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Burden of the Visionary Artist: Niyi Osundare's Poetry

Scholarship on the poetry of the Nigerian writer Niyi Osundare continues to privilege the social and political content of his work, in addition, of course, to his fascinating appropriation of the techniques of indigenous Yoruba poetry. Introducing Osundare's first published collection of poetry, *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), Biodun Jeyifo identified the poet's grand theme as the dispossession of the masses and, more specifically, of the rural producers (xi). In a perceptive and relatively early appraisal of Osundare's poetry, Aderemi Bamikunle draws attention to the themes of "social and political corruption, maladministration and mismanagement, deprivations and oppression suffered by the masses, concern with Third World situations, and concern with poetic art and how it can serve to better his society" (121). In like manner, in their prefatory remarks to an insightful 2000 interview with Osundare, Cynthia Hogue and Nancy Easterlin argue that "the folk traditions of his early life alongside the urgency of Nigeria's political situation" provide Osundare's poetry with "its energizing impulse" ("Interview" 192). Seeking elsewhere for the distinguishing virtue of Osundare's poetry in his preface to *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*, Abiola Irele notes, not fully approvingly, that the essays in the volume strive to cele-

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brate Osundare's "achievement as a poet deeply imbued with a social vision" (xvii). In several interviews, the poet has encouraged this reading of his work. However, this fixation on social and political transformation in Osundare's poetry, while certainly justified and helping to locate his work at the heart of a postcolonial Nigerian literary tradition, has as its cost the virtual exclusion from critical attention of an equally vibrant and sustained global humanistic vision.

The Heir of History

The contribution of Nigeria's preeminent pioneer writers—Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Christopher Okigbo—to the enunciation of the Nigerian writer's vocation early in the formative stage of the Nigerian canon was crucial. Speaking at the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1967, Soyinka remarked on and sternly denounced the divorce between the artistic preoccupations of many African writers and the realities of their societies. Identifying the preeminent role of the African writer "as the voice of vision" and the conscience of society, Soyinka cautioned, "When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon" (20). Similarly, in a talk titled "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause," delivered in 1968 at Makerere University College in Kamapala, Uganda, with the Nigeria-Biafra war raging, Achebe pronounced the absolute irrelevance of African literature divorced from crucial political issues: "It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant—like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames" (78). Appraising very highly the impact of Soyinka's and Achebe's views, Sule E. Egya observes that the two have provided an ideological connection among different generations of Nigerian writers (425).

On the other hand, Okigbo's contribution to this debate can be discerned only through his work, since his reflections in interviews on the writer's role in society often entail outright renunciation. In

a 1965 interview granted to Robert Serumaga, Okigbo virtually denied being concerned with communicating meanings: “Personally, I don’t think that I have ever set out to communicate a meaning. It is enough that I try to communicate experience which I consider significant” (114). Yet Okigbo’s response to the topical political issues of his time completely altered the form of Nigerian poetry, and his innovations continue to resonate in the practice of many current Nigerian poets, including Osundare. Ben Obumsele argues that the basic inspiration for that transformation was the deepening political crises of the 1960s:

By the time Okigbo arrived in Ibadan in 1962, the city was in political turmoil. The contest for power in the Nigerian Federation had come to a head in a federal siege of Western Nigeria. A state of emergency was declared in the region in May 1962. Later that same year, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the majority party in the region, was charged with the offence of treason and subsequently jailed with eighteen of his closest lieutenants. For two years, interethnic hostilities smoldered. Then following turbulent elections in 1964 and 1965, the smoldering fire ignited into street riots, jail breaks, assassinations, and the setting ablaze of political opponents in the streets. Wole Soyinka, who all the while had been active underground, was in 1965 arrested on the capital charge of armed robbery. . . . [T]he turbulent events of this period . . . changed not only Wole Soyinka and Okigbo, but Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Kenule Tsaro-Wiwa, Okogbule Wonodi, and Elechi Amadi from mandarins into militants.

(“Cambridge House” 3)

In Okigbo’s final sequence of poems, “Path of Thunder,” he sharpens his art further in the service of the public by rethinking the idiom of expression and by a more overt gesture toward adapting indigenous art forms and techniques.¹

Okigbo’s self-image in “Path of Thunder” as town crier—speaking truth to power in a public idiom, and thus a potential martyr—is a recurring image of the committed poet in contemporary Nige-

1. Okigbo’s great antagonists Chinweizu *et al.*, who strongly condemned the influence of Euromodernist poetry on his work, were enamored of his recourse to oral African poetry for inspiration and models: “‘Path of Thunder’ is resplendent with proverbs, dirges and elegies, praise names and praise songs, leader/choral antiphonies in traditional voice” (193). See also Diala, “Okigbo’s Drum Elegies.”

