POETRY AND THE POET IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Christopher Anyokwu
canyokwu@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract

Present-day Nigeria has been variously characterised as infernal, hellish, grueling and as *danse macabre* on account, principally, of the insupportable socio-economic hardships Nigerians are going through amid official apathy and criminal dereliction of duty. Despite this, there is an overwhelming efflorescence of creative activity, especially the production and reception of verse. This study, examines and maps the trajectory of Nigerian poetry from the oral beginnings through the various generational cohorts to the present, highlighting the rise and rise of verse-making in Nigeria. But it is not all about quantity but, more important, the quality of written poetry coming out of Nigeria today. The fate and fortune of digitally-mediated verse are also interrogated in this study even as the work periscopes the likely tramlines of verse in the future. It concludes that, given the incredible amount of poetry being produced across the nation, accompanied by the equally impressive efforts of the Nigerian Diaspora, the future of Nigerian poetry is bright.

Keywords: Poetry, Poet, Contemporary, Nigeria, Language.

Introduction

Poetry: The Slipperiness of Definition

In most formal discussion of poetry,we are almost always confronted with the stock phrase: "What is Poetry?". There is a sense in which this conventional introduction to the critical appreciation of poetry appears rather cheeky or downright mischievous as, almost in all cases,commentators,researchers,scholars and even so- called authorities on poetry tend to skirt this definitional challenge, preferring instead to leave it hanging in the air. The implication, therefore, is that everyone who is interested in poetry is at liberty to formulate their own definition of poetry,however wrong-headed and wide of the mark. To be sure, we scour and thumb through glossaries and specialised dictionaries of literary terms in vain in search of a catchy and universally- acceptable definition of poetry. One is either confronted with " the Nature of Poetry" or " the

Purpose of Poetry ", without a clearly enunciated definition of poetry. We are,thus,forced to ask: what is it about poetry that resists or frustrates basic definition? Is it analogous to air that we all feel its presence but cannot adequately " define" ? Or,to vary the analogy,is it similar to life itself that we all are living yet cannot define it in a tidy, denotative dictionary fashion?

Intriguingly enough, poetry, to be certain, is synonymous with life itself, given that both are at once interesting and mysterious. It is this interesting mystery at the core of the poetic experience that seems to frustrate definition. But we know poetry, or much of it, when we are in its presence; when we are enveloped by it; when we are borne away on its ineffable wings. Since we cannot define poetry,at least, we can attempt describing it. To that extent, therefore, poetry might be described as an expression of aspects of human life and experience through the use of sound and imagery to convey an agreeable and harmonious feeling,sensation, thought and sundry states of mind. It should be borne in mind,however, that human experience may be dichotomised into two broad rubrics,to wit: pleasure and pain.

Poetry in some quarters is erroneously thought to be monochromatically euphonious, solely pleasurable,conveying us on some kind of magic carpet to nirvana. Pain equally catalyses poetry as in the dirge and elegy subtypes. What's more,colour, motion,taste, feeling, smell,and,of course, sound, are veritable triggers of poetry. Small wonder, soccer commentators love to describe soccer as " poetry in motion". Similarly, a rainbow is arguably poetic as do the clap-clap of stiletto shoes on a tiled floor and the great taste of a sumptuous dish. Yet, what is more poetic than the indescribable feeling of love: of loving someone and being loved in return? Poetry also nestles in the mournful chants, heart-rending ululations and soulful threnodies encountered routinely in the homes of the bereaved. Indeed,pain and pleasure are the nursery of poetry.

But our present discourse compels a narrowing-down of the scope of what truly constitutes poetry. And,as such what shall constitute poetry for us are

the written poems produced by poets of Nigerian descent who have been very active on the scene in contemporary times. How does the social environment inspire them to compose poetry and what is the quality (and even the quantity) of verses they manage to produce in the face of the overwhelming odds stacked against them?

Poetry … At a Time like This!

Poetry at a time like this has assumed something of a luxury for some, a nuisance value. For the hard-nosed pragmatists with an eye fixated perpetually on the bottom-line, their be-all-and-end-all is money in the pocket/bank *and* food on the table. And why not? Who would blame them, living through such a time like this? Just the other day, it was widely reported in the media that two-thirds of Nigerian families go hungry as food prices soar. Families skip meals as they cannot afford enough food. It is equally reported that one in every three or four persons usually goes to bed without food, according to Mary Victory Food Foundation, a prominent charity organization in Nigeria. Besides that, a vast majority of Nigerians are jobless or under-employed, accounting for almost two-thirds of the nation's able-bodied young people who roam the streets in search of non-existent jobs. Parents are so cash-strapped they cannot afford to pay their children's school fees, their house rent and the accompanying utility bills, hospital bills and also meet their *basic* needs on a daily basis. Those who are relatively well-off, those who own cars have abandoned driving them, unable to afford petrol whose price has gone through the roof. At present, petrol price is pegged at N847.50 as against N238.11 – N600.35 in 2003 according to Google.

For the average Nigerian worker, therefore, despite the recent wage increase (seventy thousand naira monthly as minimum wage!), bare necessities remain out of reach because of the concomitant inflationary spiral. High transportation fares to and from the workplace, school, market, etc., have depleted the money. In a word, sky-high inflation in the country has utterly impoverished and pauperized the average citizen, reducing him or her to leading a dog's-life. Staple food items such as *garri*, rice, beans, millet and bread have been priced out of the reach of most people. Add to

this the cost of fuelling a generating set for the household amid PHCN-generated siege of stygian darkness, then you would begin to appreciate the dystopian nature of the Nigeria predicament.

For whatever it is worth, it is instructive to state from the outset that, without the faintest desire for healthcare, a majority of Nigerians have now resorted to *walking* to work, school, places of worship and other out-door engagements. Needless to add, there has been a steady rise in hospitalizations and visits to the hospital as more and more people come down with debilitating and, at times, life-threatening conditions such as high-blood pressure, hepatitis A and B, cancer (of this-and-that), high cholesterol levels, diabetes, typhoid fever and so on. How about Africa's worst, as some might argue, infection or affliction – *Malaria*? Or, let us put it as it is – malnutrition itself which a school of thought is willing to wager is the worst "infection"?

While many people are grappling second-by-second with these aforementioned challenges, hoping against hope that they are able to see the next day, their sleep is stolen from them by the trending topics on the ubiquitous invasively unsettling "necessary evil" called social media. They are assaulted and assailed by a never-ending barrage of *Breaking News*, nearly all of it downright *bad* news! Some of the news items include lurid reports of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping-for-ransom (said to be, officially, the biggest industry in Nigeria today!), ritual killings, violent crime, sundry forms of insecurity that leave the citizens utterly fear-crazed and paranoid, according to mainstream and social media reports. Unsurprisingly, mental health issues have taken on a frighteningly bizarre dimension, leading some to committing suicide. Even so, the country continues to grapple with social scourges of homelessness, prostitution, Yahoo-Yahoo scamming and youth restiveness and rebellion. On the view about youth restiveness, owing in part to joblessness, many have taken to gambling, substance abuse and other vices. Homes are relentlessly stalked by the spectre of spousal wrangling, sometimes, culminating in separation, and divorce. You can imagine the fate of children in such toxic domestic maelstrom.

The foregoing excursus paints a somber and sobering picture of a deeply disaffected citizenry, an underclass of enemy nationals who, in most cases, present themselves as ready and enthusiastic recruits for criminal cartels, cult groups and shadowy gangs, all of them intent upon playing havoc with polite society. Given, thus, the utter absence of fellow-feeling and neighbourliness and empathy and tolerance, what you have instead is a beggar-thy-neighbour culture, particularly in suburban and urban infernos and gentrified ghettoes, normally home to hardened members of the criminal underworld. So, at such a time and place as this, who needs a poet or poetry, for that matter? Does poetry-or even literature-make anything happen? Can we in all good conscience pinpoint some of the social usefulness of poetry under these circumstances? Would anyone say Nigerians are *living* or merely *surviving*?

