

Poetic Existence: A Personal and Social Imperative

U. L. ARCHIVE

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UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS PRESS - 2002
INAUGURAL LECTURE SERIES

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An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Lagos on
Wednesday, 3rd July 2002.

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ISSN 1119 - 4456

Published by the University of Lagos Press

Introduction

The topic has an air of familiarity to it, because it is quite easy to relate the *poetic* to poetry and poems. Yet, trying to figure out what poetry is and what it does for people creates feelings of unease. Does poetry serve any practical end? How cardinal is poetry to existence? Does it transform or enrich individuals and communities? If so, how does the transformation take place?

As one ponders these questions, some commonly held views, derived from impressions formed during the study of prescribed poems in school, begin to come to the fore. One recalls how “poems canonised by scholars” were thrust on students and how they were expected to respond enthusiastically to these classics in the poetic tradition of literature. But alas, many a student could neither muster, nor feign, the required feeling of excitement. Most of the poems seemed to offer verbal puzzles that proved quite formidable. How could writings that deliberately unsettle the reader be responsible for bringing a worthwhile life-style into being? If poetry presents one with this high measure of apprehension, then how desirable would a poetic life be?

Is poetry not a collection of pieces of writing that are notorious for the uneconomic use of space on pages of paper? Are the uneven lines on paper, not a result of dislocations of normal linguistic patterns? Is the stock-in-trade of poetry not the distortion of conventions that govern the formation and use of words, phrases, clauses and sentences? Do poetic manipulations of sounds, images and meanings ever facilitate communication? Is poetry not a recondite method of transmitting experience? If one is successfully denied involvement in the transmitted experience, how can he benefit from the supposed bounty provided by poetry? Is it unfashionable for one to admit being unable to grasp whatever the poetic import is? These questions do not only suggest the reader's notion of poetry, they

underscore a deep feeling of frustration precipitated by the obvious impenetrability of this rather self-conscious verbal art.

Poetry's apparent formidability stems from the manner in which the "outer form" of poems, especially in their written version, tends to place obstacles in the way of most readers who believe that they have made, and do make, genuine efforts to gain entry into the priceless bounties banked in the secret bower of poetry. The situation is worsened by the fact that teachers of poetry openly declare that the daunting linguistic paraphernalia, which goes into the making of poems, constitutes the hallmark of true poetry. Given this scenario, it is to be expected that many readers should naturally react negatively to poetry. On the face of it, their perceptions of how intimidating the linguistic machinery in written texts is, remain largely valid because the language strategies employed in poems, all too often, rudely confront and force many a reader from a rewarding poetic adventure.

Not even the most well intentioned explanations of the mechanics of poems can successfully change these fairly common perceptions of poetry. Can we rekindle the reader's interest in poetry by explaining to him that what he refers to as "uneven lines" are "verses" realised through specific arrangements of "sounds of words?" Can we woo him back to poetry by demonstrating to him how metre, as measured movement, determines the length of lines? What would drawing his attention to the fact that poetry has some affinity with songs do to dispel his fears? Would our insistence on the fact that poems come alive through oral performance be of any help to him?

Ask the reader if he enjoys poetry's rhythmic effects – effects produced by the systematised deployment of stressed and unstressed syllables in intonational languages as well as the structured emphases placed on syllables in tonal languages. The

response is likely to be, "how can one enjoy what cannot be accessed in the first place?" No one can blame a reader who believes that the iterative structuring of sounds and the resultant peculiar lineation configurations in the written poems create insurmountable obstacles to his full involvement in poetry. Since the true poetic impact is achieved through oral performance, it follows that written texts (graphic representations on paper) tend to rob the reader of the opportunity of being part of the rhythmic impetus that energises meaning in poetry. This rhythmic impulsion that rolls through magnificent lexical and syntactical collocations, in poems, produces multiple significations that connect man with the essence of being human.

Modern critical theories do not ease the pressure put on the reader either. For example, Russian Formalism postulates *literariness* as what distinguishes poetry from other discourses. It also stresses the fact that in addition to *literariness*, the *defamiliarising* effects of language drawing attention to itself constitute the core-defining elements of poetry's *literariness*. By insisting that the poetic experience be seen virtually as a mere sensitivity to the special procedures by which language is deployed or *roughened* and glossing over ennobling participation in the cadenced implication of meaning in poetry, formalist approaches to poetry subvert the fervour necessary for a poetic involvement in life. Is it any wonder then that poems are regarded as obscure propositions that have little or no reward to offer to readers for the great effort they demand from them? How could these kinds of obscure discourses compel poetic existence?

No doubt, the reader's misgivings about the impenetrability of the technical machinery of poetry seem quite logical and therefore perfectly understandable. Yet, it still makes sense to appeal to him to bear with us as we explore

poetry both in its restricted and comprehensive versions. We may well make the reader less apprehensive by broadening our definition of poetry to include most of his favourite activities, and relating them to how poetry touches our souls by arming us with profound insights into the nature and goals of human existence. Moreover, we may be able to make the fear of the technical attributes of poetry virtually evaporate by sensitising the reader to how poetic technicalities parallel other devices by which we normally structure our personal and social experiences.

In spite of the fact that poetry can be characterised in a comprehensive manner to include virtually every human activity, the restrictive consideration of poetry as a unique kind of verbal discourse is perhaps what immediately comes to our minds whenever poetry is being discussed. Shelley identifies this specialized kind of discourse when he states in "A Defence of Poetry" that "poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." The emphasis in this delimitation is placed on "metrical language" while its being part of the human imagination and its relevance to the nature of man are played down. Thus, the metrical and figurative uses of language which constitute the *formal cause* seem to override the input of the subject matter and its thematic import (the *material cause*).

Yet, the *material cause* is of paramount importance in view of the fact that it flows from the formal. It should engage the reader as much as the formal cause does because poetry, as verbal art, thrives on the coalescence of the two *causes*. Coleridge maintains in *Biographia Literaria* that, in vital formations of poetic visioning, the *organic form* flows naturally from the matter. Shelley regards the organic form as a

fascinating confluence of sounds, thoughts and objects when he asserts:

Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of relation of things. Hence the language of poets have ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that particular order.”(*Criticism: Major Statements*, p. 291)

Thus, poetry, even in the more limited sense of being a verbal artefact, intensely communicates what resonates in the soul of man.

While the Greek word *poesis* (which etymologically spun off such words as *poem*, *poet*, *poetry*, *poetic* and *poetics* amongst others, and denotatively means “making or to make”) supports this specialised consideration of poetry as an artistic verbal construct, it also recognizes a wide array of creations or products as poems of some sort. *Poesis* as “making or to make” implies that poetry can be applied to any object fabricated by human beings or any action or activity that stands in contrast to a natural phenomenon. This explains why Plato, in the tenth book of *The Republic*, correlates products of verbal fabrications with those of carpentry and warfare and proceeds to apply the same standards to judge their usefulness. In effect, while it is acceptable to regard those who artistically produce oral or written works as poets and their products as poems in the specialised sense, it is also acceptable to regard, in a general sense, all things produced by man as poems and all human

beings as poets because they produce things and initiate actions that can be regarded as poems.

The Platonic discernment of poetry in all man-made things is usually premised on the assumption that all natural/metaphysical substances are poems made by God/gods. While the metaphysical realities (essences) of the world of gods constitute the original poems, natural certainties occupy a second order of reality. Poems made explicit to man by gods reflect these realities. Hence, Plato insists that poetic success is derived from the manner in which poetry showers forth truth and enriches human life through the delineation of metaphysical, natural and man-made *phenomena*.

While to Plato human and supernatural *makers* are poets and poetry is discernible in all things, there is no doubt that the poetry he expends most of his efforts discussing in the tenth book of *The Republic* and in *Ion* is that which relates to linguistic constructs of beauty, truth and reality. When he talks about banning imitative poets and poetry from, and admitting only inspired and possessed poets and poetry to his republic, he refers specifically to verbal artefacts produced by Homer and other Greek poets of his generation – artefacts that served as the basis for his discussion of the nature and function of poetry.

For Plato, God/gods remain the original poets; they simultaneously create and verbalise essences and natural things. Human poets take a cue from the gods. The manner in which they relate to the divine process of poetic creativity forms the basis for assessing their actions and works. If a human poet faithfully transmits results of the divine process of creation, then the poet and his works are, for Plato, genuine products of “inspiration and possession.” Hence true poetry, in Plato’s view, showers forth a divine order of things that enriches human life.