rian poetry: "If I don't learn to shut up my mouth I'll soon go to hell, / I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron bell" (*Labyrinth* 67). Dan Izevbaye remarks on "the dismantling of the barrier of anonymity that separates author and hero" in Okigbo's earlier sequences in "Path of Thunder" (19) and discerns in that final sequence a demonstration of "the practice of art and commitment that the sixties held out as its ideal" (22). Funso Aiyejina, who characterizes pre-civil war Nigerian poetry of English expression as marked by "private esotericism," appraises the impact of the political upheavals of the period as critical and the influence of "Path of Thunder" as decisive in its transformation: "There was a physical, spiritual, and psychological brutalization of the nation on an incomprehensibly large scale. In such a 'season of anomy,' the poets no longer could afford to speak in inaccessible riddles and occult tongues. . . . The prophetic and lucid example in Okigbo's 'Path of Thunder' became a model" (113-14). Pivotal in this tradition, especially as canonized by Okigbo and Soyinka, is the general conception of the African poet's social responsibility as being that of a visionary, with the implication that the poet is not only committed to imaging contemporary issues in his or her poetry but does so as a prophet—that is, envisions present events and their future consequences in images that appear to have been invoked from dreams. Okigbo's idea of poetic composition as generated in a visionary state of anguish and his images of the poet reminiscent of Coleridge's seer-poet in "Kubla Khan," with flashing eyes and floating hair, resonate with Soyinka's belief in the poet as society's "voice of vision." These views constitute the tradition of social commitment that Osundare extends and provide the background for Osundare's affirmation of the indispensability of the African writer's assumption of social responsibilities:

You cannot keep quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves in, in Africa. When you wake up and there is no running water, when you have a massive power outage for days and nights, no food on the table, no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind; when the image of the ruler you see everywhere is that of a dictator with a gun in his hand; and, on the international level, when you live in a world in which your continent is consigned to the margin, a world in which the colour of your skin is a constant disadvantage, everywhere you go—then there is no

other way than to write about this, in an attempt to change the situation for the better.

("Niyi Osundare" n. pag.)

Here Osundare is clearly speaking with a consciousness of the past and of the national tradition. But his comment equally foregrounds his acute awareness of his postcolonial heritage, including the political and cultural formations deriving from that heritage, their crucial inflection of his own experience, and the utter necessity of using his art to engage with these factors. In responding to his postcolonial heritage, Osundare brings to the practice of poetry enormous innovation and originality and in the process extends the frontiers of African poetry.

The People's Poet

In his interview with Hogue and Easterlin, Osundare accepts the appellation "The People's Poet" and accounts for it in terms of his use of the aesthetics of folk art and his compassionate and heroic striving to transform the texture of common life:

The reason people call me "poet of the people" is that I try to resist being academicized, as it were. That was why in 1985 I started a poetry column in a newspaper, and the principles were (1) that the poems would be topical; (2) that they would also have some beauty about them, so they're not just doggerel passing for poetry; and (3) that they would be accessible.

(199)

The poet's recollections of the diverse oral resources of the Yoruba poetic heritage, rooted in a culture typified by many rites and rituals, festivals and ceremonies, are passionate, and he recognizes this tradition's impact on his conception of poetry as both people-oriented and performative:

Oral modes held complete sway in my childhood experience, and it was at this stage that the foundation for my future literary career was laid. I grew up recognizing the intricacies of the song, the dramatic nature of indigenous festivals, and the structure of the folktale, as well as the moral, didactic content of them all.

(193)

The poet's exhilarating recollections in this interview of a farmer father who was also a drummer, singer, and composer of songs and of a mother whose cloth weaving and dyeing were virtual poetry point toward how the rhythms of work and the seasons have nurtured his consciousness as well as his art. These comments are instructive for an appreciation of the poetics of the early collections *Songs of the Marketplace, Village Voices* (1984), and *A Nib in the Pond* (1986).

Discerning a central concern with cultural power at the heart of postcolonialism, Helen Gilbert has highlighted in her focus on artists from nations formerly colonized by Western imperial powers a predilection for recuperating local performance traditions, both as a means of cultural decolonization and as a challenge to Western representational biases. She likewise notes the inherent syncretism of postcolonial cultures, given their widespread engagement with Western texts and traditions, and argues that postcolonial cultural practices manifest "both a historical *and* discursive relationship to Western imperialism, whether that phenomenon is treated critically, ambivalently, or collusively" (1). In "Yoruba Thought, English Words," an absorbing account of his practice as a Yoruba poet writing in English, Osundare highlights his primary conception of poetry as music, following an indigenous tradition: "Poetry for me is song, performance; it is utter-ance. In the beginning was not the Word, in the Word was the Beginning. But the Word was a tablet of letters and symbols, mute and immobile until endowed with the animating power of the human voice" (127). He traces to this understanding his use of alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition, and varying reiterative strategies, devices that on occasion may look pleonastic to some readers. In reality, his apparent deviations from the norm in English writing are self-conscious artistic choices deriving from his allegiance to his postcolonial heritage:

Critics who condemn these devices in my poetry, I suspect, are those trained to read poetry, not hear it; those who are used to locating the prosodic climax of the poem only in rhymes at the tail end of its lines. Rhythm for me is systemic and pervasive. It is secreted in every consonant and every vowel even as both engage in the musical union that begets the syllable. The Yoruba syllable is a unit of music. To reflect its glides and slurs in English I often go for long-drawing words, hence the ubiquity of words with the -ing ending in my verse. I am more of an ear than an eye poet.

