very heavily from life as the society lives it. In this sense, *Poetic Heritage* is not only a record of a literary tradition, it is also a socio-cultural document; one that has recorded permanently a people's expression of their way of life. Egudu and Nwoga have made a useful contribution to the study of Igbo poetry.

- JAMES NDUKA AMANKULOR

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With his second published volume of poems (and rumors of a third soon to come) it would seem that Chinua Achebe has made a definite inroad into the realm of poetry. Actually, the present collection is more like an American edition of his first, *Beware Soul Brother*, which was originally published in Nigeria by Nwamife and has since appeared in a British edition as No.120 in the H.E.B. African Writers Series. The twenty-three poems which make up that first collection, including the title poem of the present one, reappear in *Christmas in Biafra*. What is new is the addition of seven new poems (one of which was published in *Okike*, no.2, Dec. 1971) and the fact, pointed out by the author in a Preface, that some of the earlier poems have been revised or re-written. There are two added and helpful features: the inclusion of explanatory end notes, and the grouping of the poems under a number of headings.

Many reviews of *Soul Brother* have acclaimed the simplicity of Achebe's language, a typical one being Donatus Nwoga's observation in *Okike* no.2 that "Achebe's achievement ... has given a stamp of authority ... to poetry of simple language," enthusiastically quoted in the publisher's blurb on the back cover of *Christmas in Biafra*. I think that too much of a virtue should not be made of this simplicity in the poet's language, a danger into which we are likely to fall after the much discussed but often exaggerated obscurity of poets like Okigbo and Soyinka. The point is that there are many instances where Achebe's simple diction (celebrated in his novels) is just not effective poetically. The impression one gets is of an artist still striving to master the craft of a different genre. A
few examples of his own revisions will bring this out. A section of "Something and Something" reads:

And so one day
in a minor quarrel I told
my wife: "You see, my darling,
whenever Something stands Something
Else must stand beside it."

(Beware Soul Brother, p.33)

In Christmas in Biafra, with the new title of "Misunderstanding", this becomes:

Flushed by success
I spoke one day in a trifling
row: you see, my darling (to
my wife) where Something
stands - no matter what - there
Something Else will take its
stand.

(p.52)

There is a quality in the second version which is more akin to the technique of poetry. Or take these lines from "Love Song":

I will sing only in waiting
silence your power to make
songs for me ....

(p.21)

revised, in Christmas, to:

I will sing only in waiting
silence your power to bear
my dream for me ....

(pp.39-40)

"To bear my dream for me" fires the imagination in a way that the more colloquial "to make songs for me" cannot. Equally illustrative of this attempt to chisel away the more prosy constructions are these two versions of extracts from "We Laughed at Him":

So what
does he get? A turbulent, torrential
cascading blindness behind
a Congo river of blood ...

We sought by laughter to
drown his anguish the fool-man
the too-know man who craved to see
what eyes are forbidden ... But suddenly
one day at height of noon his
screams turned to hymns of
mad ecstacy.  
(Soul Brother, pp.37-38)

And for
his pains?  A turbulent, torrential
cascading blindness behind
a Congo river of blood ...

We sought by laughter to
drown his anguish ... But suddenly
one day at height of noon his
screams turned to hymns of
ecstacy.

(Christmas in Biafra, p.83)

Whatever can be considered impressive in these poems
(including the revised ones) has not gained much from their
type of simplicity of diction. There is lacking in them that
terseness and economy of metaphor which makes a line of verse
grow before our eyes and suggest many possibilities. Many of
the poems tend to stretch their emotional content over a wide
descriptive span, in the process of which the reader is hardly
compelled to participate imaginatively. It seems to me that,
in these poems, Achebe has remained basically a novelist whose
typical method is to frame a situation in a narrative mould.
This is why a good number of the poems begin, in the narrative
fashion, by setting a scene over which the poet casts a reflec­
tive eye, instead of confronting the reader with an intensely
felt moment of experience. (Is this why there is hardly a
lyric moment in the collection?) Take "Mango Seedling", for
instance, which is said to have been written in memory of the
late Christopher Okigbo:

Through glass window pane
Up a modern office block
I saw, two floors below, on wide-jutting
concrete canopy a mango seedling newly sprouted
Purple, two-leafed, standing on its burst
Black yolk ....

This method has the effect of inducing in the reader what one
may call a delayed reaction. By contrast, some of the best
poems in the collection are those which show a directness of
approach with no attempt made to amplify a setting. They give
one a sense of immediacy and a challenging feeling that the
poet has said less than he knows. Such poems have the aesthe­
tically satisfying quality of suggestiveness, the ability to
grow into larger configurations, like the proverbial dry meat
that fills the mouth:

That lone rifle-shot anonymous
in the dark striding chest-high
through a nervous suburb at the break
of our season of thunders will yet
steep its flight and lodge
more firmly than the greater noises
ahead in the forehead of memory.

("The First Shot", p.23)

As already suggested, Achebe's mood in these poems is predominantly reflective, almost somber; which is not surprising in an artist who had just experienced the trauma of a bloody war. In fact, even though the poems are divided into 'Poems about War', 'Poems not about War', and 'Gods, Men and Others' (in addition to the 'Prologue' and 'Epilogue'), most of them deal in one way or another with emotions of war and its aftermath. "Love Song (for Anna)", from 'Poems not about War', pleads with her to "Bear with me../in the hour of my silence" because "the air is criss-crossed/by loud omens." The times are so ominous that "vultures at home stand/sentry on the roof-top." The very first poem in the volume recalls the approach of the crisis, the "thoughtless" and "absent-minded" days that "sat at dire controls/and played indolently" while the "diamond-tipped drillpoint" crept ever closer to "residual chaos". Various aspects and manifestations of the tragic event - an air raid, a refugee mother and child, Christmas in war-torn Biafra - are then explored, leading the poet to posit the rhetorical question of "An 'If' of History" and to observe the sad fact, in "After a War", that the ordeal has not proved to be purificatory:

After years
of pressing death
and dizzy last-hour reprieves
we're glad to dump our fears
and our perilous gains together
in one shallow grave and flee
the same rueful way we came
straight home to haunted revelry.