According to Niyi Osundare, the word "survive" "connotes struggle, strife, travail, the confronting of overwhelming odds, and the sense of a chancy escape: It signifies a battle-weary, shell-shocked fighter crawling out of the debris and smokes of a brutal encounter, rather than a triumphant warrior with a stained sword or spear, resplendent in colourful garlands. For to "survive" is to exist, or to be lucky enough to exist, both words are qualitatively different from to *live*" (Osundare, "Squaring Up" 25).

Poetry and the Hustler Culture

We may venture forth at this juncture by first of all appreciating the ambiguous and ironic boon of hopelessness, and of chaos and anarchy. As the popular saying goes: when life gives you lemon, you turn it into lemonades! It is equally similar to eating a meal of bitter leaves; the aftertaste is sheer sweetness. Given the intrinsic nature of creativity itself, it has been acknowledged that the most hospitable, the most congenial environment for its sprouting, its blooming and its fructifying is the fecal nursery of anomie, and chaos. Femi Osofisan remarks thus:

> [T]he gods of creativity arrive to possess their worshippers only at such moments when these votaries are in acute

> distress, when they are sunk in situations of deep emotional and psychological crisis or lost in ecstatic delirium" (Osofisan "Opon Ifa's Rebirth" 61)

He continues: "Men are stricken, and if they are artists, they turn articulate, and expectedly through that vocation, they defeat the pain, and even convert it to triumph. The candour of genius, that is, is honed by the knife of catatonia. Pain rakes the imagination and rekindles it to eloquence" (62). Osofisan further quips that: "So fertilizing in fact is anomy, that it does not require the author to be a direct witness in order to plausibly recreate it" (63). Let us briefly return to that introductory phrase, namely: "A Time like This". There is, indeed, a sense in which it could be construed to suggest that the ongoing social trauma, trials and tribulations which is contemporary Nigeria is unprepossessingly novel, an anomalous eruption on a halcyon plateau of social equilibrium. Putt differently, the phrase does seem to imply that contemporaneity is a jerky accident bringing to a fitfully abrupt halt an unbroken plenitude of social *becoming*, such that people could moan: "We've never seen it like this before!" A strange, bizarre nuisance, a dystopia of a kind. Again, we summon up Osofisan to enlighten us on this score. Femi Osofisan argues that the Nigerian situation has been for a long time a "forest of a Thousand Dystopias". What does that mean? He vouchsafes; "A thousand in this context is therefore a cogent trope for irrational multiplicity, implying a number of instances so gross in my estimation, as to equate almost to a scandal" (Osofisan, "The Muse" 5). He goes on: "You know as well as I do, that a sequence of successive nightmares has continued to dog our lives, with such regularity as to become the perverse reality of our existence" (5). Osofisan equally posits here that the possessive Muse of pain and dystopia haunts the creative artist: "[W]e writers thrive unseemly on crises" (7). That is to say, creativity issues forth out of *catastrophe*. Happily, cometh the hour, cometh the man – that is, *the poet!*

Small wonder, then, Chinua Achebe allegorises on the relationship between the war, the warrior, the artist and the story (read: *poetry*):

> The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards – each is important in its own way. […] But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle to feather I will say boldly: *the story* (read: *poetry*.) (Italics added; Achebe, 1987, 113)

The Making of the Oral Bard

Soyinka in his play, *Death and the King's Horseman* and also in his *Kongi's Harvest* famously declares that a man is either born to his art or he is not. A bold claim, that, which begs the question: Are poets born or made? Are they produced in, say, creative-writing workshops, writers' clinics and creative boot camps? Can anyone who is enraptured and enamoured of the flying sparks of fire from the forge shaping formless ores into metallic miracles of burnished ornaments step into the smithy to work the anvil? Does, to use another register, love of poetry provide enough afflatus to equip the stricken individual with the requisite technical wherewithal for verse-making? How was it in traditional society? For a would-be gleeman, *raconteur*, griot, bard or chanter to pursue a professional career in bardic minstrelsy, he must undergo a period of apprenticeship under the guidance of a master performer. He is put through his paces, as it were, by the grizzled guru of tradition himself. He is taught such skills as vocalization or voice training, the art/act of mental recall or mnemonics, retention of information, improvisation, mimicry, role-playing, the knowledge and functions of flora and fauna, a tutelage which makes him, more or less, a living library of social graces, and etiquettes, norms and mores, taboos and sanctions, *inter alia*. The object universe becomes a moving or mobile university offering life-lessons in varied fields such as history, geography, sociology, ethnology, cosmology, mythology, and politics.

As the case may be, the neophyte or pupil is also drilled in the art of singing and dancing, the better to be able to play a host of roles. After undergoing about seven years or more of intensive and extensive training, the tyro gradually develops self-confidence and, with time, comes into his own. He accompanies his master during performances from location to location, paying close attention to the *modus operandi* of oral delivery and

live performances as well as audience dynamics – its participation, reaction/reception and criticism. We may exemplify with the popular Yoruba *Alarinjo* travelling theatre and the practice of the itinerant bard.

Very briefly enunciated here, therefore, the bard begins his performance, firstly, by making a few opening remarks known as the *Ijuba* or salutation made to the world of nature presided over by the King and, secondly, the supporting cast of nobles and notables, all of them local satraps directing the everyday affairs of the community. He goes on to pay homage to men and women and children, the illustrious dead, homestead and farmstead, and, indeed, all *nature*. After the opening Glee or "Awure" (i.e., goodwill-rallying invocation), the minstrel launches straightaway into the main course of his song-poetry. He declaims, chants, sings, dances, and, in short, *performs* his art, sometimes aided by instrumental orchestration and, at times, relying solely on his body as resonant instrument of full-orbed performance. To this extent, therefore, the bard's mouth, hands, chest, belly, legs and face are deployed and pressed into kinesthetic service. Writing about the astounding repertoire of the oral bard, Niyi Osundare asseverates that he is capable of producing "the witty barb of the satire, the bawdy boisterousness of the ballad, the wrenching accuracy of the well-appointed proverb […]" (Osundare, *Poetry and the Human Voice* 7).

After the whole performance is done, the bard again pays due homage to his hosts and hostesses, old and young, animate and inanimate, benevolent and (seemingly) malevolent occult forces such as witches and wizards in a fitting peroration known as the Closing Glee to bring the event to a close. As is the universal practice in most traditional cultures, the bard usually appeals to higher powers, in our case, the pantheon of Yoruba gods and goddesses to prosper his performance, he being their mouthpiece.

However, given the notion that the bard is the acknowledged imaginative leader of his world, as William Wordsworth avers in the *Lyrical Ballads*, why does he attribute his creative powers to a divine source? Isidore Okpewho throws some light on this:

> For this appears to be the pattern among many societies, and anthropologists generally seize upon it as a proof of the

> religious uses of art. Among the Yoruba, the *Ijala* artist claims to be the "mouthpiece" of Ogun, the god of blood and iron, of war and the deadly hunt. (47)

Even so, this attribution of divine inspiration is seen in such canonical works as Homer's *Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Virgil's Aeneid*, Edmund Spencer's *The Faery Queen*e and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In the African experience, D.T. Niane's *The Epic of Old Mali Empire* uses it as do Mazisi Kunene's *The Epic of Emperor Shaka the Great* and John Pepper Clark's *Ozidi Saga*. It is important to state that the traditional practice of oral performance continues to the present time, especially in rural areas. At public events such as weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies and state occasions, university matriculation and convocation ceremonies, we still find these ambulant performers armed with both wind and string instruments, for instance, drum ensembles, flute, castanets, rattles, pipes, gong, native guitars with which they serenade and regale their audiences.

In this regard, Osundare pays homage to some of the notable exemplars in Yoruba society, such great oral artists as Olatubosun Oladepo, Olanrewaju Adepoju, Alabi Ogundepo, Adebayo Faleti, Akinwunmi Isola and "Other *akewi* (bards-poets) whose powerful voices on radio, television, and video, re-discovered for their audience the beauty and power of Yoruba poetry" (*Poetry and the Human Voice* 28-9). Needless to add, these oral poets from Yoruba tradition have their countless counterparts scattered across the length and breadth of Nigeria. There is, therefore, a sense in which we can meaningfully engage with the creative intersection of tradition and modernity, with especial reference to verse-making in a predominantly literate and now more than ever before, digitally – conscious creative ecosystem.

The Contemporary Nigerian Poet

The making of a literate poet is something of a toss-up on account of the fact that the overriding criterion of performance is the indubitable benchmark for assessment. How does one explain a situation in which someone who did not attend a Creative-Writing School or clinic or workshop—indeed, any kind of formal training on "How to be a Poet" or

"How to Write a Poem" –still composes and publishes a scintillating body of poetry that bests the output of those who did not only take degrees in literary studies but also attended Creative Writing programmes and courses, with certifications to boot? Although the likes of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, among others, had backgrounds in humanistic studies—having read such courses at history, philosophy, classics, and so forth—they were able to earn their living in other fields of human endeavour. T.S. Eliot, for instance, was a Grammar School English teacher, banker and editor-cum-publisher.

In the Nigerian experience, we can say without fear of contradiction that we have poets and creative writers who never sat for a day in a Creative Writing class or studied English Literature for a Bachelor's or Master's Degree, yet they have produced great poetry, novels and plays. So the question is, how come poetry-writing is such an all-comers-affair? Soyinka declared that writers are born and not made, as we noted above (Soyinka, 1975, 35; Soyinka, 1967, 20). One really does not think everyone would simply swallow this statement as gospel and walk quietly into the sunset. It is a declaration that evidently divides opinion. Interestingly, when you interrogate it closely you would realise that we are likely to have two major schools of thought, to wit: (1) those who support Soyinka and (2) those who oppose his stance, that nobody who writes "comes fully made" (to paraphrase Achebe on Adichie; See the Blurb, Half of a Yellow Sun). Such is the vocation of writing that philosophers and literary scholars and critics down the ages have expressed their differing views and opinions on the contentious matter (Kaplan, Charles, and William Davis Anderson, 2000).

Classical commentators such as Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, and even English Renaissance scholars such as Sir Philip Sidney make pronouncements on the question of the training of the artist generally. Those avatars agree that the poet is a melding of natural talent and formal training. In other words, *nature* and *art* must conjoin to birth a good artist. A naturally talented poet who shuns the tempering fires of academic discipline can be likened to a profusion of vines untrimmed, and, therefore, unappetizing and ungainly to the eye. Pope says that much in his "An Essay

on Criticism": "Nature's chief master-piece is writing well", Pope quips (167) but, to "write well", the poet must undergo training (i.e., the pragmatic necessity of art). This goes to show that even for the so-called "born poet", there is a place for their "shaping" or "pruning", to use a horticultural register. And this is where wide reading comes in. Longinus, Horace and Pope, all of them insist upon the necessity of study — that is, studying the "Ancients" or the so-called "dead masters", the precursors themselves. Again, it has been said that a poet can be "inspired" to create masterpieces. Fair enough! However, the question of inspiration is no less vexed and polarising than that of the making of a writer—whether they are "born" or "made" (i.e., trained in school).

In Plato's "Ion", he argues that the poet who desires to be admitted into the *Ideal Republic* must be *inspired* by the Muses. These divine sisters must possess the willing votary, the human vessel in order for them to deliver the "lively oracle" from the court of the heavenlies. The question, again, is, how does the poet prepare for possession in order to be *inspired*? Do they run naked into the harvest-tide? Or wait barefoot at Heavensgate for the watchword? Do they don a special regalia, bedeck themselves in ritual get-up and mouth in formulaic fashion certain mantras for divine illumination? How does the poet achieve epiphany? In the discourse of Nigerian poetry, we normally invoke the likes of Wole Soyinka, Launko Okinba, Okigbo, J.P. Clark, Ojaide and Osundare, among other poetic luminaries. The question is, how did they produce such great bodies of poetry we sate and savour today? Were they "inspired", Ion-style?

We need, to be certain, to look beyond the smog of sentiment to cognize the brute fact, the *truth* of the matter. All through his impressively credentialed and well-decorated career as a poet, Thomas Stearns Eliot never tired of telling his readers about the vital primacy of tradition. For him, tradition occupies a commanding place in a writer's life. In his influential article "Tradition and the Individual Talent", he writes:

> Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who

> would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. ("Tradition" 14)

What stands out in this excerpted passage is the telling phrase "great labour", a phrase which segues seamlessly with what Biodun Jeyifo posits: "We should not of course mystify poetry and the process of poetic creation. What has been said of literature in general is truer of poetry in particular: it is 90 percent perspiration and 10 percent inspiration" (Jeyifo, viii). In fact, if there is any place at all for "inspiration" in a poet's life, it may be ascribed to the Freudian theory of the unconscious, specifically his concept of "the return of the repressed". People usually wax lyrical about the *influence* of various sorts of things, sensations, feelings, sounds, sights, smell, and the like, that could act as "inspiration" for them to create, to ideate, to body forth ineffable essences. Some claim a song, a fragment of a tune on the radio can get them going. Others ascribe inspirational status to food, drink, cigarette, drugs, and even sex. Even then, yet another group of writers and poets claims that when they visit some sites – museum, library, cemetery, a beach, a forest or an orchard, deserted places, wilderness or rockery or historical sites (river, sea, ocean, or a tryst) – creative afflatus comes flooding in, buoying them up to the dizzying cusp of elegance and clarity of vision. Unbeknownst to the lot, all those so-called sources of inspiration are mere triggers and catalysts. Deep in the human psyche are a confounding and complex depository of inherited and forgotten items—memories, taboos, hurt, agonies, pain, pleasure, wishes, desires, longings, dreams, visions, aspirations, goals and all whatnot – stored therein since childhood. It therefore requires an external stimulus, a triggering event of some sort to excavate these buried multiverses of unconscious motivations.

The archeology of the mind is generally erroneously misapprehended as "inspiration" or a quasi-demiurgic visitation in the throes of parturition.

Let us not forget what Osofisan tells us about the muse of pain, chaos and anomy: "Writers thrive unseemly on crises." Hardly, if at all, does pleasure or satiation induce catatonic disambiguation. "Ripeness", Soyinka lyricises, "is all". Thus, pain begets beauty. That is why in times like this, poetry is in spate! The point we are trying to make is that, regardless of the vexatious matter of the making of the poet, anyone who goes by that name must have earned it through personal development, through application, passion, persistence and the perfection of craft. The poet is required to, thus, tap into their biggest resource – *themselves*. The poet must learn to mine everyday experiences for great and powerful ideas – the humour, irony, pain, disappointment, loss, and conflict whose judicious and felicitous distillation into memorable imagery can inspire, uplift, as well as *entertain*. Hence, T.S. Eliot notes that the poet must submit him/herself "to the eclectic learning which ranges over the whole world in search of artistic beauty" (Eliot, *The Use of Poetry* 23). By way of exemplification, Eliot puts W.B. Yeats on the witness box, saying: "[Yeats] was very much fascinated by self-induced trance states, calculated symbolism, mediums, theosophy, crystal-gazing, folklore and hobgoblins. Golden apples, archers, black pigs and such paraphernalia abounded" (140).