On certain desperate occasions when a quarrel erupts between the sound-
ing and the meaning of a word, I often tilt the scale in favour of the former.

(127)

In varying ways, Osundare's indigenous culture has provided models he appropriates in responding to the many legacies of colonialism, especially in his conception and practice of poetry, and in confronting the aberrations of the postcolonial state.

Osundare declares in *Songs of the Marketplace* that "Poetry is / not the esoteric whisper / of an excluding tongue" aimed at mystifying a "wondering audience" (3). Human-oriented, poetry is aimed at reaching out to and touching humans:

Poetry
is
man
meaning
to
man.

(4)

Evidently, Osundare is embarked on a poetic revolution that will redefine both the scope and the language of poetry, placing the folk and the underprivileged at the heart of the poet's compassion while drawing on the resources of their oral arts and privileging an accessible idiom of expression.²

Appraising Osundare's first six volumes—*Songs of the Marketplace*, *Village Voices*, *A Nib in the Pond*, *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Moonsongs* (1988), and *Waiting Laughters* (1990)—Bamikunle contends that the poet remains faithful to his poetic ideal of social commitment on the side of the underprivileged, in accessible language, only through the volume *Village Voices*, given that *The Eye of the Earth* was a major turning point in the poet's career. Apparently less political than the earlier volumes, *The Eye of the Earth* and *Moonsongs*, especially the latter, illustrate a new, abstract philosophy of the cyclical nature of history that contrasts with the revolutionary tenor of the first three volumes. While before, Osundare had always

2. One can discern here a correspondence with William Wordsworth's revolutionary poetry in *Lyrical Ballads*, which aimed to use "the real language of men" (184) and to focus on the "humble and rustic life" (187).

made use of the seasons and diurnal revolutions as vehicles for depicting social revolutions, in *Moonsongs* they become “the framework for unrevolutionary philosophic statements on the seasonal and cyclical nature of existence,” according to Bamikunle (122). Inscribing the moon, which marks changes in the annual and diurnal cycle, as a representation of the tyranny of unpredictable time, the poet makes social revolutions victims of the revolution of time, Bamikunle argues, and thus makes humankind *dependent* on history rather than the maker of history and human destiny, as socialists would wish and as Osundare claims in his earlier work (125). Bamikunle considers the probable inspiration behind *Waiting Laughters* to be the poet’s realization of the need to mediate between his earlier revolutionary belief that humankind creates history and can control it and the rather pessimistic notion that history is intractable and protean, and thus beyond firm human control (126). In this essay, I aim to reappraise *Waiting Laughters* and to read two subsequent collections, *Songs of the Season* (1990) and *Horses of Memory* (1998), in the light of Bamikunle’s claims regarding Osundare’s conception of history and politics; to examine further the poet’s conception of the dialectic between history and humankind; and, especially, to highlight his deeper involvement with humankind as a species rather than with local history, his close attention to the topical notwithstanding.

Minting Currency

In his preface to *Songs of the Season*, a collection of poems previously published in the Nigerian daily *The Tribune*, Osundare articulates the basic aims of the volume and his approach to style:³

From the very outset, *Songs of the Season* has been empowered by a definable style and purpose: to capture the significant happenings of our time

3. Regarding the tradition of publishing verse in newspapers, M. J. C. Echeruo recalls that early Nigerian poetry in English is often described as “pilot” verse for two reasons: first, because it was thought of as a pioneering endeavor, and secondly, because many of the poems were published in the Nigerian newspaper the *West African Pilot*. As Echeruo notes, the “pilot” pioneers were not Nigeria’s first generation of English-language poets, and the first Nigerian English-language newspaper, the *Anglo-African* (1863–65), had played a similar role (15).

in a tune that is simple, accessible, topical, relevant and artistically pleasing; to remind kings about the corpses which line their way to the throne, to show the rich the slums which fester behind their castles, to praise virtue, denounce vice, to mirror the triumphs and travails of the down-trodden who ever so often the big books forget; to celebrate the green glory of the rainy season and brown accent of the dry, to distil poetry from the dust and clay of our vast, prodigious land.

(v)

"A Song for My Land," a panoramic view of the "prodigious land," precedes the first section of the volume, titled "Songs." If it evokes a romanticized and idyllic view of the land and peoples of the country, it is clearly Eden after the Fall, complete with its snake with a "venomous head" (4) and tainted by the corruption of politics: "one land, one people, one future, / Sliced into countless pockets / By the glistening blade of political tongues" (5). It is, nonetheless, a vision of the poet's deep love for the land. Many of the poems—mainly through satire, irony, and sarcasm—dwell on the manifold social misfortunes of the underprivileged in a tyrannous state: destitution, joblessness, retrenchment, overtaxation, exploitation, enslavement. In several of the poems, such as "Echoes from the Rural Abyss" and "A Song for Ajegunle," the poet underscores a growing awareness on the part of the down-trodden of their plight, as well as their will to self-emancipation. The poem "The Horse Who Rode the Rider," written "for the oppressed who question their plight" (122), is especially acute on the longing of the underprivileged for a transcendence of their humiliated condition. It is the poet's conviction that myths of the underprivileged's condemnation to eternal servitude (as in the poem "Olowo Debates Talaka") notwithstanding, "MAN is the centre of this world, / master of everything in it / and maker of its restless history" (147), even if the epithet "restless" strongly suggests the limiting intractability of history. Osundare identifies the failure of memory as a crucial aspect of the challenge:

Fickle like a fart
 Forgetful like a tale-less tribe,
 People of our land,
 Our memory is a lazy dust

Washed easily off our head
By showers of arbitrary seasons.

