the stakes are the refusal or acceptance of a certain knowledge (to will to believe or to risk all in order to lay hold of the truth).

In conclusion, we have an actential subject who is expected to execute a certain charge, which is to establish his people in dignity and in moral and spiritual well-being. He willingly accepts the charge but is not able to attain the desired goal because, on the one hand, he lacks the necessary knowledge and on the other, the given having-to-do is met with the conflicting obligations imposed by the agents who function according to their own wanting-to-do.

At the present time, African heads of state often carry the burden of the failure—a provisional one, we may hope—of the economic and political systems of their countries. At the same time all Africans in general carry the burden of the gaze of an Other who, in the absence of immediate, personal or deep-rooted knowledge, seeks, like Andru, to know the people better than they know themselves. For this reason, it would be interesting to bring the relative precision of the relationship (in this social, cultural and literary context) between what one is familiar with, what one knows and what one manages to do with this knowledge. This text of Aminata Sow Fall represents a privileged moment in the sense that this author offers us the hypothetical model of a once supreme political authority that has now become a consciousness, and thus a multi-leveled system of modalization and re-modalization which dramatizes and interprets a painfully topical situation.

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NOTES

¹ “. . . pendant que moi, Son Excellence en désillusion, je poursuivrai *mes detours dans les labyrinthes de ma conscience obscurcie par huit années de règne, de sécheresse, de faim et de*

malheur.” The translations of Sow Fall’s text are our own.

2 “Ceux qui m’adulaient hier me blâment aujourd’hui. Ils ont transféré sur Masiri tout ce qu’ils m’avaient donné. *Est-il assez naïf pour y croire! Il semble y croire ou joue à le croire. Il finira par y croire sans s’en rendre compte. Dommage. . .*” (our italics)

3 “Je venais de me rendre compte que je n’avais pas saisi toutes les dimensions du pays parce que, tout simplement, *j’avais cru qu’il suffisait d’être un fils* et de regarder sa mère pour la connaître.”

4 “. . . des profondeurs que je croyais avoir acquises d’une manière toute naturelle. Mon ignorance m’avait surpris.”

5 “Andru m’était apparu comme une encyclopédie. . . . *Je croyais* avoir découvert l’homme qu’il me fallait. Brillant, attentif et tout à ma dévotion. Je jubilais. Avoir un tel homme sous la main a l’orée de mon regne *me semblait* du meilleur augure.”

6 “Sa clairvoyance et *ses connaissances exceptionnelles* m’impressionnèrent. Il avait des lumières sur tous les sujets, dans tous les domaines. Le pays lui avait confié ses secrets sans restriction, et aucun de ses recoins ne lui était inconnu.”

7 “Andru, apparemment, ne s’était pas contenté de regarder; il avait étudié le pays. Il avait eu à abattre un mur et, par la conscience d’une distance à vaincre, était arrivé à des profondeurs que je croyais avoir acquises d’une manière toute naturelle.”

8 The possibility of this distinction arises, it seems to us, from a difference in French that is both syntactical (one may say “savoir faire” [to know how to do] but not “connaître faire” [to be familiar to do]) and semic (connaître but not savoir may mean “to have lived”).

9 “Votre pays, Excellence, vient tout juste d’accéder à l’indépendance. Vous avez acquis un pouvoir tout neuf. C’est comme si vous étiez debout sur la cime d’un arbre sans racines. Si l’arbre bascule votre vie est en danger. Nous sommes ici, Excellence, pour vous donner nos humbles conseils afin de consolider votre règne.”

10 “A la guerre comme à la guerre et tous les moyens sont bons.”

11 “Ma mère disait d’ailleurs que les convertis sont toujours les plus zélés. . . . *Je croyais* que c’était justement le cas de Maas. . . . La loyauté de Maas ne faisait plus aucun doute dans mon esprit.”

12 “Je savais déjà que mes sorties non officielles le contrariaient puisqu’il en avait parlé à quelques ministres qui m’avaient aussitôt rapporté les propos.”

13 “Souviens-toi, cher fils de notre mère patrie, que l’amphore est lourde, tres lourde, et qu’elle est vide et que tu as la charge de la combler pour en anéantir le poids contraignant.”

14 “Les jours suivants, la vision chassée revenait obstinément, accentuant un sentiment de défaite dans le combat que je menais en moi-même: vouloir croire que tout allait bien et m’installer dans une paix mentale, peut-être factice, sécurisante, ou tout braver pour saisir la vérité que je pressentais, qui m’interpellait, que je traquais partout, dans les dossiers des ministres, dans les rapports des conseillers, dans les envolées solennelles des députés, et qui m’échappait toujours parce que dissimulée par de savantes mains derrière un rideau de brouillard épais. Comment saisir cette vérité! Je sentais que quelque chose de fondamental glissait de mes doigts, et qu’une force puissante et mystérieuse jouait sur les ficelles que j’étais censé tenir.”