Furthermore, the most important tool of the poet is language. He is a successful poet, an artist, who has mastered language, much in the same manner a matador masters a bilious bull. T.S. Eliot captures it this way:

> That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:
> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter
> It was not (to start again) what one had expected.
> What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,
> Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
> And the wisdom of age? (*Four Quartets*, 25-6)

He continues:

> So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –
> Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*
> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a whole, new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
> One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling
> Undisciplined squads of emotion. (30-1)

Hence, he counsels: "Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning/ Every poem an epitaph" (58). Apparently, T.S. Eliot did not have the African or Nigerian poet in mind when he was writing these highly prescriptive prosodic *diktats*. If he did, he would have realised the double jeopardy in which the Nigerian poet is, given his or her eternal burden of "double consciousness" or what W.E.B. DuBois calls "the double vision" (DuBois, 1903/1973, 53). Reformulated simply, the African or Nigerian poet normally *thinks* in his or her indigenous language but *writes* in English. And we are reminded that: "when two languages meet, they kiss and quarrel" (Osundare, 2002, 11). Osundare remarks that:

> Despite the linguistic universals and translingual communalities that have come into prominence in the recent times, it is still common knowledge that each language possesses its own uniqueness, each language maintains—and frequently defends—its own territory of sounding and meaning. (15)

Here, Osundare shares with his readers his personal challenges as an orally-rooted Yoruba-born Nigerian poet, about how he tries to settle the scuffle between English and Yoruba. This interface style—going all the way back to the Language Question Conferences of the 60's and Achebe's "fatalistic inevitability of English" as medium of artistic expression in African writing—bulks large in Nigerian poetry even today. Every Nigerian writer

is constantly grappling with this linguistic challenge. Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo, and their many successors, all intersperse their poetry with vernacular elements, especially lexical items, thus giving their works local colour and cultural authenticity. Arising, thus, from the resultant linguistic *metissage* of the native tongue and English, a verbal miscegenation of sorts, the ensuing Nigerian English (NE) is put down in lowercase indicating pejorative overtones of "impurity" and "inferiority," a deformed, misshapen and defective variety of the language Shakespeare spoke! (Ashcroft *et al*, 1989).

Confronted with this unenviable situation, how do we evaluate Nigerian poetry vis-à-vis poetry produced by the native speakers themselves? We may take consolation in the reassurances given us by Chinua Achebe to the effect that speaking or writing like the native is rather not desirable or feasible, and that it is enough that English has been given to us, and we must domesticate it to suit our communicative purposes (Achebe, 1975, 42 – 46.). This nativisation of English in our poetry is part of the enrichment of the tongue, as its vocabulary continues to burgeon to date.

It is instructive to state at this juncture that the touchstone of poetry, as David Crystal argues in his book entitled *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, is the poet's handling of language, or poetic diction, to be precise. Crystal argues that there are two opposing camps regarding poetic diction, namely: (1) those who prefer simplicity of language, and (2) those who favour a more hard-going and difficult style. He, therefore, concurs that all dealers in symbols and imagery, notably poets, abhor banality, and, hence, their predilections for transgressing linguistic codes in search of freshness of vision and novelty of insight. Literary history furnishes us with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's rift with the *ancien regime* established in the neo-classical period by the likes of Alexander Pope, John Dryden and Samuel Johnson, who championed in their writings artificiality, the cult of poetic diction, the virtual apotheosisation of reason and rationality. Resisting the neo-classical citified aestheticism, Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* does not only create "a reform of language" but also inaugurates what T.S. Eliot calls "a revolution of language". (Eliot,

The Use of Poetry 26). However, Eliot's dictum: "The common word exact without vulgarity,/The formal word precise but not pedantic" (*Four Quartets* 58) should be the desideratum for all poets who aim to be taken seriously.

Periodizing Nigerian Poetry

Many scholars and historians of literature over the years have tried to furnish what in their considered opinions and views would be regarded as the definitive periodization of Nigerian poetry. Some of these scholars include Harry Garuba, Biodun Jeyifo, Donatus I. Nwoga, Senanu and Theo Vincent and Tijan Sallah and Tanure Ojaide. Jeyifo remarks, for instance, that if there are now about *five* distinct generations of writers, critics and scholars of modern African literature, the first two generations came into their own in the epoch of the high tide of decolonization while the last two generations have been confronted with the specters of arrested decolonization, failing or collapsed states, economic stagnation, widespread autocratic misrule and the delegitimization of the grand narratives of emancipation which held that the liberation of African peoples in the modern world is indissolubly linked to the liberation of all the oppressed peoples of the world. (Anyokwu, "Nigerian Poetry" Part 1).

In spite of the perceptive and perspicacious analysis of Nigerian literary history furnished by Jeyifo, it would seem far more accurate and, in fact, intellectually more rewarding to stick to the periodization provided by Sallah and Ojaide in their jointly-edited anthology entitled *New African Poetry: An Anthology*. According to these African poet-critics, there are *three* distinct generational cohorts in Nigerian, nay, African poetry. These include (1) the Nationalist poets such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Dennis Chukude Osadebe who wrote poetry in imitation of the 19th century British poets, as part of the momentous anti-colonial struggle and the agitation for self-determination, (2) the Independence Generation, that is, Nigerian (African) poets and writers who came of age during the heyday of political independence across Africa; and, in the Nigerian situation. This refers to the so-called Ibadan-Nsukka School or the Soyinka-Clark-Okigbo-Echeruo

coterie; and (3) the group of African poets who had cut their teeth on the works of their immediate predecessors but felt deeply dissatisfied with their precursors' performance, and, therefore, steered a different course, thereby inaugurating at once *a thematic* and *formal* sea-change in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. ("Nigerian Poetry" Part 1)

Sallah and Ojaide, both among this cohort of African poets, identify some characteristic features of this school/tendency/sensibility/mindset, features which include limpidity of diction, a clear class consciousness or poetic ideology, a sense of propaganda, incorporation of instrumental orchestration into poetry, a style popularly termed "performance poetry", call-and-response or antiphonal exchange between cantor and auditor, the adroit incorporation of indigenous oral aesthetics or, better yet, poetic sub/genres (in the Yoruba case, such poetic forms as *oriki* (panegyric or praise/heroic poetry, *ofo* (incantatory poetry) *ijala* hunters' chants) *ese Ifa* (Ifa divination poetry), *iremoje* (valedictory verse); *owe* (proverbs, apothegms, adages, saws and wise sayings; *alo apamo* (riddles and jokes) and *epe* (curses/imprecations). Additionally, these poets regard themselves as agents of change—radical, progressive and revolutionary change – poet-prophet/seers, social gadflies, ideologues, notably left-leaning revolutionary arbiters of taste and social wellbeing. Among these poet-seers include Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Okinba Launko, Funso Aiyejina, Obiora Udechukwu, Ossie Enekwe, Catherine Acholonu, Afam Akeh and Harry Garuba.

The impression has been created in much critical commentary that the Third Generation of Nigerian poets emerged out of the frustration felt by the readership over what has been variously described as the "obscurantism and Eurocentrism" of most of the [second] generation of modern Nigerian poets. Or, what Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ikechukwu Madubuike characterise as "Euromodernism" or "the Hopkins' Disease"; or, to further flesh it out, "Hopkinsian syntactic juggery, Poundian allusiveness and sprinkling of foreign phrases, and Eliotesque suppression of narrative and other logical linkages of the sort that create obscurity in "*The Wasteland"* (Chinweizu *et al* 208). This egregious cultivation of obscurantism is equally excoriated by Biodun Jeyifo when

he comments that: "[T]he older poets generally deployed a diction and a metaphoric, highly allusive universe calculated to exclude all but a small coterie of specialists" (Jeyifo, 1985, ix).

Given the fact that the Second Generation of Nigerian poets was to produce the first major body of poetry for serious and sophisticated critical disquisitions, it was not out of place or surprising that their works have consistently attracted in equal measure both high praise and acerbic denunciation, a vilification that came to a head with the epoch-making publication of the *Bolekaja Trioka's* vitriol, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, published by Fourth Dimension Publishers, in 1980. Typically, in what he has called "Responses in Kind", Soyinka has equally fought back pound for pound, taking his traducers to the cleaners in such mordant rejoinders as "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," "The Autistic Hunt; or, How to Marxmize Mediocrity" and "Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies" (Soyinka, 1988).

However, in trying to play the umpire, or, hold brief for the Ibadan-Nsukka School of Nigerian poetry, D.I. Nwoga, himself a poet in the same generational cohort, wrote a famous essay entitled "Obscurity and Commitment in Modern African Poetry", in which he notes that Wole Soyinka and his ilk "are struggling to give expression to an elusive vision in a situation which they as well as the intellectual *elite* which I consider their chief audience, find quite confusing" (Nwoga 31). The apparent difficulty felt by those poets to communicate "an elusive vision" (whatever that means!) derived in the main, according to Nwoga, from an incipient or nascent linguistic interface context which required the poets to yoke together by violence English, a stress-timed language and, say, Yoruba, a syllable-stressed language. This dilemma of usage was exacerbated in no small measure as "The Modern European Poets to whom our modern poets apprenticed themselves were difficult to understand and therefore even more difficult to imitate because their technical complexity could more easily divert the reader and imitator from the essential character of their poetry and their underlying perception of life and art" (Nwoga 31). In a more straightforward appraisal of the Ibadan-Nsukka poets, Nwoga in the

same publication berates them for what he perceives as "a lack of communication". This same technical flaw in the poetry of Wole Soyinka and his fellow compatriot poets has been criticized and carpeted by Derek Wright as "failure of craft" (Wright, 168), and Lewis Nkosi, in the same connection, puts the alleged lapse of rigour down to a "failure to communicate" (Nkosi, 1982, 124). For his part, Odia Ofeimun in his poetry collection *The Poet Lied* finds space and time to cut Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike down to size, accusing the crusading triumvirate of doing injustice to poetry through their "*pronounciamentos* of ignorance" (Soyinka's phrase). Ofeimun also traduces curmudgeonly the *Bolekaja* Trioka in his, book, *In Search of Ogun: Soyinka in Spite of Nietzsche*:

> The notorious case in relation to Soyinka's art is the stumble-and-fall performance of the troika, Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie in their *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* […], a polemic in which they make too much of a meal of the Euromodernist influences in the poetry of Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark and Michael Echeruo. (Ofeimun *38-39*)

Still on the vexed question of the style of Soyinka (and his ilk), Stanley Macebuh weighs in thus:

> Language in Soyinka is difficult, harsh, sometimes tortured; his syntax is often archaic, his verbal structures sometimes impenetrable. It would be pointless to seek to overlook this condition in his works. And bearing in mind his basic preoccupation with myth, it might on the face of it appear an insupportable contradiction that he should thus seem to overlook the consideration that the language of myth is usually 'simple'. There is, nevertheless, the possibility that a good many of Soyinka's critics have, in identifying this difficulty, yet failed to pay attention to the internal, that is, ethnocentric compulsions in his poetic dramas that render this condition nearly inevitable. (80)

Macebuh goes on to asseverate that: "If there is anyone who has been persistently exercised, and painfully so, by the problem of language in

contemporary African writing, it surely must be Wole Soyinka. But he has not been preoccupied with language merely as the index of style, but rather with language as a vehicle of mythic meaning" (82). Segun Adekoya, himself an accomplished poet, a foremost Soyinka critic and a retired professor of English at Ife, in his 30 – page poem captioned "Kongi", clearly dedicated to Soyinka, goes to great lengths to lampoon Chinweizu *et al* for what he regards as their blinkered vision and defective understanding of the true nature and character of poetry *qua* poetry: Consider the following excerpt:

> Gosh!
> What they couldn't chew was chucked up—chaff;
> What they can't count they call cant;
> What incenses their senses is sentenced nonsense!
> A potful of archaisms, crudities and stupidities!
> Defenders of a culture that they list not to live
> Nor carefully study to thoroughly understand
> Can only carp at its capped cans
> Yap to no end at their people's politico-economic
> Yoke, cosher the folk like a kosher egg yolk
> And cartwheel as they cavort about on foes' faults.
> Certainly, the whole of all their monkey role is a fall
> Followed by a sigh for a broken lens
> And a long silence full of tons of regrets.
> Ah!
> Pity poor prodigals who come home stunned
> To prod laggards with slag and slander,
> Their slender gals and slack slim work
> With chic newly strung signifying slang.
> They labour to slay the chicks of lyrics
> Prating poetry is not a puzzling riddle,
> Yet every line they write prises open a lie can,
> Preys on the sight and sense of sound,
> Plays the jigsaw puzzle of verse phonetics
> In the trap that nets its rat and tricks;
> They seek in a mirror the meaning of metaphor
> Trying syntax by the glass law of logic. (13-4)

In the excerpted passage, Adekoya lays mercilessly into virtually all foes and adversaries of Soyinka, appositional schools of Nigerian writing who have achieved prominence via their sadistic flaying of the Ake-born Nobelist. In an essay entitled "Singers of a New Dawn…", Niyi Osundare provides a typology of modern Nigerian poetry. He, thus, identifies the following sensibilities and tendencies, to wit: (1) the Nationalist poets (2) the so-called "Wasted Generation" *a la* Soyinka, (3) the Angry Generation, that is, the Third-Generation in which he himself belongs and (4) The Anxious Generation which includes the likes of Akeem Lasisi, Uche Umez, Chiedu Ezeani, Sola Osofisan, Maik Nwosu, Austyn Njoku, Joe Ushie, Obi Nwakanma and Bassey Nnimmo. Thus, as far as Osundare is concerned, these *four* generational cohorts are sufficiently distinct from one another in terms both of their *thematic* foci and *stylistic* and *ideological* orientations and choices.

Tanure Ojaide, however, has denounced his successors (or those with whom he still writes at present) as mere copycats, accusing them of aping and parroting him and Osundare. As a consequence, he does not think the poetry of these "copycats" is fundamentally different or distinguishable from his and Osundare's to warrant or merit a distinct category. The implication, therefore, is that the Fourth Generation, in his opinion, is a continuation of the Third one, that is, the Osundare-Ojaide Generation. It is instructive to stress at this juncture that, Ojaide himself, having done his Ph.D. on Wole Soyinka's poetry – which he considers difficult and inaccessible – had begun writing his own brand of poetry, one overwhelmingly influenced by the oral poetics of his Urhobo Udje song-poetry. In repudiating Soyinka's obscurity, in a rather "parricidal" fashion, to deploy Bloomian terminology, Ojaide swings to the polar opposite of the Soyinka hemeticism. In the written orality of his native Urhobo song-poetry tradition, Ojaide comes across as excessively prosaic on occasion, thus inviting a groundswell of irenic put-downs as exemplified by the unsparing pillorying by the likes of Ode Ogede and Stewart Brown, among others. ("Nigerian Poetry" Part 2)

Holding brief, however, for Tanure Ojaide, who himself had charged Lasisi and others with slavish mimicry and dilettantism, Tayo

Olafioye writes: "The problem with new poetry today is world-wide. The matter of looseness or lack of intricate intensity or "vision" is not Ojaide's alone nor should he be held an exemplary heretic of literary criminality, assuming that the critic himself is accurate and convincing in all his charges […] [P]oetry has largely diminished in narrative intensity… The poet emotes everything, orates every hue, hardly leaving anything to the imagination of the audience. The mysteries of distinction and quest are subverted in simplicities" (Olafioye, 35).

Nigerian Poetry: The Ethnic Factor

Nigerian poetry, like the country itself, is an amalgam of ethnically-informed, religiously-nuanced and culture-bound configurations. It has become necessary to re-operationalise and reconceptionalise Nigerian poetry with a view to properly situating its heuristic and hortatory potentialities. If, indeed, we would like to take ourselves seriously in the discussion of what truly constitutes Nigerian poetry, we should be speaking of it *in the plural*, namely: Nigerian *poetries*. In other words, we would be talking of, for instance, Yoruba-English poetry, Igbo-English poetry, Hausa-English poetry, Urhobo-English poetry, Ika-English poetry, and so on. We should, to be certain, be asking ourselves seriously, what in concrete practical terms, does, say, Wole Soyinka's poetry have in common with Christopher Okigbo's poetry; or what communion has Niyi Osundare's verse with Tanure Ojaide's poetry? To hazard a guess or vouchsafe an answer to these posers, however, it is useful to emphasise the point that these poets all hail from the same country, write in and speak English, the country's official language, and, to that extent, are all united by factors of context, that is, the Nigerian polity and circumstances as well as bound inextricably together by the same medium of expression, English. But if we take the trouble to interrogate the linguistic and cultural determinations with their informing, shaping and over-determining impetus in regard to the artistic issue of their imaginaries, it will become clear to us that what divides these poets are more deeply-entrenched than what seems to unite them ("Nigerian Poetry" Part 1).

Furthermore, the contentious details of the strife-ridden, ethnically-charged Nigerian politics itself do not only shape their linguistic ideology but, far more significantly, impinge upon their reading of history and shape the critically vital relationship between poet and polity. To speak a bit more about language, speakers of English as a second language often wrestle with the English language. As Osundare opines, when two languages meet, they kiss and quarrel. Does this apply in equal measure to both the Igbo-born poet and his Yoruba counterpart? Even if it does, both languages being as they are tonal languages, yet they each possess phonological, syntactic, morphological and, thus, semantic features fundamentally unique to them. Embedded in each language is a particular philosophy of life which, in turn, invariably permeates the social values, the patterns of thinking, the religious outlook and the epistemology of that particular ethnic group. Yoruba is Yoruba, Hausa is Hausa. What, therefore, comes through as Soyinka's poetry, for instance, is a melding of Yoruba oral tradition and western poetic tradition. By the same token, Okigbo's poetry is steeped in Igbo autochthonous oralities and a welter of foreign-derived literary influences.

Using both Soyinka and Okigbo as template, we can very easily analyse the socio-cultural features of any Nigerian poet's *oeuvre*. Therefore, just as it has become increasingly difficult to speak of African literature, owing in large part to the multiplicity of nationalities, ethnicities and the resultant communicative ideas derivable from these confounding chorus of tongues which make up Africa, so does the description of Nigerian poetry as a single homogenous body of writing leave much to be desired. What is being proposed here, is that, in light of present socio-cultural and geopolitical realities in Nigeria, it may be more intellectually rewarding and, of course, more *factual* to take another, more dispassionate look at the criticism of Nigerian poetry-and this time, from a decidedly ethnically-informed perspective (Nigerian Poetry" Part 1).

The merit of this procedure is that, shorn of the lie of cultural homogeneity, the critic is more equipped and better informed to plumb the depths of any Nigerian writing under analysis as he or she is required to situate the work within its socio-cultural milieu and, hence, is able to stake

out its proper place within the larger Nigerian social context. Poetry originating from the so-called minority ethnic groups would have their day in the sun, as it were. Thus, we can, then, speak of, say, Ibibio-English poetry, Nupe-English poetry, Isoko-English poetry and so forth. Beyond showcasing the vast cultural diversity of Nigerian poetry as a whole, these *poetries* from hitherto suppressed and marginalised ethnic groups would be brought to the fore, plus the fact that their academic or discursive respectability would be established. To this extent, therefore, uprooted scholars and prodigal researchers must recognise the need to return to their respective natal homes, to their villages and localities with a view to *collaborating* in a structured and serious way with their unlettered townsfolk, those grizzled living encyclopaedias, the custodians of their endogenous patrimony, failure which they die out with their artistic heritage. Crucially, the importance of this town-gown collaboration cannot be overstated, especially in light of the egregious depredations of globalization ("Nigerian Poetry" Part 1).

Nigerian Poetry and Ideology

When it comes to the discourse of ideology in cultural and, more narrowly, *literary* representation, especially in verse-making, we have to quote Niyi Osundare's poetic manifesto, namely: "Poetry Is" (*Songs of the Marketplace* 3-4):

> Poetry is
> not the esoteric whisper
> of an excluding tongue
> not a claptrap
> for a wondering audience
> not a learned quiz
> entombed in Grecoroman here
> ---
> ---
>
> Poetry is
> no oracle's kernel
> for a sole philosopher's stone

Poetry
is
man
meaning
to
man (Osundare 3-4).

It is enough to state here that in the poem, Osundare inveighs against the old order, his immediate predecessors – Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo, Echeruo, etc, whom he accuses of writing "Grecoroman lore" fraught and freighted with indigestible imponderables to boot. He, thus, juxtaposes the Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry with the post-Civil War cohort of Ojaide, Udechukwu, Enekwe, Aiyejina, Atanda Ilori, Launko Okimba, Ofeimun and himself. He valorises the ideas of limpidity, ideological suasion, audience participation, and the revolutionary imperative of art. In his view, the poetic canvas is capacious enough, like the sky overhead, to imbricate both rich and poor, literate and unlettered, urban dweller and rural inhabitant. That is to say, everyday people are fit and proper subjects of poetic portraiture. Interestingly many of his fellow poets with whom he shares the same generational cohort exhibit similar ideological predilections in their works.

But what do we mean by "ideology" in the context of poetry? Do our poets consciously or otherwise write with an ideology in mind? Quizzed if he writes with an ideology in mind, Wole Soyinka was said to have swatted off the question, stating that to write with an ideology does stymie and stultify creativity, blur vision and pigeonhole the poet in narrow-minded partisanship. For Soyinka, therefore, ideology-ridden writing would eventuate in the mummification or suicide of poetry (see Soyinka, "And After The Narcissists?"). However, some critics have dismissed his so-called non-ideological stance as hypocritical and dishonest, highlighting Ngugi's position instead, that no writing whatsoever is ideologically neutral (Ngugi, 1984). Soyinka may be described, therefore, as a conservative, bourgeois artist with a liberal disposition, one who favours reformism over revolution, a champion of tradition with a good deal of sympathy for change.

Still on the question of ideology, Abiola Irele characterises Wole Soyinka's artistic ideology as "romantic anarchism", which, according to Irele, "expresses itself as an extreme attachment to the abstract ideals of the liberal individualism of the nineteenth century European intellectual tradition" (210). Irele believes that the "lack of a definite and positive orientation to his imaginative vision" is responsible for "the impression his work often gives of swinging without a middle term between tragic pessimism and lyrical idealism" (211).

The famous left-leaning scholars in Nigerian universities, particularly Ibadan and Ife, scholars such as Biodun Jeyifo, Omafome Onoge, Femi Osofisan, Yemi Ogunbiyi and Osundare had launched a countervailing assault against Soyinka's reactionary and atavistic politics, accusing him of heroizing mythic demiurges and avatars such as Ogun. Even though Soyinka seizes upon Ogun as a handy versatile metaphor for the essential duality of experience, these Marxist-socialist scholars believe that Soyinka's historicisation of Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and the deadly hunt, ends up reifying an oppressive regime of power-relations. This class dimension of his Ogunian poetics remains an unbridgeable gulf between Soyinka and the rest. Even so, it is fair to note that, in spite of Soyinka's alleged elitism, no one can accuse him of being in bed with social ghouls and monsters, life-denying social agents upon whom he often pronounces imprecations (see *Kongi's Harvests*).

Emmanuel Ngara and Ademola Dasylva and Toyin Jegede and Ezenwa-Ohaeto have examined the question of ideology in Nigerian (African) poetry (See Ngara, 1989, Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1998, Dasylva and Jegede, 1997). These critics and scholars tell us that African poets are either using their art to advocate people-oriented agenda or to purvey and reinforce pro-Establishment views. But it is reasonable to posit that, on account of the pervasive apocalyptic socio-political realities across the African continent, writers and poets in particular are increasingly jettisoning hagiographic poetization of officialdom and deploying their creative energies in the denunciatory flagellation of the powers-that-be. At

present, there is a great deal of fire and fury coming out of the current crop of Nigeria poets, as their poems seem to compete with the day's headlines.

The Lost or Careless Generation and the Future of Poetry

If the poetry of established voices like Tanure Ojaide, and others in the Third Generation and most of the so-called "Anxious Generation" is said to betray looseness of structure and other egregious marks of juvenilia, we need to sound the alarm to alert the world to be tumultuous invasion of a rising rash of pseudo-poets and poetasters who have colonised the literary scene at the moment. Enter the "Lost or Careless Generation" of Nigerian Poetry. They are legion, mostly found amongst secondary school students, university undergraduates and postgraduates, freelance "writers" and journalists, literature teachers at both secondary and tertiary levels, civil servants, and the artisan class-truck-pushers, *maiguards*, *wannabe* musicians, up-and-coming stand-up comedians and skit-makers, bloggers and, of course, Area Boys! For this group of "poets", not for them the Vatic or masonic *nous* of an Okigbo or Soyinka, the eclectic erudition and intellectual catholicity of an Echeruo, Pol. Ndu, the meticulous logistics and the contemplative urbane grace of an Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Esiaba Irobi, or Funso Aiyejina or the lyrical ebullience and the philosophic depth-experience of an Osundare, Okimba Launko (i.e., Femi Osofisan) and an Odia Ofeimun. No, this new breed of scribblers is a rag-tag cohort on the fast-lane, scuttling hotfoot to instant and instantaneist fame and fortune, dazed and disorientated as they are by, on the one hand, what Sigmund Freud calls "The Discontents of Modernity", and, on the other, by the centrifugal crosswinds of the post-modern condition: the primacy of the fragment or the fragmentation of experience, alienation, rootlessness, exile, the cult of the virtual, play and fantasy, indeterminacy, decentered consciousness, the delegitimation of grand narratives of Truth, Beauty, Reason, etc., ("Nigerian Poetry" Part 2).

What is worse, the poetry of this motley group is an instantiation of the virtual globalization of kitsch, especially on the internet. As a result, what you have is a rather "factory-line", mass production of cut-and-paste generation of literary pretenders and philistines intent on assaulting all the

time-honoured values of good taste. Bereft and barren of fresh and innovative ideas, these "writers" and "poets" mobilise a language which, at best, is dismal and, hence, their vision, regrettably abysmal. They, thus, violate all known norms of grammar and syntax in the name of poetic license. These "rhymers", to be sure, lack the knowledge of life's important issues, and, on occasion, when they find clarity and lucidity, their understanding of life's knotty theorems is disappointingly shallow. In a word, their "poetry" can be described as the prosification of inanities dressed in stanzaic patterning. Sadly, puerility is, therefore, passed off as "orality" (the most abused term in these parts), or, better still, as "performance poetry". Moreover, without waiting to benefit from constructive criticism, these poets-on-the-go rush to the printers to self-publish, thereby endangering public artistic health. Let's be clear, there is, indeed, an absolute sense in which this abuse of orality or written gibberish has become a leitmotif, an organizing principle for the perennially prostrate post-colony itself where lawlessness and normlessness is the norm.

The "Lost or Careless Generation" who are incredibly active on the internet came to limelight sometime in the middle of the first decade of the New Millennium, and is waxing stronger even today. The consolation, though, is that it is not all doom and gloom even for this fast-growing cohort, since we can point to comparatively good and sure-footed poets among them. Within their ranks can be identified refreshingly original voices such as Dami Ajayi, Benson Eluma, Chike Ofili, Niran Okewole, Amatoritse Ede, Richard Ali, Unoma Azuah, and the greatest of them all, Tade Ipadeola. If Ipadeola's poetry collection entitled *The Sahara Testaments*, which, by the way, scooped home the prestigious Nigeria Literature Prize sponsored by the NLNG, (which critics say combines the best of Okigbo and Soyinka), is indicative of the future of Nigerian poetry, that means it's morning yet on creation day for our poetry. As Niyi Osundare rightly points out, "poetry is essentially a performance-oriented, audience-conscious genre" (*Poetry and the Human Voice* 16), and poets are increasingly struggling to break loose from "the prison-house of the scripted page" 24), and, to that extent, Nigerian poets are experimenting

with performance poetry. And, there is nothing essentially new about this. Osundare argues in the same study that poets such as Donne, Hopkins, Whitman, Okigbo, Neruda and Nicolas Guillen composed performance-oriented verse in their day. Even among African-American poets; "poetry performs the word" (Brown 26 cited in Osundare 18). Osundare elaborates:

> For the black poet the word can hardly afford to just 'be' without the urgent imperative to 'mean'. The word is transformative, regenerative, and empowering, thus giving rise to serious language practices and performance strategies: the joyful noise of the sermon in which most times 'writing is an extension of speaking or singing' (Brown p. 28-29), the mellow, sometimes sweetly melancholic lilt of the blues singer, the solo virtuosity coupled with the polyphonic riffs of the jazz artist, the boast and bravura of the hip hop or rap artist, the bardic clash of the slam warrior. (18)

Given, therefore, the theory and the pedagogy of the newfangled poetic movement known as the *Spoken Word*, intimations of which we have seen in Soyinka, Clark, Okigbo, Okara and Okot p'Bitek, and Kofi Awoonor, Niyi Osundare furnishes a select roll-call of Nigerian poets whose outputs can be described as being influenced and informed by the poetics of indigeneity and rootedness in African orality:

> Odia Ofeimun, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Funso Aiyejina, Chimalum Nwankwo, Harry Garuba, Akachi Adimara-Ezeigbo, Idris Amali, Ogaga Ifowodo, Joe Ushie, Hyginus Ekwuazi, Bayo Adebowale, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Obiora Udechukwu, Ossie Enekwe, Esiaba Irobi, Uche Nduka, Afam Akeh, Emma Shehu, Obi Nwakanma, Obu Udeozo, Isidore Diala, Toyin Adewale-Gabriel, Hope Eghagha, Adah Ugah, Moses Tsenongu, Sule Egya, Tunde Olusunle, Nduka Otiono, Niran Okewole, Denja Abdullahi, Gbemisola Adeoti, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Olu Oguibe, Maik Nwosu, Joyce Ashuntantang, Jumoke Verissimo, Promise Okekwe, Sam Omatseye, Ismail Bala Garba, Dami Ajayi, Folake Onayemi, Akinloye Ojo, Henri Oripeloye, Chirikure Chirikure, Amatoritse Ede, Ndubuisi Martins, Anthony Ebika, Remi Raji, J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, Nelson