(106)

The poet's concern with history is signal for Osundare, and his engagement with the topical military despotism is focal throughout the collection.

Osundare's confrontation with the topical in his *Tribune* poems underscores his will to counterhegemonic discourse in full awareness that it is danger-fraught. If the striving to rewrite history is in the gray area of the contestation of power, the fierce tussle for control of the discursive representation of the present is of high intensity, as it is a battle for determining the substance and the trajectory of history. Like minting currency, control of the authorized version of events is the prerogative of authority.⁴ Osundare's work simmers with the poet's awareness of what postcolonial revaluations of imperial historiography have made clear—the conflation of official chronicles of events and hegemonic mythmaking, as scholars such as Robert J. Young have detailed. Moreover, the poet's choice of a popular forum, the tabloid, as the medium for appropriating the topical as symbolic capital had the real potential of exacerbating the envy of the state, with frightful consequences.

In his examination of the banality of power in the postcolony, Achille Mbembe notes that such a state is not merely an "economy of signs in which power is mirrored and *imagined* self-reflectively" but also "a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence" (102). He thus sees the postcolony as a "stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline" (103). Michel Foucault's influential insight into the compact between "subjection" and "discipline" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* is his revelation of the narcissistic compulsion of power to appropriate all state institutions as agents of coercion in a bid to fabricate authorized stereotypes. Foucault underscores the evolu-

4. As Clive Cheesman and Jonathan Williams observe, since the invention of coinage in Lydia (western Turkey) and China in about 650 B.C., "the material form of money" (just like stamps and heraldic devices) has been a highly contested site of authority for claimants to sovereignty and legitimacy (13).

tion of the prison as a conglomerate, an all-embracing and interlocking “carceral network” of modern institutions—including the censor, the mental asylum, the police force, the court, the prison, and even churches and schools—aimed at the social conditioning of the individual toward compliance and orthodoxy (299). Osundare’s understanding of the state’s morbid desire for compliance, as well as the consequent abiding possibility of persecution for deviance, is highlighted by the fact that a presiding concern of *Songs of the Season* is the contest for representing the “truth.” It is the primary theme of the ironic “Only Four,” whose speaker, a would-be “emperor,” indicts the press for reporting the deaths of “only four” students in a police shoot-out as if it had been “a senseless massacre” (51). It is manifest in the account of the persecution and incarceration of frontline human rights activists Femi Falana and Gani Fawehinmi in the poems “For Femi Falana” (68–69) and “Letter to Fawehinmi” (70–72), and when the poet describes prison as a place “where dragons wrestle TRUTH / in the chilly glare of iron gates” in “For Fela Anikulapo-Kuti” (96). But it is perhaps most poignant in the elegy dedicated to Dele Giwa, a Nigerian journalist killed by a letter bomb from suspected agents of the then-military government, whose fate is interpreted as symbolic of the lot of those dedicated to the cause of truth.

Osundare, who locates the power of the poet in his or her tongue, depicts the poet’s tongue as emblematic of the terror that the truth holds for power and of power’s paranoid striving to silence rival discourse. Addressing “Patriots / Thinkers / Countrymen” in “A Tongue in the Crypt,” he writes:

Behold your tongue
Sealed up in this iron cage
For public safety
And the national interest

For permission to use,
Apply to:
The Minister of Whispering Affairs,
Dept. of Patriotic Silence,
53 Graveyard Avenue,
DUMBERIA.

(*Songs* 127)

Read as a response to Decree No. 4 of 1984 (and later Decree 35 of 1993), through which the military strove to infringe on freedom of speech, the poem is daring. Branded "Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree 1984," Decree No. 4 was curiously worded to make its interpretation infinitely subjective and so potentially capable of insulating public officers from any form of scrutiny or interrogation whatsoever:

Any person who publishes in any form, whether written or otherwise, any message, rumour, report or statement, being a message, rumour, report or statement which is false in any material particular or which brings or is calculated to bring the Federal Military Government or the Government of a State or a public officer to ridicule or disrepute, shall be guilty of an offence under this Decree.

(Supplement A53)

Although the decree was primarily aimed at the press, Nigerian writers recognized its latent capacity to be all-embracing in its application. Beyond Osundare's humor and irony is a damning parody of the tyrant's imposition of restrictions on freedom of speech. For the poet, it is symbolic of the sterility of the cemetery, and he consequently renames Nigeria "Dumberia," a veritable country of the *dumb*.⁵ The topicality of the poem is set in relief by the intriguing location of the country at "53 Graveyard Avenue," doubtless a precise reference to the pagination of the decree in the official gazette. Osundare's conviction that the poet's assumption of the responsibility of political transformation is inseparable from symbolic self-crucifixion is borne out in several other poems in the collection. "Song of the Tyrant" is a parable about the ironic consequences of the will to power, as well as the sheer futility of the dream of the godhead. But it is primarily a parable about the poet's will to tell the truth as integral with the will to martyrdom.

Osundare carefully provides the historical provenance of many of the poems in *Songs of the Season*: "Shout of the People" was written "in memory of Nigeria's 5th coup d'état" (34) (through which Major General Muhammadu Buhari emerged as head of state in 1983), just as in the poem "And Cometh the Bulldozer" he locates

5. See Diala, "Bayonet," for further discussion.

the demolitions of homes and business premises belonging mainly to the underprivileged within the “fierce keep-the-country-clean campaign” by the military regime in 1984 and 1985 (*Songs* 18). The bulldozer, “Armed with claws and iron laws / Elephant legs on our huts and sheds” (*Songs* 17), and the “armoured monsters galloping / Like giant caterpillars / Down the spine of our creaking streets” (*Songs* 34) in “Shout of the People” are complementary images of military brutality. Osundare is at pains to establish the historical context of his work while creating memorable, generalized images of terror, brutality, and even bestiality reminiscent of Okigbo’s and William Butler Yeats’s prophecies of doom in “Come Thunder” and “Second Coming,” respectively.⁶ This dialectical tension between the topical and the visionary is foregrounded in the final poem of the collection. In that poem, “Song for All Seasons,” the poet reveals his deepest craving as an artist—a yearning for the enduring relevance of his work, or that his “songs of the season” may be songs for every season:

When the sun of these eyes
Has set in the cloud of the brows
When this tongue lies limp
In the chambers of a frozen jaw
Let memory scribble this:
In the pages of my palm
· · · · ·
Let every mouth tell
A listening ear:
 We find in his many and varied songs
 Voices of his and other times.

(149–50)

The poet’s characteristic exploration of typical Nigerian political experiences in parables and tropes certainly served as a shield against trigger-happy but illiterate Nigerian tyrants, as he claimed in the 2000 interview; its more crucial artistic role, however, is the sublimation and transformation of the specific and the local into paradigms applicable to a larger humanity by turning political experience into the enduring mythical substance of human experi-

6. For further discussion of Okigbo’s poem, see Diala, “Okigbo’s Drum Elegies.”

ence. The collection *Waiting Laughters* is especially instructive in this regard, as I will discuss.

The Humanist

Locating Osundare's work within the postcolonial Nigerian tradition demonstrates the validity of deploying national traditions as a context for literary studies. Yet in his pronouncements and in his art, Osundare equally foregrounds his awareness that in the modern world, all national traditions are embedded in circuits of cultural production, reception, and exchange so intricately interwoven as to interrogate any uncomplicated notion of time and (political) space. Vilashini Cooppan contends that nations are "spaces of flows and movement" (9) and traces "a politics of relationality within which the national and the global are tandem ideas, twinned identifications, and doubled dreams" (4). Drawing productively on Cooppan in his examination of Nigerian literature, Hamish Dalley argues that relying on spatiotemporal constructs to categorize authors into generations fails to account for the complexity of texts. He notes how the spatiotemporal imaginary of the postcolonial novel is typically multiple, accumulative, and ambivalent and shows how "recent Nigerian novels are shaped around ambivalent spatio-temporal imaginaries that exceed the national-generational framework" (15).

Osundare has repeatedly drawn attention to his involvement with a larger global humanity. His conception of the topical has global breadth; the poems "For Olof Palme" and "For the Women of Greenham Common" in *Songs of the Season* demonstrate the scope of his compassion. His concern with nature and humanity's relationship with it likewise reflects his global vision. As S. Louisa Wei remarks on the centrality of nature in the poet's oeuvre, "His expression of 'the green desire' and his concern for the endangered earth as well as the endangered people . . . reveal a great compassion that can be shared by a global readership" (300). Osundare's concern with nature is integral to his reflection on the *human* situation. In the 2000 interview, Osundare traces his earliest awareness of the eternity of life—the temporality of earthly existence notwithstanding—to the transformation of the scorched earth at the outset of the rainy season. He remarks on the profound impact of this natural

phenomenon on his conception of life and art: “[T]his experience of nature had the very first impact on my sensibility as a writer, and even on my ideal of art. That death comes, but it is only temporary; life is an ongoing experience” (194).⁷ In the same interview, he affirms: “Humanity is one. My travels around the world have shown me we are more united than politicians want us to believe” (198). He exclaims on how the many poets, selected from across the globe, whom he draws attention to in *Midlife* have not only clarified his vision of the relevance of art but also led him to discover the bonds of a common humanity:

I am a voracious reader of poetry. And I’ve been blessed by all these others from Asia, the U.S., Australia, Greece, Latin America, and Africa whom I have read. Hearing voices of other poets from other parts of the world has a way of affirming my own confidence in myself and in my art. They tell me, “Oh yes, it is so here as it is in other parts of the world.” They reconfirm my belief in the essential commonality of humanity.

(203)

To remain central to his various constituencies, Osundare chooses resonant themes which are simultaneously of burning consequence for meditating on the Nigerian situation and amenable to interpretations that easily ascribe to them meanings that transcend national frontiers. The motifs of “waiting” and “laughter” are triumphantly explored in this manner in *Waiting Laughters*, as is “memory” in *Horses of Memory*.

Abiola Irele notes that the fruits of Osundare’s introspection in *Moonsongs* come to maturity in *Waiting Laughters*, alongside the poet’s acceptance of “the complexities of poetic language” (xx). This “recuperation of the inner self,” crucial for the social and political

7. Reacting to an attempt by a reader of his column in the Nigerian magazine *News-watch* to “balkanize” Nigeria into ethnic laagers, Osundare was constrained to define his “politics” in terms that expectedly recognize humankind as his crucial constituency: “I am achingly aware that the terrain of public discourse in Nigeria is strewn with barbs and thorns. But I have never really cared whose TRIBAL ox is gored as long as the issue at stake concerns our country, our continent, and our common humanity. Proud of my Yoruba provenance and grateful for its manifold endowments, I have never seen myself as hostage to any ONE tribe or tongue. I consider my vision too large, too angry, too restless for the narrow walls of a tribal prison. This, indeed, is the truth of my ‘politics’” (341).

reconstruction of Africa, makes the volume a testimony to the poet's newfound recognition (beginning in *Moonsongs* with its espousal of a cosmic vision) of "the truth that human capacities reside in self-understanding of one's place in history and ultimately in the world" (xxii). Osundare's revelation in the volume is of *waiting* as a basic human condition, given the critical interval between human desire and its fulfillment; the poet is also fascinated by the diversity of the modes through which that distance is negotiated, denied, whittled down, or extended. Thus the philosophical depth of the volume resonates in its exploration of the mythic substance of the human experience and the myriad of responses to it, not only with Samuel Beckett's gloomy *Waiting for Godot*, which it modifies with its therapy of laughter, but also Blaise Pascal's quintessential image of humans as shackled prisoners seeking either to break out of the human condition or to adapt to it. With laughter inscribed in *Waiting Laughters* as both a palliative for and an evasion of the human situation, as well as the recurring questions it asks about the means to desired ends, the volume boils with an awareness of authentic and inauthentic responses to the human predicament. Yet the substantive engagement with military despotism never entirely recedes, given the frequent evocation of its horror:

Ordinances tumble down like iron showers
decrees strut the streets like swaggering emperors
hangmen hug the noose like a delicate baby
and those who die thank Death
for his infinite mercies

(46)

Osundare's insight is the paradox that power inevitably gravitates toward implosion because its desperation for self-consolidation is ironically inseparable from its inclination toward self-defeating excesses. Thus the poem moves toward a close that can be read to suggest the necessity of a revolution:

New chicks breaking the fragile tyranny
Of hallowed shells

A million fists, up,
In the glaring face of complacent skies

A matchet, waiting, waiting,
In the whetting shadows of stubborn shrubs

A boil, time-tempered,
About to burst.

(*Waiting* 96–97)

Privileging a political reading of the poem, Saleh Abdu regrets that the “forceful language” with which it ends does not permeate the entire work (142). But Osundare is a poet rather than a political activist or even a propagandist; he is wooing language for memorable and compelling images of transformation. He scours various realms of experience, ranging from poultry to disease, in search of antithetical images of birth, rebirth, and regeneration, on the one hand, and decay, dissolution, and death, on the other. The metaphors of chicks breaking their eggshells to emerge and the boil about to burst both mark the natural end of a cycle and therefore the beginning of a new one. The central insight is the ineluctably transformative impact of time, which humans can harness, rather than revolutionary circumstances of human making. Like the emblematic stammerer of the poet’s oeuvre toiling in an anguished struggle to say the father’s name, humans are condemned to await the beneficence of time and fortune:

For time it may take
Time it may take.

The stammerer wil[!] one day call his
Fa-fa-fa-ther-ther’s na-na-na-me!

(*Waiting* 74)

Asked by Hogue and Easterlin to explain the centrality of laughter in his work, Osundare is explicit in noting that laughter is not necessarily the celebration of a triumph over tyranny. He instead points to the paradox and indispensability of laughter in African societies in a state of siege, where laughter is an acknowledgment of hope, and to the grander human scheme where laughter is an energizing resource from the depths of one’s being: “I don’t know what humanity would have been like if there were no laughter! There is something about our souls that is released by the kind of laughter we

engage in, also something about inner personality that is demonstrated by the way we laugh" (204). Osundare's arena is infinitely larger than the political, and his techniques are thus not always intended to serve as barometers of the political experience.

Attempts at reproducing stammered speech are a highlight of Osundare's poetics. Lines of poetry in *Waiting Laughters* (and indeed throughout his oeuvre) are occasionally broken up in a graphological mimicry of time's quirks, its hesitations, and its infinite modes of movement: *ambling, limping, heaving, slouching, trotting, strutting, crawling, galloping, flying.*

Wait
 Ing

And the hours limp a-
long
with
band-
ages
of fractured moments

Waiting
like a felon yoked to a tryst with the noose,
a groom for the magic of the bridal night
a husband pacing the scented corridors of the labour ward
a home-sick traveller on the platform of tardy trains

.....
Time
 ambles
in
 diverse
paces
 with
diverse
 persons

(*Waiting* 29–30)

The alleged differing movements of time are in reality indicative only of the subjectivity of perception and thus the expectations of the one obsessed by those movements, or else a measure of his or

her mood. Despite the human mind's struggles to recast time in its own image, time remains intractable and impervious.

Sounds are evoked for their musical possibilities. Repetitions of whole phrases and incremental assonances are, for example, exploited as an auditory mimesis of echoing voices rumbling across "rolling hills":

We are a village of hills,
A village of rolling hills,
Those who sharpen dark knives
For our fledgling voice
Will go back home, drowned in the deluge
Of its echoes
Of its echoes
Of its echoes
In the deluge of its stubborn e...ch...o...es

(Waiting 67)

In the overall schema of the work, the poet's obsession with the reproduction or parody of particular sounds is consistent with his general conception of poetry as music. Sounds are exploited to reinforce the poet's meanings, but they are also sometimes used just for their sound effects, to make music. Osundare has observed the great abundance of ideophones in the Yoruba language and remarked on their mediation of the rhythm of speech into the movement of meaning. On the inherent musicality of the language, he notes:

For while English is a stress-timed language, Yoruba is a syllable-timed one operating through a complex system of tones and glides. In this language, prosody mellows into melody. Sounding is meaning, meaning is sounding. The music which emanates from the soul of words is an inalienable part of the beauty of the tongue.

("Yoruba Thought" 121)

If the poet's penchant for the sound effects of the Yoruba language recurs in his work, his mastery of the resources of both the Yoruba and English languages is his forte.

Discussing Osundare's translation or transliteration of Yoruba songs to enhance the musicality of his poetry, Bamikunle notes the

poet's typical suggestion of various musical instruments as accompaniment for the poems. He posits "ritual poetry" as the model for the expansive form of *Waiting Laughters* (135). However, Osundare's practice in this regard is reminiscent of Okigbo's. Remarking on Okigbo's tradition of scoring his poetry for instrumental accompaniment, Ben Obumsele traces the practice to Léopold Senghor and Langston Hughes and considers it an integral part of Okigbo's steadfast conception of his poetry as music ("Christopher Okigbo" 68). Obumsele notes especially how after 1962, Okigbo had turned to "long symphonic poems organized in four or five movements" ("Cambridge House" 3). Obumsele's description of the form is insightful:

The form entails the deployment of a diversity of themes in which, despite every difference of subject matter, tempo, and mood, the entire work must come together as an imaginative unity. Various European novelists, poets, and painters had tried out the idea in the 1920s, sometimes with astonishing results. But the form is essentially musical. It could have been suggested to Okigbo by his favorite musician, Debussy, who in *Nuages*, for instance, begins with the invocation of Mussorgsky's *Without Sunlight*. He goes on to recall Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* and gradually modulates to motifs from other composers. Many different tunes are heard in what appears to be a medley. But the entire work, with all its changes of allusion, theme, tempo, and tonality, is unified by a presiding imaginative conception.

("Cambridge House" 4)

Considering the most remarkable formal experimentation in *Waiting Laughters* to be the organization of the work, Bamikunle describes the collection in terms that largely correspond to the symphonic structure with which Obumsele associates Okigbo: "Instead of a collection of individual lyrics, Osundare has presented a highly organized body of poems intricately related to one another, held together by recurrent motifs, images, and symbols of 'waiting' in expectation of pleasant social change ('laughter')" (135). Angus Calder's register in describing the structure of the volume is even more steeped in the musical: "It is an ambitious sequence, 'musically' structured, playing variations on themes of waiting and laughter, posing images of sterility against evocations of fertility, moving between political satire and the cycles of the season" (28). Osundare

himself uses the apt orchestral expression “a medley of voices” to describe his performance in the title poem of *Horses of Memory* (127). Adopting a similar approach in *Waiting Laughters*, he strings together the motifs of “waiting” and “laughter” in a structure of four movements that develop by an incremental multiplication of related themes which vary, extend, and recapitulate the central concerns. *Waiting Laughters* meditates on the Nigerian national condition as well as on the generalized condition of living under tyranny and oppression. It also reflects on the representative inadequacies, delusions, failures, distractions, and hopes typical of that condition. Yet it is ultimately a compelling and evocative statement on the healing processes and redemptive powers of the passage of time. Its manifold revelations and graphical inventiveness are clearly aimed at a consciousness deeper than national politics.

Meaning in *Horses of Memory* is similarly organized. Reflecting on the sovereignty of memory, especially in its active form as remembrance, Osundare underscores its role in political transformation. A poet’s deep sensitivity makes his or her memory “a house / of many rooms” (85); and the poet’s crucial role is to awaken a slumbering and lethargic race: “Stick over gong / In the streets of the sun / The poet routs the snore / Of a tribe committed to slumber” (86). Because it is longer than tyranny, history is its certain resolution:

Tyranny
may be long,
History is
always
l
o
n
g
e
r.