Plato’s notion of poetry in *The Republic* is not restricted to a universalistic embodiment of truths. It acknowledges and

comments briefly on the formal qualities of the language of poetry. Since "making" through language is poetry, virtually all compelling linguistic "products" can be regarded as poems. When he speaks about the charms of poetry "that excite the hearer" and admits that these charms are actually capable of moving a great philosopher like himself, Plato is, in fact, indirectly paying tribute to the "rich effects" of poetry – linguistic as well as ideological. In a sense, he pays tribute to the formal and ideational qualities of the poetry in discourses that range from the strictly aesthetic, through the philosophical, to the poetically scientific. Although he does not call himself a poet or his products poetry, he affects enough of the poetic to make other theorists like Sidney confidently regard him as a poet. In a sense, therefore, any producer of remarkable verbal discourses produces poetry, making poetry an omnibus term, which is applicable to literature generally. Drama and theatre (tragedies and comedies), hymns and songs, lyrics and epics, romances and fiction as well as inspiring philosophical/scientific performances and writings fall within the province of poetry. In a general sense, all language-based artefacts, which embody truths that profoundly impact on man's life, qualify to be called poems.

The tradition of regarding, as poetry, the entire corpus of works emanating from linguistic artistry and other human creations in different fields of human endeavour has, in various forms, continued uninterrupted in Western thought from ancient times (Greco-Roman), through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Augustan and Romantic to Modern and Contemporary periods. Aristotle, Longinus, Horace and even Sidney classed all works (aesthetic, moral, philosophical and even historical) in so far as they are realised through linguistic artistry as poetry. Aristotle and Longinus make no distinctions between drama, poetry and prose fables: they are all poetry. In contemporary literary

theory, in so far as all products of our material and non-material culture are regarded as *texts* (as is evident in notions of *textuality*, *intertextuality* and *hypertextuality*) the consideration of all human products as poetry remains extant.

Poetry entails all linguistic activities as well as all other products that have ensured man's survival and the enrichment of his life. Products of all knowledge (humanistic, scientific and technological) qualify as poetry. Poetry, in the words of Coleridge, is thus "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, motions, language."

If the core attributes of aesthetic verbal discourses inform the base of all human products and activities, then it follows that such products and activities are poetic. The order and pattern, discernible as beauty in poetry, constitute the aesthetic harmony that must be infused into all other human products (scientific, technological and textual). This aesthetic harmony is what produces the cardinal principles which individuals and social groupings must regulate their affairs with in order to qualify for poetic existence.

This broadened view of poetry informs our consideration of *poetry* and the *poetic* in this lecture.

Our Topic

Now, let us briefly characterize the denotative meanings of key words in our title, establish the context and stipulate the main ideas that form the base of this discourse before proceeding to explore the core issues.

"Poetic" is derived from poetry while poetry is generally associated with poems. Poems are embodiments of poetry. "Poetry" is a type of discourse which addresses its effects through rhythm, sound patterns, imagery . . . evokes emotions, sensations . . . conveys loftiness of tone . . . (and) lends force to ideas." "Existence" relates to "the state or fact of existing"

while “exist” entails “to be real or actual, to have being”. Being, being alive and/or ontological reality are all aspects of existence.

“Personal” springs from “person” and signifies what pertains to a human being as an individual or what is of specific concern to a single person. “Social” implicates societies, groups, organisations made up of people as well as the relations between people and communities. A nation is basically a social group or community of people which is reasonably homogenous “sharing a common history, culture, language . . . territory and government.” “Imperative” relates to what is “essential and urgent,” that which urgently and immediately constitutes the core of anything.

These “meanings” provide significations that crystallise the central ideas in this lecture. The collocation of “poetic” and “existence” demonstrates the input of poetry into human life. The poetic input, in this context, involves distilling the essence of the specific “type of discourse” called poetry and applying it to the world, and all human experiences. The key elements of rhythm, emotions, loftiness and animated ideas that are the hallmark of poetry combine to produce poetic beauty, based on concord and gracefulness that is vital to all profound experiences and ideas. Poetry is the compelling enactment of the inherent beauty in experienced (intellectual, emotional and imaginative; scientific and technological) reality achieved through verbal deployments or technological processes that uncover and elucidate enduring truths and values that direct man’s adventures in life.

As the immanent splendour which nourishes the human soul, poetry is a kind of pulchritude that accentuates and brings into correspondence the binary elements in life – the good and bad, ugly and beautiful, profound and trivial, pleasurable and painful, noble and ignoble, decadent and progressive, amongst

others, forming the basis for the meaningfulness of individual and social being. It is a ravishing symmetry identified and celebrated by Hopkins as God's glory in "Pied Beauty." It is not just beauty in "dappled things" but also comeliness in "All things counter, original, spare, strange."

Glory be to God for dappled things—

For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh fire coals chestnut-falls; finches wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;

And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare and strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows what?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

Hopkins praises God for the gorgeousness of the "dappled things" that constitute the world and the beauty they transmit to "all trades, their gear and tackle and trim." Moreover, his praise goes to God for all things that are counter to the ones mentioned because they have a kind of glamour that is awesome and insightful.

For Hopkins, this beauty is the aesthetic ideal that naturally connects the apparent contradictions in nature, man's life and the world. Although it is intriguingly paradoxical, Hopkins makes this aesthetic beauty the pillar of his Christian faith. Essentially, this complex manifestation of God's glory is, for him, what virtually all religions offer as the essential source of salvation. And yet, many a religious adherent is neither able to comprehend this source of bliss nor put into practice what it demands of all human beings as the true model of blessed

living. The effort required in making this principle direct human affairs is so great that whoever is able to make his experiences and endeavours emanations of it, is admitted into the highest realm of being open to mortals – the poetic life. Similarly, any community that models its institutions and dealings on these tenets enjoys the bliss conveyed by poetic existence.

Thus, a poetic life ensures the configuring of individuals and social set-ups for operation in accordance with the harmonic dictates of poetry. Poetry, as the pervading spirit of magnificence, creates irresistible values through inputs that enrich lives. It manifests an ineluctable order that synchronises all social groups and formations for the actualisation and preservation of the sterling attributes of a distinctly human culture. The “harmonic dictate” is the true rhythm of humanity. It is a rhythmic patterning that invigorates all for the distillation of truths and values that constitute the humanist melody, the animating soul, and the magic of a truly meaningful life.

The Poetic in Human Activities

The notion of poetry that emerges from the discussion so far is that of an invigorating tonic that energises human life by compelling participation in the pervading rhythm of “beauty in all things.” This notion of poetry may seem somewhat transcendental but its direct application to human activities is fairly common. Most memorable events are often depicted as poetry while non-memorable ones, by implication, are censored for lacking poetry. For example, when a sports commentator hails a sprinter’s performance as “poetry in motion,” he does not only domesticate for us what seems transcendental in the concept of poetry that informs this discussion, he also points in the direction of how we perceive poetry in what affects us deeply. A phrase like “poetry in valour” may express a striking valuation of human bravery in circumstances as varied as the

diversities of human cultures permit. Poetry can therefore be applied to food, paintings, architecture as well as love, hate, anger and frustration. While reactions to these applications of poetry may differ because of contextual input, it is important to note how the feeling of triumph that marks the acceptance of the sprint as poetry unites all possible reactions.

Correlating the racer's performance with poetry, even in the sense of poetry being a linguistic construct of great density, is not arbitrary; formal and material similarities are discernible. At the *formal* level, there is a parallel between the athlete's action and the attributes of normal poems. The calculated motion in the dash is analogous to *metred language* while the physical and mental coordination involved in the act partakes of the beauty of poetic synchronisation. At the *material* level, the peak performance reflects the great heights man can attain in typical human endeavours. The effort put into the run and the virtues exhibited during the race produce anagogical reverberations that immortalise the human spirit. The *great run* becomes a symbolic embodiment of significant acts of personal and social actualisation of the seemingly limitless potentials that power human civilisation.

The accomplished runner, in pushing himself beyond what could be termed "normal mortal boundaries," presents boundless horizons that challenge man's instinctive quest for self-fulfilment. As the victor savours his success, with spectators in attendance, a splendid stage materialises before us in which the unending story of man is superbly played out. The victor's joy mounts the stage side by side with the loser's agony. Joy and agony interconnect. A network of aesthetic coalescence of pain and pleasure is achieved, resolving opposites into a unity. And yet, distinctiveness persists in this delicate balance that explodes into weighty insights. Victory and defeat lose their sting as both are rolled into poetic

sportsmanship. This kind of sportsmanship affirms the supreme joy of participation in sports as well as in life.

Poetic Justice

Poetry, conceived of both in the restricted and broadened senses, commonly informs our notions of, and approaches to *justice* and freedom (*licence*). We often acknowledge the existence of a higher order of justice that is absolute and superior to what is available in our societies. We call this ideal justice, *poetic justice*. We conceive of it as an unstoppable force that polices the world by patterning all things in accordance with what is just and proper or what is beautiful in the poetic sense we have identified in this lecture. When this supreme sense of fairness is sometimes viewed as a divine instrument or associated with the *Law of Karma*, its manifestation is perceived as transcendental. This perception makes this form of justice somewhat remote from, or only marginally relevant to our daily lives.

Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that poetic justice entails the actual manifestation or revelation of a sure natural order that regulates the world and human affairs. As the ultimate enabling of a kind of even-handedness in lives of individuals and social institutions, poetic justice is said to be central to existence, making its untrammelled manifestation in *truth and in deed* a guarantee for a humane world.

Quite often, however, individuals and societies shy away from actualising the ideals of poetic justice by either introducing cultural distortions into the concept or taking refuge in the belief that poetic justice is essentially otherworldly. If the human fate has been absolutely predetermined by divine or natural forces, then it follows that man must remain perpetually helpless in the hands of the gods.

But are the divine powers to be blamed for man's tainted realisation of poetic justice? Ola Rotimi categorically articulates, in his play titled *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, a cardinal African belief in poetic justice that makes man responsible for all his actions and inactions. Thus, men (and not the gods) are to blame for the subversion of poetic justice that promotes inequality, corruption, discrimination and discord in all personal beliefs and actions, as well as in all social policies, institutions and activities.

If man has responsibility for ensuring the realisation of the true tenets of poetic justice, then it follows that it is necessary to re-assess most commonly accepted human assumptions, beliefs and motivations. For example, poverty is commonly considered to be a natural part of the social system and, at best, efforts are made to reduce but not eliminate it because "all fingers are not equal," as the saying goes. From this position of supposedly firm conviction, follows the practice of extending pity and mercy to the poor as a means of demonstrating that we care even though we are not responsible for the plight of the poor.

Are people not supposed to remain poor if they are unable to utilise available opportunities effectively through hard work? Do they not deserve the travails they have attracted to themselves? As an Ethiopian oral poem titled "The Cure of Poverty" puts it:

One expels and drives away poverty
By holding the gaza-wood of a plough,

.....
By wearing short pants ready to work!

One brings in poverty by leading it with one's hand,
By washing clothes everyday, making them gleam,
By drinking at the monthly gathering with unequals,
By killing a bull that has been bought with a loan,

These statements reflect a common view of the *ordained* order. No real cure is proffered for poverty. What we have is an opinion about how people become poor – an opinion that has been elevated to the status of a universal truth. No one is troubled by the fact that the plough may not be available to the majority of the people. Is it possible for the poor to have gleaming clothes or even source a loan? What security does the poor have to mortgage? It is only when reference is made to “drinking . . . with unequals” in this poem that the inadvertent signal of a misapplication of poetic principles to justice becomes obvious. A class system is put in place and inequality established as a basic element in social interaction.

A tacit acceptance of inequality in this oral poem is at the base of the terrible pauperisation of so many people in social systems supposedly based on poetic justice (democratic, just and egalitarian) and operated by “God-fearing leaders.” Since neither individuals nor groups are willing to accept responsibility for their role in bringing about this despicable situation, is it any surprise that William Blake in “The Human Abstract” castigates mankind for advocating pity and mercy as antidotes to the suffering occasioned by poverty? He declares:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

Are we willing to take responsibility for the numerous ways in which we have contributed to setting up societies that thrive on inequities? The general answer is an emphatic “No!” After this answer has been given, we then proceed to justify our role by projecting hollow rationalisations. But the fact remains that,

insofar as human activities and institutions are programmed to sabotage poetic justice, human suffering and false expressions of pity and mercy will remain.

The short-circuiting of poetic justice in most societies is so subtle that it has become part of what seems natural. This is so because the concept has undergone a tremendous sea change in many cultures. Its consideration as a principle which rewards good and punishes evil as well as the belief that justice reigns only when punishment is administered as a logical concomitant of a wrong done are regarded as incontrovertible truths. But poetic knowledge interrogates these perceptions by revealing how concepts of good and evil are non-absolute, culturally determined and, in most cases, mutually interlocked. Also important is the fact that the course of justice can be better served by acts of forgiveness and rehabilitation.

Poetic justice stipulates the determination of an issue from a thorough examination of all the circumstances, assumptions and actions that brought the incident into being. Multi-dimensional approaches dictate thoroughness, comprehensiveness and balance. What informs a crime-and-punishment approach to life? What really defines a crime – an action, perception, impact or motive? What is the driving force of punishment – reprisal, vindictiveness, sadism or frustration? Are the various notions mutually exclusive or do they practically become manifest through inclusiveness? Probing into human values in this fashion creates the right atmosphere for a proper understanding of how poetic justice is supposed to impact human lives and how man plays a key role in the process.

Hence, it is appropriate to state that the poetic life is poetic justice compliant. It is in conformity with John Locke's *state of nature* postulated in his treatise on social contract. It is a state which man distils from nature through reason, a state

which gives him the proper understanding of, and a natural inclination towards, the *law of nature* that guarantees freedom, equality and independence for all. It is a life that is part of an ineluctable networking of man and his world in consonance with what is just and proper. It recognizes and accepts human frailties and strengths as integral to the full realisation of being. It retrieves the responsibility for human values and actions from transcendental forces, and places it squarely on the shoulders of man. After all is said and done, the metaphysical world remains an imaginative construct of man.

Understanding the fact that *poetic justice* is a major driving force in a poetic life, paves the way for a real insight into the nature of *poetic licence*. Since a poetic life is aesthetically set up, it follows that its exercise of poetic licence is based on an all-inclusive vision of the world bolstered by a sound experiencing of the melody of being. Such an exercise of poetic licence is thus an earned privilege, which admits of nothing capricious, untoward or disruptive. It liberates people from fixities and propels them, through imaginative alertness, towards encountering the world in creative ways that may appear to non-initiates as rebellion or unorthodoxy.

Becoming a Poetic Being

All poets, in their works, depict experiential realities that uncover, explore and interpret salient truths that guide all those who live poetic lives. These truths synchronize the inherent contraries that define man, his endeavours and the world, and constitute the aesthetic flowering of the creative impulse. Blake calls these truths products of the “visionary imagination.” They inform the aesthetic ideal which is for Keats the “principle of beauty in all things,” the “pervading presence” for Wordsworth and “intellectual beauty” for Shelley. As the pulsating genetic code of beauty that overwhelms the world, and as what makes

individuals souls, the aesthetic ideal is effortlessly expressed in all poetic lives. While for Blake souls operate on “imagination heightened to the level of vision” for Keats, they are “personal identities or souls” that are defined by *Negative Capability*. In his letter of 27 December 1817 to his brothers, George and Tom, Keats states that *Negative Capability* “is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” To attain this poetic state of negative capability people and communities need to be educated through a direct experiencing of all that life has to offer.

Most poets provide training schemes for individuals (and by extension communities) who genuinely seek to harvest the fruits of poetic existence. These schemes are fairly explicitly stated in some works while in others, they are implicitly realised through symbolic or thematic significations. Distinct stages are established for those who seek the poetic life to go through in their march towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Progress is not automatic. Since great intellectual, imaginative, emotional and practical effort is required from each trainee, not all who embark on the mission are able to overcome the numerous obstacles on the path to progress. Only a few out of the numerous seekers after poetic existence ever achieve their goal. The vast majority actually get bugged down in a particular stage, drop out of the programme, get fixated or exhibit symptoms of arrested development.

As varied as poets are, so varied are the subjects they make central to their programmes. Poets like Milton, Blake and Okigbo base their schemes on conventional as well as unorthodox religious concerns while nature provides the training impetus in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Clark and Osundare. Social issues are predominant subjects in the plans generated by Jonson, Pope, Byron, Soyinka and Ojaide

while philosophical considerations fuel the works of Shelley, Keats, Hardy and Eliot, amongst others. What is regarded as central to a particular poet's scheme is not necessarily what is exclusive; virtually all the subjects are found, to some degree, in the programmes of most poets. Moreover, in spite of the diverse approaches adopted in the programmes, all of them are designed to propel the devotee towards acquiring a sound knowledge of the aesthetic ideal as well as applying this knowledge practically in their lives.

The Poetic Programme

In its most simplified form, the programme consists of three phases. Each phase is planned to take care of certain aspects of the poetic education. While it can be established that virtually all poets have these three stages, not all the stages are fully developed in the works of all poets. Moreover, poets characterise the stages in different ways. Milton's classification follows the Biblical model of *Paradise*, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* while Blake's are named *Innocence*, *Experience* and *Visionary Imagination*. Wordsworth identifies *Childhood Raptures*, *Coarser Pleasures*, *Sombre Pleasures*; Coleridge remarks the *Natural State*, *Dejection* and *State of Joy* while Keats projects *Intelligence*, *Maiden Thought* and *Soul-state or Personal Identity* as phases to be passed through. For most African poets, a conflation of the Blakean and Miltonic stages provides a fairly reasonable reflection of their schemes in which pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial experiences and themes remain central. Okigbo's religious/artistic rites of self-discovery, for example, can be realistically shown to reflect these three phases.