> Fashina, Ademola Dasylva, Mabel Evwierhoma, Unoma Azuah, Maria Ajima, Lola Shoneyin, Funke Awodiya, Funke Aluko, Tosin Gbogi, Tony Marinho, Folu Agoi, Ifesinachi Nwadike, Charles Akinsete, Servio Gbadamosi, Sueddie, Stephen Kekeghe, Kola Tubosun, James Yeku, Bassey Nnimmo, Obari Gimba, Eriata Oribhotor, Tade Ipadeola, Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah. (25-26)

Continuing on this surge in the genre of Spoken Word, Osundare comments: "The past two decades have witnessed a rejuvenation of interest in oral poetry and the aesthetics of performance. Poetry Grand Slams are on the rise; the ranks of advocates (and acolytes) of the Spoken Word are swelling; rap keeps churning out new rhymes. The 'hip hop' generation is not just a dancing, gyrating bunch; it is also taking the Spoken Word to new exciting heights" (29-30). Niyi Osundare adds for good measure that the Spoken Word revolution is waxing stronger and stronger on university campuses as well as in urban places. In this regard, he references the encouraging efforts of the likes of Efe Paul Azino, Ola Awakan and the "dynamic, 'simply poetry' Dike Chukwumerije" (28). It is not only in Nigeria that Spoken Word or performance poets are making giant strides, "garnering respectability and relevance" with their works ruffling the "pages of hallowed typo-centric poetics" (28), the rest of Africa is equally alive with song. In the recently released important study, *Networked Poetics: The Digital Turn in Southern African Poetry*, Susan L. Sacks explores the nature and function of poetry caught in the intersection of page and screen. Examining the creative and critical interactions between literary studies, print culture and transnational studies in the digital-era poetry of Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa, Sacks shows digital networks and platforms impinge upon poetry from inception to canonization." Sacks demonstrates that, as more artists in Africa reach wider audience "through online publication, poetic form has shifted to reflect social media's aesthetic norms of urgency, immediacy, and populism" (Blurb).

Writing about the influence of the digital turn, Osundare tracks poetry's peregrination "from page to stage to screen". Celebrating this

"digital delight", he calls our attention to the "enormously important" efforts of Akeem Lasisi who has "moved Nigerian poetry from page to stage to screen" (28). For Osundare, therefore "the walls built by guardians of theoretical orthodoxy are being assailed by electronic and digital warriors" (29). Yet, it is critically important to stress at this juncture that there is a sense in which new Nigerian poetry, especially digitally-mediated types suffer inauthenticity. Whilst it might be argued that a fair amount of these writers and poets still continue to draw upon the oral resources of their natal origins, an overwhelming majority of them are fundamentally rootless and dislocated, being as they are mere driftwood and *flaneurs* in the seedy belly of the urban beast. With rampaging globalization and the accompanying attenuation and atrophy of the cultural self, the native son (and daughter) only ends up singing songs of other lands that violate our ears. What to do in the circumstances? We address this in the next sub-heading.

Poetry's Institutional Relevance and the Question of Reception

T.S. Eliot writes: "Poetry begins, I daresay, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm" (*The Use of Poetry* 155). This is to say, poetry derives from human language which imbricates both verbal and non-verbal resources and elements of communication. We know of drum poetry, percussive and instrumentally-orchestrated forms of poetry. Poetry, indeed, is rhythmic movement both of animate and inanimate entities—humans, *flora* and *fauna*, rivers, seas, oceans, rocks, mountains, etc., etc. Whatever displays a sense of harmony, and rhythm that imparts aesthetic delight and also conveys meaning can be included in the song. The motley brew of nature furnishes material for verse-making. However, word and image are pre-eminent elements of poetry: "Sounding is meaning, and meaning is sounding", as Niyi Osundare tells us. (Osundare, 2002, 12)

As we begin to round off, we need to ask again, in its *utile et dulce*, who really cares about poetry's health amid the ongoing *danse macabre* that is contemporary life in Nigeria? As the poor, impoverished masses face pangs of hunger and starvation on a daily basis, who remembers, or is

charmed by the rhyming couplet or nettled by the flaying satire? Besides the so-called practitioners of poetry, who else loves poetry for poetry's sake?

Is everyone not writing for pecuniary reasons? For recognition? For ego inflation? Is contemporary writing not a form of pot-boiling, a side-hustle for most? Are most poets not merely writing because it is the in-thing, for sheer voguism? This fad idolatry or mentality seems to dovetail into the culture of writing for career advancement and for prizes, and sundry accolades. Again, how many people write from the heart? Are the audiences growing or shrinking and who are they, to be honest? Secondary school students, university people, arts-oriented journalists, publishers, book sellers and the odd bibliophile? Has Nigerian poetry been able to transcend class divide to become a truly communal art, an art-form all and sundry are passionate about and consume with gusto? Where does poetry rank or figure in the hierarchy of needs of Nigerians? Would the average Nigerian recognise it if and when they encounter it on the street? Have they been socialized enough to *own* it as part of the fabric of society?

In 1991, American scholar Dana Gioia in a very provocative essay entitled "Can Poetry Matter?" took a stern and hard look at American poetry and reported thus:

> American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group. Little of the frenetic activity it generates ever reaches outside that closed group. As a class poets are not without cultural status. Like priests in a town of agnostics, they still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible (Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter").

Nigeria, it would seem, is not in this kind of situation. As we have pointed out earlier on, poetry in Nigeria has become an all-comers affair. However, we have also sounded the warning that this can and does give rise to a reduction in the *quality* of verse produced for public consumption. Thus, while it would appear we are experiencing a boom in the House of Poetry,

much of it might be mere blather. To rectify this, there is need to do the following. First, there must be a Town-and-Gown synergy. University people—students, researchers, scholars, critics, teachers – must go out of their Ivory Tower to engage in collaborative work with the original custodians of oral poetry, that is, the dying tribe of indigenous bards, griots, chanters, and performers. This type of collaboration is absolutely vital for the lettered tribe in order to root their written poetry in the affective, authentically endogenous *habitus* of Nigerian (African) gnosis and epistemologies.

Second, we must establish poetry clinics and Creative Writing workshops in schools and universities in order to help identify and nurture young, up-and-coming talent to maturity. Third, it is equally necessary to build or set up public libraries in rural areas and towns across the country with a view to encouraging access and creating opportunities for self-improvement for the young and the young-at-heart.

Fourth, the reward system in Nigeria which is at present skewed towards rewarding mediocrity on the altar of political preferment and patronage must give way to a proper reward system that recognises and rewards excellence and merit. Fifth, government funding and logistical support are sorely needed in the culture industry as a whole, and for the nurturing and development of creatives in particular. To that extent, therefore, Fellowships, Awards, Prizes and Residences must be established to drive healthy competition and innovation among our writers and poets, especially the burgeoning tribe of Spoken Word artists, both offline and online. And, lastly, government should set aside a *Poetry Day*, a kind of National Festival of the Arts in which to celebrate poetry in particular.

Conclusion

As we round off this critical discourse on the production of poetry by Nigerian poets, it is important for us to reiterate our major arguments: whilst our established poets from the past continue to lay down the marker for poets of today, there are encouraging signs of progress among the mixed multitude of both serious and middling poets. Interestingly, the handling of language remains the agonistic coliseum of contestation. We must,

therefore, understand that the lifeblood of poetry is language, that is, the language really spoken by humans in society. The truth is, without poets, language will atrophy and die. Society needs poets to renew and revitalize language. Poetry encodes what is eternal and permanent in human civilization. It is the duty of poets to endeavour to keep human language fresh and healthy by carrying in their souls the collective harvest of human civilisation, from the mists of memory to the high-noon of present-day experience.

So, in spite of the present socio-economic hardships Nigerians are going through, in spite of the bleeding headlines of the day, we must never forget that words matter, and the poem must "mean" as the poet strives *always* to transform "blood into ink".

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