Achebe also contemplates the larger issues of life and the state of man; and it is here that he exhibits that quality in his writing which he handles so well - his ironic mode of perception. Achebe is a master of situational irony, the ability to perceive the reality behind the mask, the incongruities behind the apparent. Life and human nature are seen as inherently complex and enigmatic, but human behavior often
contrives (sometimes unwittingly) to throw a veneer of consistency in motivation and rationality of conduct over what is essentially a pattern of hypocrisies and paradoxes. "Non-commitment", "Lazarus" and "Vultures" are good illustrations of Achebe's handling of sardonic humor; and especially pathetic is the wretched figure of the Nazi Commandant at Belsen going home for the day

\[
\text{with fumes of human roast clinging}
\]
\[
\text{rebelliously to his hairy nostrile...}
\]

but who will stop

\[
\text{at the wayside sweet-shop}
\]
\[
\text{and pick up a chocolate}
\]
\[
\text{for his tender offspring}
\]
\[
\text{waiting at home for Daddy's return....}
\]

The effect is devastating.

One thing which Christmas in Biafra has done is to reinforce Achebe's stature as a great twentieth-century artist. It may not have established him as a major poet. In fact, I suspect that as with Lawrence and Joyce, Achebe's principal reputation may have to be sought in his fiction. Still, I believe that these poems hold forth prospects of further achievement in this genre.

If Achebe's vision is essentially tragic, one poet whose attitude to mankind borders on contempt is Pol Ndu. The title poem in his slim first published volume, Golgotha, is a study in disillusionment:

\[
\text{I despise mankind:}
\]
\[
\text{vanguarded tractors}
\]
\[
\text{bullying tracks of their kind}
\]
\[
\text{raising sputum and spittle}
\]
\[
\text{both passing t.b.}
\]
\[
\text{on wings of winds}
\]
\[
\text{down lungs of all kinds.}
\]

It is significant that "Golgotha" appears at the end of a sequence of visionary and creativity poems - "Afa (before Oracle)", "Incubation (at noon)", "Udude (at cock-crow)", "Incarnation (at midnight)" - in which the poet/seer enacts the ritual of his rite of passage. It is almost as if at the end of the visionary tunnel lies this beast of mankind from
whom the poet, who has had his cleansing, turns away in
disgust convinced that

when the row drowns,
with its characteristic hies in tufts of ash,

........

God must start afresh.

This time,
with plastic apes.

Pol Ndu is one of the most promising of that crop of
new Nigerian poets, including Okogbule Monodi (Icheke and
Dusts of Exile), Bona Onyejeli, and Clem Abiaziem Okafor, who
had their initiation in one of Peter Thomas' creative writing
classes at Nsukka. It is appropriate, therefore, that
Golgotha should be dedicated to Thomas who, in turn, had dedi-
cated his Poems from Nigeria (1967) to his students. Most
of the eighteen poems in Golgotha have already appeared in
various journals and anthologies like Transition, Black
Orpheus, Nigeria Magazine, Modern Poetry from Africa (revised
ed., 1966), Young Commonwealth Poets (1965), and New Voices
of the Commonwealth (1968), and are mainly apprentice poems
written, I suppose, before 1966. They show signs of an
extravagant use of language and a frequently unnecessary
striving after rhyme effects which, one hopes, later maturity
will mellow. Only "Golgotha Revisited" (the first stanza of
which was quoted in Time magazine of January 10, 1972 to
accompany a write-up on post-war reconciliation efforts in
Nigeria) and "Cleansing", both of which (with "Smoulder!
Brother! Smoulder!") were published in the first number of
Okike, April 1971, appear to have been written after the
Nigerian civil war. They carry a reflective and quiet tone
which the earlier poems conspicuously lack:

I see song in the movement of their lips,
figures scouted in black veil, in dumb
procession, long
grief bent, raucous, tortuous, ranting:

Asperges me Domine ......

Even in these later poems, but especially in the earlier
ones, Ndu remains basically a poet of sound. There is an
abundance of sound motifs - the "doom! doom! of age-old drums",
the "ordered frenzy" of "royal-wine-drums", the chiming of
bangles, the abia-beats, the "cascading muskets of destruc-
tion", the "groans of rustling mortals". Such devices as
repetitions, cacophony, onomatopoeia, and compound word for-
mations are frequently employed, and the impression one gets
is of a gathering cyclone or of a rumbling volcano that is threatening to erupt. Somehow, this infrastructure of breaking sound patterns seems appropriate to the overall theme of the collapse of a normative order.

One must not fail to observe that the quality of the printing in this collection leaves a lot to be desired. Apart from the strange absence of a content page, there are many errors, for instance on pages 15, 29, 33 and 34, which are obviously typographical and which, considering the slimness of the volume, could easily have been corrected in a more efficient proofreading. One hopes that Ndu's second volume of poems, Songs for Sears, promised by Doubleday, will do better justice to this fine poet.

- EDWARD C. OKWU

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED


