

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.

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Christmas in Biafra and other Poems. By Chinua Achebe.
New York: Doubleday & Co., 1973. Pp.92. \$2.50.

Golgotha. By Pol Ndu. Ife, Nigeria: Pan African Pocket Poets, Vol.4, 1971. Pp.34.

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 ecstasy.*

(*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
ecstasy.*

(*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 reflective 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 aesthetically 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

*with fumes of
human roast clinging
rebelliously to his hairy
nostrils ...*

but who will stop

*at the wayside sweet-shop
and pick up a chocolate
for his tender offspring
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:

*I despise mankind:
vanguarded tractors
bullying tracks of their kind
raising sputum and spittle
both passing t.b.
on wings of winds
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

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.

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