For all the poets, the first stage reflects a unified idea of the world in which a sense of *wholeness* and a feeling of being part of all things and all things being part of the individual are

predominant; the second entails a form of *separation* from phenomena external to the self and a consciousness of this separation. Moreover, distinctions that set apart different entities by placing them in opposition to each other emerge in human perceptions and experiences of reality. The third and final stage presents mature forms of *integration* of the individual with the world and fellow human beings – an integration that differs from that in the first phase because it takes place in spite of the individual's awareness of the multiple forces at play in the world. These stages mark processes of development.

The first is available to virtually every human being in infancy and perhaps in early childhood, the second imposes itself on the individual as he gains more knowledge about life and probably continues through adolescence to the threshold of adulthood while the final stage is associated with adult life. The association of the phases with human development from infancy to adulthood is not strictly tied to age or progress in time. These categories may take on symbolic meanings that transcend the passage of time. Hence it is quite possible for an unusual adolescent to attain adulthood while an adult may be fixated in infancy.

The second stage is the most challenging in that it presents conflicts and conflicting positions that the individual must struggle to understand through an intense experiencing of the complexities of fragmented selfhoods and worlds. Progress to the final stage involves being able to experience, in an intense and balanced manner, the complexities of the second stage. These mature experiences of contraries provide valuable insights that lead to the final stage in which the seeker perceives and partakes of the interconnectivity of all elements in human life and the world. And so, the poetical individual is born, fully equipped with the aesthetic ideal that naturally or intrinsically

configures him for a poetic existence that is marked by balanced insights, ennobling actions, life-enhancing creations and worthwhile endeavours.

Poetic existence humanises the individual and society, not necessarily by making them perfect, but by giving them significance through immersing them in intense experiences that touch on our core humanity. By making us part of the creation and re-enactment of incidents, situations, characters and environments that bring into sharp focus the enduring themes in human life – themes like the transience of life, the joys of companionship, the pains of death, the vanity of human actions and the ennobling effects of suffering – poetic existence compels us and our societies to be more thoughtful, tolerant and civilised.

U. L. ARCH

The First Phase: Participation Mystique

The first phase, no matter what name each poet associates with it, is a state in which the individual spontaneously awakens to, and immerses himself in, the wonders of the world. It is analogous to Lévy-Brühl's "participation mystique" which foregrounds the poetic absorption of all things, individuals and communities into a universal kind of existence. Essences and their empirical equivalents, the natural and supernatural, the good and bad, the invisible and visible are undifferentiated, creating experiences that parallel the Platonic state of possession which is distinctive by not acknowledging a dichotomy between worldly and otherworldly agencies.

Most myths of origin, created by peoples around the world, recount that this idyllic state existed "in the beginning," in the pre-historic period before *time* began and before man created divisions in experiences. Spirit beings, as literal certainties, intermingled with humans in a world in which the

ethereal and material remain indistinguishable. Symbolic behaviour, ritual, and drama were real, not indirect representations of realities. Thus, people plainly lived in the spirit, human, elemental, and cosmic worlds simultaneously.

Most religions acknowledge this phase in which there exists perfect places, peoples, communities and things. People are portrayed, in the holy books of these religions, as basking in the bliss of innocence. Eden, Paradise and Heaven on earth are names often associated with the idyllic locations. Man and animals lived in concordance because deadly, beastly and life-threatening tendencies had not become manifest. In most cases, these fantastic conditions are attributed to divinely revealed and enforced codes, the observance of which had become second nature to man. Human instincts, will and experiences were part of a divine manifestation and therefore remained noble. Man remained in tandem with the divine and swam in the pool of universal being without hindrance.

The early man and his ideal social system that thrived on group solidarity and a pulsating enthrallment with the environment provides another index of this level. The fascination with the "noble savage," which was popular in Europe centuries ago, still exists in the minds of those who seek exotic holidays because of the legendary stories associated with primitive peoples. In a less fantasised way, rustic life has become a fad for urban dwellers who seek to reproduce this idyllic state.

African poets, usually look back to the pre-colonial era and its people as those who lived in conditions that could be associated with this first phase in the process of fashioning man for poetic existence. Nostalgia and attempts to revive glories destroyed by colonialism are evident in the works of Senghor and other *Negritude* writers. Moreover, writers like Soyinka, Okara, Awoonor, Brutus and Clark, amongst many others,

either directly or symbolically eulogise this *traditional African environment* that is seriously threatened by urbanisation or seems to be fast disappearing. Part of Okigbo's pilgrimage in "Heavensgate" typifies a return to the blissful root of Africanness.

In a way, the untainted African rural setting correlates with the world of the early man and pre-literate societies in which creative ecstasy is expressed in oral poetry. Moreover, children, at work or play – children untainted by the cares of the adult world – lived in exhilaration as the rhythm in them embraced that which was external to them in a poetic mystique that thrived on spontaneity. Wordsworth's childhood excitement with nature relates to this phase, which he further clarifies in the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*." He presents his notion of this phase thus:

The principal object . . . was to choose incidents and situations from common life . . . throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination . . . (trace) in them . . . the primary laws of our nature . . . Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity . . . because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity . . . the manners of the rural life germinate from these elementary feelings and from the necessary character of rural occupations . . . because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

The "incidents and situations from common life" chosen by Wordsworth are those of rural life that are capable of revealing what is genuine in individuals and communities whose endeavours reflect the concerns of this phase.

This stage captures a state of careless abandonment in which individuals in “simple communities” commune with the universe in which gods and human beings interact and the mythological consciousness makes all visions factual realities. Blake, in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” maintains that the fusion of the body and soul creates “Energy” that is “Eternal Delight” which expresses itself in the “exuberance of beauty.” In this phase, “Man’s perceptions are not bound by organs of perception, he perceives more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover.” A non-self-conscious visionary perception marks this stage.

For Keats, the mythic-consciousness of this stage marks out the “*Intelligence* as spark of divinity... atoms of perception – they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God” (*Letters II*: 363). The human mind and heart are indistinguishable in the *Intelligence*, ensuring that feeling and thought, the self and others, internal and external worlds, and literal and symbolic meanings are undifferentiated in a state of innocence. The *Intelligences* or *Sparks of Divinity* represent all those at this stage of development whose lives are based on melting into the universe, oblivious of self-knowledge.

The Second Phase: Demystified Mystique

Movement to the second phase is usually prefaced by a subtle transition created by the impugning of non-idyllic circumstances on the mind of the novice, making him gradually aware of the contraries that constitute his selfhood and the world around him. His being, as well as the world, is laid bare. He perceives a split within him, a split between his mind and heart, his feelings and thought, his imagination and reason, and between fantasy and reality.

He now becomes conscious of himself as separate from the external world and distinct from other human beings. The

bond between him and all things loosens. The demystification of the mystique of the first phase commences with the intrusion of the obverse side of the human fate on the trainee's horizon. An indication of this destabilisation of the world of the first phase is revealed in Blake's portrayal of a self-conscious infant in "Infant Sorrow":

My mother groan'd! my father wept,
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands,
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

The joys of child-bearing and the infant's magnificent entry into the world in an atmosphere of love, as would have been the case in the primary phase, has now turned into anguish as the supposedly adorable infant is likened to "a fiend in the cloud" and the world becomes a nightmare. The infant protests being brought into a life rocked by pain and danger.

Self-consciousness begets the consciousness of severance from others that shocks one into this phase where the experience of pain, depravity and brutality contrast with that of pleasure, divinity and empathy. The *state of nature* has come to an end and the human input into the world, in its entire contradictions, become manifest. The prevailing condition is no longer that of uninterrupted vistas of splendour, but one in which negative elements in nature threaten man's very existence. The enchanting valleys and fields as well as gentle flowing brooks and rivers begin to reveal darker elements. Wild forests, frightening gorges, floods, tidal waves and whirlpools

move to centre-stage as sand in the desert, volcanoes and earthquakes also present themselves as inescapable realities.

The sweet songs of birds turn plaintive, the concord in the activities of all natural creatures turns into discord as the cooperative tendencies of the first phase transform into vicious competitions that often lead to brutal battles for survival. As John Keats's reveals in the poem titled "To J. H. Reynolds Esq.," nature in this phase projects a condition in which " . . . every maw/The greater on the less feeds evermore," because the law of "eternal fierce destruction," reigns in the elemental world where the shark is "at savage prey, – the Hawk at pounce – / The gentle robin, like a Pard or Ounce/Ravening a worm" (93-7 and 103-5). Tennyson identifies a similar situation when he depicts nature as "red in tooth and claw" in the poem titled "In Memoriam A. A. H." In short, the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest now takes over the world and human affairs.

What obtains in nature has its parallels in human social formations. The simple, rustic societies of the first phase metamorphose into complex structures in which individualism promotes selfishness and communal conflict. Man preys on man and communities coexist in a state of siege. "The greater part of Men make their way with the same instinctiveness, the same unwavering eye for their purpose, the same eagerness as the Hawk," says Keats (*Letters II*, 340). The susceptibility of human being to fear, rage and greed translates into actions that promote strife, cruelty and agony.

In this stage, partial ideas are paraded as incontrovertible truths that must not be challenged. This approach impedes the growth of human knowledge and slows down the process of understanding man and his planet. The attribution of universal status to what is essentially parochial represses the poetic human disposition towards a dynamic processing of ideas,

actions and endeavours. A correlation of this kind of tainted knowledge to ethical, political, economic and moral issues yields outstanding results that explain the basis for the limited visions of this stage.

When this kind of approach to knowledge is adopted in the determination of moral issues, notions of good and evil, which were basically undifferentiated in the first stage, now become separate entities that are perceived and defined as absolute opposites in the moral firmament. Cultural origins of moral positions are glossed over. The correlation of good with pleasure and evil with pain becomes an article of faith. The possibility that, given certain circumstances, good may bring forth pain while evil may produce pleasure is banned from human thought. Moreover, moral judgements based on the mutual exclusiveness of good and evil remain oblivious of the fact that what constitutes good or pleasure for an individual or community may well be evil and pain for another. What is important here is that an awareness of the hostility of the forces of good and evil has become acute. The world is thus a battleground for good and evil – a situation that did not exist in the first phase

The opposition that exists between these concepts of morality is often given divine support in various religions. Claiming divine origins for their concepts of evil and good, most religions fashion a reward-and-punishment cosmos; heaven is created for those who do what is good while hell awaits supposed evildoers. Yet, each religion sets moral standards that are unevenly applied to individuals and groups. They may all agree on the distancing of heaven from hell, but they differ widely as to interpretations and modes of application of rules of justice. Conflicting notions give birth to conflicting doctrines, even within the same religion.

Ideas of good and evil have other parallels. Beauty, goodness and godliness are replaced by a keen awareness of ugliness, evil and devilishness in the world and in human affairs. Man's technological output is no longer geared towards improving his material and spiritual comfort but most technologies seek to destroy enemies or forcefully appropriate their means of sustenance. Personal and social relations are based on mutual distrust. Tension, cunning, brute force and intrigue become the operating system for a world split into interest groups.

Most poets regard the splitting of individuals and the world into two opposing camps as what makes this stage complex for the trainee. The danger is for the seeker after poetic existence to regard one of the two elements as the sole reality and thus become fixated. In effect, because it is normal at this stage for either the darker or brighter side of life to present itself as the sole reality, great care must be taken to ensure that the seeker after poetic existence is able to place them within a comprehensive framework and not accept one of the two possibilities as the sole reality. If he does otherwise, the journey towards enlightenment automatically terminates.

If one at this point in his poetic pilgrimage decides to or is cajoled into believing and living solely in accordance with the brighter side of things in spite of his awareness of the darker side, then it follows that he has settled for a partial experiencing of reality. Being oblivious of the darker side becomes a kind of escapism or a regression into the childhood world of rapture by an adolescent or adult – a regression that belies the experiences of this stage and signals arrested growth. On the other hand, being overcome by the darker side of life constitutes a latching on to another partial reality, more so since the pilgrim is all too aware of the brighter side of life.

Progress to the next or final stage can only begin to occur when the trainee starts to experience, in a very intense manner, issues and products arranged on both sides of the divides of brightness and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell, sky and earth, pleasure and pain.

The Third Phase: Integrative Mystique

An intense knowledge of the grave paradoxes of existence and a keen understanding of how these paradoxes rotate the world create the right atmosphere for the attainment of *Soul-state* by a person or community. The achievement of Soul-state enables an individual to utilise his knowledge of the depths of essential humanity to regulate his perceptions and actions. He is now able to transcend the split within him through an informed activation of a bond between his mind and heart, his feelings and thought, his imagination and reason, and his intellect and intuition. This re-integration of selfhood translates into a new engagement with the world in which the subsisting recognition of separateness from other human beings, other creatures and the external environment is infused with points of contact that create mutual connectivity.

A new form of mystique comes into vogue because the individual who lives a poetic life is party to putting it in place. The back and obverse sides of the human fate coalesce to produce a unity that reflects wholeness and comprehensiveness. Self-consciousness flows into the consciousness of others and generates empathy as the interpenetration of pain and pleasure, depravity and nobility, selfishness and generosity, brutality and tenderness become obvious indicators of the profound nature of human life. Conflicts are not abolished; rather, they are placed in contexts that reveal the shaky foundations that support them. Individual and communal posturing is exposed as just that, paving the way for dialogues between ideologies and

resolutions of conflicts that do not override differences but place them in symbiotic relationships.

A *new state of nature* is born in which the human input into the world makes for a clear understanding of, and involvement in, the synchronicity that has overcome the normally manifest contradictions in nature. The prevailing condition is no longer that which threatens to terminate the existence of others but that in which the negative and positive elements are balanced to enthrone concord. The Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest is now checked off against laws that ensure the survival of the weak in nature and in human societies – the weakest in strength, as Blake speculates, often turn out to be the strongest in cunning so that they can outwit the strong and survive.

Regenerative and productive processes balance fierce destruction in nature as well as in social arrangements. Survival and death alternate to keep the natural process in a state of self-perpetuation. Natural elements like enchanting valleys and fields as well as gentle flowing brooks and rivers harmonise with wild forests, frightening gorges, floods, tidal waves and whirlpools. Volcanoes and earthquakes take their position in the universe as part of a system that leads to the full actualisation of the infinite potentialities of all things in nature. Conditions that affect individuals and nature are replicated within communities as guarantees for making the human being central to all human formations and the institutions that foster their activities.

These conditions, which promote the *conscious participation mystique* of this stage, arise from the poetic individual's wide-ranging approach to knowledge. All ideas are projected within contexts that reveal specific points of view that are in a state of continuous and dynamic interrogation by other points of view. Since perspectives and contexts determine meaning and understanding at this stage, it follows that the true

approach to knowledge thrives on the dialogue of ideas within discernible contexts. This dialogue, which is a constant factor in this stage, encourages the growth of human wisdom through a dynamic engagement with the opposite of what is proposed. The attribution of universal status to any thing or idea is understood as valid if, and only if, certain conditions are present. Thus the poetic human disposition towards an active processing of ideas, actions and endeavours becomes the order of the day. An application of an all-inclusive approach to the processing of ethical, political, economic and moral issues yields outstanding results that form the basis for mature ideas and actions.

When this kind of advancement in knowledge is achieved, poetic justice will inform the determination of all matters. Relativity and mutivalence, when applied to situations would key moral issues to culture, revealing how culture determines morality. As diverse as cultures are, so diverse would their ethical standards be. Whenever good is associated with pleasure and evil with pain, the possibility of the opposite being valid, in different contexts, is never ruled out. Judgements become cognisant of the mutual relations of opposites. What constitutes good or pleasure for an individual or community may well be evil and pain for another. The world as a battleground of rivalries is transformed into a plateau of interlaced contraries that conjointly define existence. This is the knowledge that poetical individuals are armed with in all their activities and this serves as a guarantee for purposeful existence.

The poetic principle energises all endeavours, societies, educational systems, scientific output and technologies, ensuring continuous inquiry and development of new ideals through the provision of the cutting edge of progress and advancement in knowledge. Science, like all subjects in the

Arts, is given great fillip by the poetic impulse. As William Blake states in "There is no Natural Religion": "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character, the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still, unable to do than repeat the same dull round over again" (Blake, p.97). The poetic impulse is dynamic in bringing contraries into contact, either through a clash, fusion or reconciliation. This vibrant contact serves as the basis for experimentation, adventure and discovery. How static would science be, if earlier notions of not being able to split the atom remained unquestioned by the poetic impulse? How helpless would man be in the hands of radiation caused by nuclear fission, if the possibility of nuclear fusion was never mooted?

The poetic impulse as the soul of poetic existence must continuously add vibrancy to life and thereby make it meaningful. It accentuates the binary counters that define individuals, societies and the world at large in order to demonstrate a resonating sense of coherence that implicates other coherences in the active process of cross-interrogation that is fundamental to human life.

Poetic Existence for Nigerians and Nigeria

Thus far, the necessity for poetic existence for individuals and communities has been established through a demonstration of how poetical persons and social set-ups operate from a position of comprehensive, human-life enriching knowledge of being. Moreover, the three phases which seekers after poetic existence need go through in order to acquire the required understanding and will-to-action for the proper realisation of the ultimate goals that lend meaning to human life have been discussed. Each segment of the learning scheme has been examined in relation to what it has to offer the trainee and how the manner of response to the exercise determines possible progress or

otherwise through the course; hence the state of development of individuals and communities have been reasonably identified and generally examined in relation to these phases.

Now, it is time to relate these issues to Nigeria and its peoples in their search for meaningful existence and nationhood. A rather simple way to look at the matter is to state that pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial phases parallel the three poetic stages. This approach is discernible in the works of many a covertly or overtly negritude Nigerian writer whose works did bubble with great hope for independent Nigeria. Such writers did believe that freedom from colonialism would translate into a just and egalitarian society in which all citizens had a fair chance to realise themselves. Needless to say that, not only do they know better now, they can appreciate the fact that the colonial era was not absolutely deficient of praiseworthy elements.

Experience and hindsight has shown that this neat classification is not possible because all three stages are discernible in different combinations and proportions before, during and after the foreign domination of the territory that now constitutes the state of Nigeria. A reasonable way to look at the matter is to recognise that although pre-colonial establishments (as grass-roots influence centres) were predominantly pleasant, a few oppressive regimes (perhaps hemming in many of the human-sensitive communities) were also in operation. Similarly, in present day Nigeria where governmental apparatus exhibits the oppressive tendencies of the second stage, pockets of the authentic *state of nature* settlements still survive in most unexpected areas. Therefore, when village societies are singled out, in the discussion that follows, as representations of particular phases, what is meant is that these communities, at their best, provide indications of a high measure of the ideal being present in their management of affairs. The seed of

discord (harbingers of the second phase) are not totally absent from even the best of village settings. What is important is that concord pre-dominates in such settlements.

Subject to the reservations given above, we may proceed with a more comprehensive classification and placement of individuals and neighbourhoods within the three-stage scheme of poetic development discernible in Nigeria. The first stage exists reasonably, the second is pervasive, the third is rare. This means in effect that it is possible to find persons and hamlets, located in most unusual places across the country, whose ways of life approximate the first phase while very few approximate the third in the scheme of poetic being. The rarity and uncoordinated nature of the efforts of those in third stage account for our country's instability and stunted growth. Unsettling contradictions and conflicts, generated and encouraged by un-poetic individuals, groups and institutions in various fields of endeavour, plague Nigeria today. This is an indication that the country is maladjusted to the conditions associated with the second phase of poetic development.

For example, the Koma community and its people, before the callous onslaught on its communal way of life by the individual-driven-civilisation of present day Nigeria, represent a state of being based on cooperative and participatory involvement that tallies reasonably with the mystique of the first phase of poetic development. Since the tensions of the second and problematic state of being seemed basically alien to them, it follows that the true Koma community and its people serve as representatives of indigenous, simple or rustic Nigerian communities and individuals before, during and after the advent of colonialism.

It is important to separate Nigeria's simple societies from the complex ones in order to appreciate the phases. While the simple societies operate within the matrix of the first phase,

the complex African/Nigerian monarchies/empires, which correlate with our present state of the nation, function within the conditions of the second. Not only do vestiges of these empires and monarchies survive to provide insights into their modes of operation, historical accounts provide information that tend to gloss over their dictatorial excesses. Femi Osofisan in *The Chattering and the Song* exposes Alaafin Abiodun's dictatorial reign over the Oyo kingdom in the 19th century through the activities of Latoye which serve as strident criticisms of the monarch's reign of terror. The Oyo kingdom under Alaafin Abiodun represents the larger and more complex traditional political structure which parallels that of the present Nigerian political entity. Within the Oyo kingdom were many other simple communities just as there are such groupings within the Nigerian federation today.

Simple village settlements like that of Koma were, at their best, effectively well administered, and on the aggregate, they accounted for and still do account for the servicing of the immediate needs of a greater percentage of the population of Nigeria. In essence, the culture of these village people constitutes the genuine Nigerian way of life while the culture of indigenous, urban, royal and other forms of exclusivist governments in Nigeria/Africa constitutes a corrupted version of the unadulterated mode of being. And, of course, it is obvious that the corrupted version of our culture is what holds sway in Nigeria today.

The prominence of the tainted way of life blinds us to what obtains in these authentic settlements, ensuring that our gems of cultural attainment hardly attract the attention of those who sought, and still do seek, to convince the world that Africa had and still has a credible civilisation. Oppressive monarchies and empires enjoy high profile in what is on offer to the world as pre-colonial pearls of African administrative genius. This is

so because the native systems of government highlighted had much in common with those operated in the home countries of the colonisers. Since political and not cultural history is what makes the headlines, it seems inevitable to focus on the leaders rather than the people. The so-called leaders corner all achievements, while contributions made by the vast majority of the people are either relegated to the background or ignored altogether. This trend is evident in present-day Nigeria, where what is often touted, as “Nigerian culture,” is in actual fact the “culture of the rulers and their cronies,” or worse still, the corruption of the people’s way of life for the benefit of those in power.

If historical records consider what matters to the majority of the people as peripheral to their concerns, poetic depictions make them central by revealing how their practice of a human-enriching form of communalism met the people’s needs. Virtually every member of the community was involved in the social organisation which achieved its goals without necessarily concentrating power in the hands of a few persons or an individual. Insofar as these indigenous social organisations functioned in “the state of nature” – without overt display of governmental machinery – they may be regarded as belonging to the first stage. If and when the institutions that guarantee these core practices and egalitarian goals are formalised and consciously operated to retain the ideals of the first stage, then they may be said to be in the third phase. This classification is valid because being in the third phase presupposes the deliberate use of effective strategies to tackle the problems associated with the second stage. In fact, the humanistic functionality of native individuals and communities in this third phase is the crux of poetic existence in our Nigerian heritage which our people and leaders need to know in order to evolve a poetic administration of our affairs.

With the existence of these communities, the fallacy inherent in maintaining that the concentration of power in the hands of a few as a true index of a well-organised society is exposed. It is in this light that the Nigerian state's open assertion of its suzerainty over Koma correlates with its continued oppression of other simple communities, creating a situation in which Nigerians are prevented from deriving real benefits from their heritage. The true Nigerian heritage is not to be derived from systems with dominant or bossy leaderships but from the best forms of cooperative modes of management implicit in the rural settlements that flourish through educational systems, which integrate theory with practice, science and technology with the humanities, man with his environment. These modes of education are not only functional, they produce individuals, groups and enabling institutions that shape politics, religion, economics, science, technology and the Arts (components of the material and non-material culture) for the benefit of man.

U. L. ARCHIVE

Sabotaging the Poetic Ideals of Our Heritage

Nigeria today is caught in the stranglehold of the contradictions of the second stage of poetic development because its *coup*-produced (*coup* at the polls or *coup* with guns) leaders, with the connivance of a vast majority of its docile people, have conspired to sabotage the poetic ideals of our true heritage. This sabotage is made ever more pervasive because the most awful elements of our traditional ways of life have been yoked with the worst of the colonial mindset to create a horror that is blatantly manipulated by an arrogant ruling élite which has seized power from the people.

The élite, made up of "educated" individuals drawn from all tribes in the federation, remains the vaulting outrage of our times – an outrage unconsciously foisted on the country by

the common people who through seemingly untainted trust (which is really underscored by personal interest) have inadvertently become instruments for the perversion of the ideals of our indigenous poetic existence. No one heeds the numerous poetic expressions of interactions of contraries, in our oral traditions, that point the way to a balanced approach to issues:

The thriving tradition of Nigerian oral poetry parade word pictures that drive home the need to recognize the coexistence of the different: "two hands a man has," "let the kite fly and let the eagle fly," "the small man becomes the big man," and "Death kills a great priest/As if he does not cry unto God the King." Contrarities seal the fate of man; being truly conscious of this inevitability brings our humanity to the fore. (Eruvbetine, 2001)

Many of our indigenous aesthetic renditions of experience are aimed at keeping us dynamically focused within the final stage of poetic development as a means of making our lives meaningful.

Our inability to comprehend, work towards, and apply poetic principles to existence in Nigeria is best illustrated by the fact that all major social institutions have been corrupted and re-programmed to unleash dissonance on the country and its citizens by our proclivity towards latching on to one end of the binary counters of the second stage and insisting on its universality.

A discussion of the Urhobo *Udje* oral poem [in Isidore Okpewho's *The Heritage of African Poetry* (pp. 81-2)] which was composed and performed a few years after independence throws some light on the basis for, and the nature of the discord discernible in every sphere of human endeavour in Nigeria. It is

rightly titled, “The woes of independence” – a title that could be easily adjusted to reflect issues that are on the front burner today. Is it not just as logical to depict “The Woes of Oil Boom, Military rule, Democracy, Privatisation, Religious fanaticism, the Educational system, Party politics, Ethnicity and Corruption,” amongst others? Are all these issues not central to the tensions that seem to rob us all of our patriotic sensibilities and render our lives un-poetic? Perhaps Odia Ofeimun’s declaration:

Never ask me why,
My country chews
the cud of civil strife (Soyinka 1975, p. 124)

is based on the fact that the causes of Nigeria’s instability are quite obvious to all.

“The woes of independence” is fairly long but it needs be quoted in full to demonstrate the awful plight of ordinary Nigerians just a few years after independence; a plight which has continued or has been made even worse by the realities attendant on our almost four decades of freedom. The high expectations innocently entertained by Nigerians on the eve of independence were not only nullified by the pauperising truths of supposed freedom but the hope of progress towards the realisation of the people’s dreams of prosperity seemed to have also been dashed. Here is the poem titled “The woes of independence.”

LEADER

Fortitude indeed we need
A mistaken step warns against carelessness in a repeat action
Oh, innocence has cost the pangolin its life!
A sewing needle pierces a point once only
Gongs are chiming once again

Djuju is a major divinity
Ogude, a powerful communal deity
Every year we worship him
Renew his charms and renovate the shrine
These are signs of his impending festival
Spectators hear a marvellous story!
The much talked about self-government is now our undoing
Colleagues hold well the song for me.

GROUP

News came from Benin blacks would govern themselves
That the white man had exploited us for too long; so the UAC folded
up in anger
The first few years were very pleasant
No one ever thought regret would follow
'After independence price of palm produce would soar' said a slogan
'Rubber trade would boom' said another
Oh, with corn they have lured the fowl into a trap
When the referendum drew near
Kinsmen in foreign lands were summoned home
'Demo, Power, Zik, *Okokoroko!*'
The more you drown a calabash the more it floats! The campaign
fever gripped everyone
Barely two years after, tumults of tax raids brought sleepless nights to
all
'The Police are in town, let no one brave the streets'
And the naughty children would taunt defaulters:
'*Kikighwo*, run fast!'
And a stampede would begin
Those who ran into gullies were countless
And the injured were a multitude
The swift of foot escaped paying that year
But a debt does not grow mouldy with time
Soon angry murmur filled the air:
'Should one defecate in the home for fear of tax?'
The so-called liberation is now a curse.

We move stealthily like a fox prowling after a stray fowl
Independence has brought us woes.
While we fumed over this letters came from Benin that the
government was broke
Tax receipts for four, six years were demanded, for the poor living
was a nightmare
Our race for progress was now at bay
Demo, *Okokoroko*, one Nigeria!

These economic conditions and their attendant embarrassment of the people prevailed a few years after independence. Are the conditions improved for the poor people after nearly forty years of independence? Unfortunately, conditions have not improved.

It is interesting how this poem and its performance characterise the three phases of development, implying the first and third but concentrating on the second phase in which Nigerians are held hostage. The poem essentially concentrates on economic woes as a means of demonstrating how the corrupt manipulation of the economy impacts negatively on all other aspects of the people's way of life. Greed, selfishness and the drive to cater for the self rather than the community disengaged industrious citizens from earning a decent means of livelihood.

Is this greed and selfishness not at the root of the present-day privatisation exercise which seeks to rob the people of what they jointly own and hand them cheaply over to a few privileged persons? Even if those engineering these processes can lay claim to having been cut off from their genuine indigenous cultural approaches to economics, they cannot feign ignorance of the disaster that attended free enterprise in Victorian England and the subsequent rise of communism. Where, other than in the Western world, has privatisation served the needs of the people? Where are the stable Western-type infrastructures to support privatisation in Nigeria? How people-sensitive are the privatisation schemes? To lessen the woes of

independence, the woes of a tottering democracy, all that is needed is to adopt methods that work, African communal methods, to manage our public enterprises for the benefit of all.

While the poem appears, on the surface, to be really loud in its exposure of the peoples' material destitution, it does also, on a deeper level, covertly present a general state of non-material impoverishment. The presentation and performance, unobtrusively but effectively, indicates ways by which the ills could be taken care of by drawing upon the resilient indigenous approach to human issues. The spirit of community, the involvement of the entire community – poet and audience – in the public enactment of this poem remains a tribute to the living culture of poetic connectedness to personal and social realities.

The leader and group of performers as well as Nigerians on the eve of independence impress themselves on the reader as sharing, and working together towards, the realisation of common aspirations in a spontaneous (first stage) and conscious (third) manner. If this culture of acting together for a mutual purpose was cultivated and continued after independence, the expected benefits of self-rule would have materialised to enrich the lives of all. This point of view, ingeniously presented through depictions that bristle with humour, obviously expose the contrast between the spirit of performance exhibited in this poem and the mode of administering post-independent Nigeria. How pleasantly different the situation would have been if the mode of this poetic enactment was made the mode of governance!

Moreover, these delineations of acts of cooperation put forth modes of confronting the choking contradictions that plague various spheres of human endeavour in this country today. The purpose of this interrogation is to chart paths that could lead to the establishment of a beneficial order of poetic existence. Steps to be taken to make Nigeria better are revealed

in explicit statements like: "A mistaken step warns against carelessness in a repeat action." More importantly, the poem practically enacts, through participatory performance, the effective handling of affairs for the good of all. For example, the acceptance of "Djuju (as) a major divinity" and "Ogude, (as) a powerful communal deity" unites all members of the community in a poetically religious festivity, which provides great insight into the state of the nation. In spite of the grim issues broached, humour bustles through to make the *Udje* celebrative mood contagious, differences in religious beliefs notwithstanding.

This celebration of our indigenous spiritual ideal is keyed to a religious culture that regards the enhancement of the best qualities of our humanity as paramount in all religions. The corruption of this ideal is implicated in the ideological determinant of many other post-independence woes that are only implied in this poem. In a sense, the liberal indigenous religious temper is closely aligned with the semiotic view, which regards virtually all-human constructs, like religion, as structures derived from signifying activities that are fundamentally culturally generated and unconsciously implemented. This disposition is poetic because it fosters cooperation, accommodation and partnership, making religious bigotry and all its attendant agonies inconceivable in this context.

The fountain of this religious outlook flows from the traditional belief in many divinities with different spheres of influence. A head-divinity in charge of coordinating all efforts by the divinities is also part of the supernatural structure. Yet, divinity as conceived in this context is nothing extraneous to the human reality; it derives its certainty as well as its relevance from being experientially determined by the fact of its being an integral part of the human being's own life. This explains why

the Godhead does not wield absolute power; he/she serves as a chairperson of the confederacy of gods in the manner in which true leadership is supposed to be exercised.

This poetic conception of the supernatural world is central to the democratic approach to religion that this poem indirectly canvasses. It is also directly related to the form of government recommended for our country. A conception of a Godhead that overrides other gods in their spheres of influence, would be alien to the spirit of this kind of poetry which allows the native muses to do what they know how to do best in the interest of the community. A concept of an omnipotent Godhead, with absolute control would be alien to the manner in which divinity is meant to impact on human affairs. Any concept of God that counters the genuine indigenous one by enthroning a Divinity that operates on the premise of its having all powers and being absolutely free to assert or impose them on all, divinities and human beings alike, subverts the poetic impetus which introduced the divine into human life. Any concept of superiority that subjugates or annihilates others, paves the way for a human parallel that is dictatorial in conception and execution. Is it any surprise therefore that in Nigeria today religious, economic, political and technological leaders, quite often do take a cue from the all-powerful god of their distorted imaginations, and unleash on the people crushing dictatorships? Is it any wonder, that in this poem, the people live in constant fear of the awesome power of the government and its law enforcement agencies?

Taxation, as demonstrated in this poem, is a powerful instrument for terrorising the common people in Nigeria. Government organised raids on the people to collect or check for receipts on numerous taxes and levies abound at Local and State government levels – raids on a people without means of livelihood, attacks on a people without gainful employment.

These physical assaults on the people are the obvious indicators of government traumatising of the populace. There are other less visible but highly destabilising measures put in place to pauperise ordinary citizens. These include taxes collected by governments on goods, services and infrastructure, taxes made legitimate by horrible policies on tariffs, imports, exports, petroleum, telecommunication, power, and water, amongst others. These policies seem targeted at robbing the people of a decent life style. Where the policies seem fair on paper, they are implemented in ways that have disastrous effects on the people.

Bribes as Insidious Taxes

Most public officers and institutions as well as many members of staff of high profile private sector establishments meant to render services to Nigerians have syndicated an all-encompassing machinery for extorting money from whoever needs their services. Most times the extortion instrument is so blatant that it overrides what would have been considered the real operational mode of the establishments. These institutions have suddenly turned out to be tax-collecting offices for their operatives. Executive, legislative, and judicial arms of government as well as parastatal, educational, media, religious, economic, social, cultural and even big private establishments have all become so mired in bribery and corruption that it does seem as if our Nigerian constitution has unwritten provisions for bribery and corruption. This insidious but anti-poetic culture of bribery and corruption in Nigeria is confronted in the poem on the woes of independence by a dramatic presentation of the terrible effect of this form of taxation on the people.

Is it true that in Nigeria it is not legal to collect bribes/taxes for oneself from public or corporate services? The immediate answer is that our laws and constitution do not condone such practices. In fact, Nigeria has laws against these

illegal taxes, the most recent and perhaps most comprehensive of which is the "Anti- Corruption Law." Hail Nigeria! But wait a minute. Is the country not corruption compliant? Have we not distorted our culture to accommodate bribery and corruption? Without really being conscious of how we have effected this cultural distortion, can we find our way out of the mess? If we are not conscious that what we do is tantamount to taking bribe, why should we be indicted? If we are so sure that we do not have the disease called bribery and corruption, why should we seek a cure?

The truth is that we have all come to accept, actively or passively, corrupt practices as proper. This is the case because we have bastardised our custom of giving gifts and expressing gratitude to benefactors and made it the justification for bribery and corruption. Whether we are conscious of this fact or not is immaterial.

First, let us take the custom of expressing gratitude as conceived and practised in the genuine spirit of communal life in Nigeria. Is this spirit still alive? Does an individual in the community show gratitude to an individual for communal duty excellently done? The answer is clear: gratitude goes to the community and the community rewards the individual who was an instrument for realising the joint goal. Must the show of gratitude always translate into the presentation of money or material gifts? No.

But things have changed in Nigeria. A public officer, performing public duties, expects or even demands a practical or material demonstration of gratitude to him personally, in cash as well as in kind, from those who benefit from the public programme. There is no separation of the individual as a private citizen from the individual as a public office holder. This confusion of roles is deliberate and meant to create situations that turn a normal official transaction into "a special favour

extended to the citizen” by “the officer(s) in charge.” This paves the way for the demand of a “material” show of gratitude as the officer’s entitlement – a demand that could be met before, during or after the deal is done. The demand is made either openly or through subtle suggestions. But open demands are now more in vogue than veiled ones.

How did Nigerians achieve this feat of removing poetry from a custom which served the purpose of extolling virtues of collective effort? How did they pervert methods of administration that ensured meeting the people’s survival and life-enhancing needs? Simple, the offering of *kola* or *token cash* as a show of hospitality or gratitude, the verbal gesture being the most important, has now been hijacked and carried to absurd levels that blatantly proclaim bribes as part of our culture.

Worse still, many Nigerians take bribes “naively.” They ask for and receive bribes because they see nothing wrong in the logic behind the very popular trend of reasoning that runs thus: “people give you gifts when you are in office, but will not do so when you are out of office. Therefore, when you are in power, you have the opportunity to make money through receiving gifts from people who show appreciation for what you have done for them. No one should let the opportunity slip by without cashing in on it.”

Is it not logical that public office holders should launch programmes, books, endowments and re-enact funerals to ask for contributions from previous and prospective beneficiaries from the “kindness” of office holders? Who would stop this kind of gift-giving-and-taking? Would it ever be part of what the anti-corruption law is meant to address? No? What about those-praise-singing-advertisements or announcements that are put in newspapers as favour-seeking devices? Are these publications not deliberately sought and openly presented as

part of our political tradition? Would the anti-corruption law address these? Your guess is as good as mine.

Another popular argument is: "I accepted the gift after the job was done. It is not a bribe. I did not ask for it. It was given voluntarily. It would be a bribe if I took it before the contract was given out." First, the gift to an individual is for a duty performed on behalf of an institution owned by the people; it is wrongly targeted because the institution should receive the gift. Second, a gift given before, during or after a contract or supposed favour is a bribe, pure and simple. A gift given after a successful contract is bribe given in anticipation of the next contract bid. Surely, no gift would be given if the person offering it were certain that the officer would be out of office before his next bid. Therein lies the fallacy of regarding a post-contract bribe as a mere expression of gratitude. Would our laws address these issues and separate our public from private moralities?

If public or corporate offices "legitimately" make private fortunes for individuals (in line with the stripping of poetry from our culture of hospitality), it follows that helping oneself liberally from the public coffers is no offence. Is this not the ideological basis for the rampant looting of the public treasury? Is this not at the core of the urge to amass wealth whether we need it or not because our society seems always ready to assure us that with the loot we can buy religious salvation, traditional titles, votes and even "respect?" Is our society not one that is overwhelmed by whoever has money? Why bother about how the people came by the money? Even if we did know about the unfair manner of wealth acquisition, are we not prepared to shrug it off? All is fair as long as money talks. This is the stark reality.

No anti-corruption laws can reverse this trend for now because the enforcement processes are laid prostrate by the

same factors that produced the laws in the first place. And, of course, this rather disheartening situation is a clear indication that Nigeria is fixated in the second stage of poetic development. Will we ever have what it takes to pry ourselves out of this quandary and attempt a march towards poetic existence?

U. L. ARCHIV

Conclusion

Wherein lies the way out of this quagmire? We require a complete overhaul of the present Nigerian mindset through making the essential principles of poetic justice, principles that are already a part of our genuine indigenous heritage, the basis of our personal and communal being.

What is needed is a strong enough dose of poetic edification administered through a comprehensive cultural orientation that is capable of re-connecting us to the ideals of our communal life by making us always conscious of our humanity in all our dealings. In the poem titled "Ozymandias," Shelley demonstrates the hollowness of all our treasures – wealth, power and monuments – treasures with which we assert our presumptuous superiority over all creatures and with which we bolster our belief in our ability to overcome our mortality. The poem's protagonist's declaration, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/ Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" serves as the crucial expression of how death and time lay all human achievements to waste. This is the inescapable fate of man, but man will never learn!

Genuine aesthetic engagements among human beings – engagements that guarantee personal and social realisations of the quintessential values of our being – are what ultimately make life meaningful. This meaningfulness is realisable if, and only if, all human affairs and institutions are configured to be truly poetic-justice-sensitive.

Let us live our lives doing simple things that put smiles on the faces of others, simple things that touch their lives, simple things that make life poetic for them and for us. Let poetry rule our lives and our nation's affairs.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since an Inaugural Lecture provides a bounteous harvest of ideas from intellectual crops sowed and nurtured over an incredibly long period of time, it is to be expected that numerous institutions and individuals have made invaluable contributions to today's yield. Time and space would not permit me to mention all of them. Therefore it is important for me to state that those I mention below represent a mere fraction of all that have impacted enormously on my personal and intellectual life over the years.

I am highly indebted to The University of Lagos for being central to my intellectual growth. The present Vice Chancellor, Prof Oye Ibidapo-Obe is hereby acknowledged as a worthy representative of all past Vice Chancellors of this great University. I salute them all heartily even as Professors J. F. Ade Ajayi and Jelili Adebisi Omotola remain dominant in my consciousness.

Let me also respectfully acknowledge that The University of Alberta, Edmonton and, to some extent, the University College, Dublin, helped sharpen my research sensibilities.

I pay tribute to the great scholars who made it possible for the English Department of this University to impact positively on my life – Professors J. P. Clark, Abiodun Adetugbo (a darling father figure), Theo Vincent, Ebun Clark and Funso Akere. Praise goes too to Professors E. J. Rose and Gary Kelly of the University of Alberta for letting me explore what interested me for the Ph.D. Other significant mentors include Professors Emmanuel Kwofie, I. A. Asiwaju, Isaac Ogunbiyi and Dr. Roland. To all past and present members of the English Department, I say thanks for being part of my life. Nevertheless, I need to mention a few younger members of my

academic horizon, Chimdi Maduagwu, Harry Olufunwa, Austin Nwagbara, Dimeji Ajikobi, Muda Ilupeju and Bonny Igbeneghu.

I salute my parents, Mr. Peter Eruvbetine Aminobire Odeh and Mrs. Kezaiah Ataphroma Odeh, for the gift of life and focus. Both of them were teachers in their conventional lives; they are alive to me always. And to my alternate father, late Rev. (Canon) Chief D. U. A. Eferakeya, I say, thanks for the gift of ideals that guide my life. And to all my relations, I say thank you for being there always.

Finally, I pay tribute to those whose existence is inextricably tied to mine always – the Eruvbetines of the Agwonorobo extraction – Daisy, Ome, Obor and Prem. Let's project them on the screen and I'll introduce them to you. My wife, Daisy, Associate Professor in UNAAB, my daughter, a newly produced medical doctor, Obor, a mechanical engineering 300 Level student and my last card, Prem, a JSS 2, ISL student and my tail for now.

A. E. E.