(105)

In “The Stage and the Mirror,” the poet makes power subject to history: “When History pulls the rug / even emperors must sway and fall / Naked / in their countless robes” (88). The poet is nonetheless aware of the hegemonic implications of historiography and so stresses the need to “probe every pore / of its shadows, / thresh

its depths for nomadic grains . . . / Inter / rogate its silences" (106). Even then, he acknowledges the invariable subjectivity of the perception of reality and its representation, as he does the necessity of the inevitable reappraisal of truths in the constantly changing circumstances of humans and the challenges those changes bring. As with "waiting," the perception of history as well as its writing is dependent on who we are and what we aspire to be. In "I Met History Today," the poet points to the diversity of history's masks, arising from the necessarily legion apparatuses through which it is perceived:

I met History today
Draped in purple robes
And jewels from distant seas
I met History
A scarecrow in ragged echoes
Abandoned in the afterglow
Of fugitive harvests
.....
I met History today
In the chariot
Of galloping Pharaohs
I met History
In the ranks
Of fleeing tribes
Desperate for a parting in the sea
(109-11)

Between the king and the serf, the judge and the condemned, the colonizer and the colonized, and between the conquistador's rampaging army and a beleaguered and fleeing people, truth is provisional. Osundare's representative, sharply contrasted human laagers account for the irreconcilable threads in the loom of history, and their mutually exclusive narratives illuminate the interface between history and mythmaking. Thus if the poem "End of History" perceives history's brow as "a taut membrane / Of inexhaustible riddles" and affirms that "old truths" are ultimately the "compost of newer Truths" (43), it acknowledges the inadequacy of individual perceptions of truth: "Today I look History / In the face / And I remember the child in the tale / Who touched the elephant's tail, / Vowing he had seen everything / About the giant of the for-

est" (43). The poet in "Memory Chips" elevates this insight to national relevance: "One season's hero / Is another's villain / One land's fact / is another's fiction" (49). The poet is indeed aware that "Sometimes / History enters the night / As a sheep, / Waking up / As a wolf" (104). The plurality of the horses of the volume's title is instructive; the legions of riders to memory return not only with distinctive or even contrasting histories but also with manifold relics strewn on the beach of time. *Horses of Memory* is a sustained meditation on human memory—its vagaries, uses, intractability—and its many countenances and masks. It is only to be expected that all of Osundare's earlier themes should constellate in this compelling volume, with its central theme the labyrinth of the human mind: politics in all its variegated forms, from the precolonial to the postcolonial, with the corollary themes of the temporality of power, the natural universe, love, sexuality, the poet's art and its roles, and the uses and abuses of waiting and laughter in human life, as well as diverse timeless, mythical human experiences.

Crucially, the first poem in *Horses of Memory* is a magnificent elegy in memory of the poet's father. Death raises fundamental questions of universal significance and so has a resonance beyond politics. The remembrance of our beloved dead is both a cultural duty and, more broadly, a *human* necessity, strengthening the human bond by implicating all of us in the commonality of our mortal condition. In cultural terms, the typical conflation of lamentation and praise in the *oriki* of the dead seeks to perpetuate the most exalted ideals of a people. Karin Barber has stressed the great diversity of sources from which *oriki* performers draw or derive names for the praisee and allude to meanings not fully explored in the performance: "Textual meaning is not considered to be inherent. *Oriki* are composed of autonomous elements, each of which may lead out from the text-in-performance into hinterlands of other genres" (115). Meaning in such a text therefore involves tracing allusions to historical narratives, personal anecdotes, etymology, and etiology, among other sources of signification. A common denominator, however, is that each name is suggested by its communal acceptance as a form of distinction. Thus a great farmer's *oriki* is invariably a tribute to industry, resilience, selflessness, and generosity in their varying manifestations:

You who plucked laughter from the rafter
Of a drooping house
Before scattering it like cherries
In a careless wind.

(11)

Even more importantly, a farmer is that mythical avatar of the Earth, standing between the people and starvation. Embodying the beneficence of the Earth, the farmer is the conduit of divine grace *par excellence*, capable of extending the lease of life and lending anchorage to the precarious human adventure, which the previously discovered vocations of gathering and hunting could not provide. Karen Armstrong has remarked on the momentous impact for humans of the discovery of agriculture and noted that in its earliest practice, it was apprehended and approached as a mystical experience:

The crop was an epiphany, a revelation of divine energy, and when farmers cultivated the land and brought forth food for their community, they felt they had entered a sacred realm and participated in this miraculous abundance. The earth seemed to sustain all creatures—plants, animals and humans—as in a living womb.

(42)

Osundare strikingly uses the expression “the womb of a faithful soil” to account for the miraculous yield that is a consequence of Earth’s acceptance of the farmer’s offering of fructifying sweat as a sacrifice of incense; and it is insightful that the poet conceives of the *oriki* of a legendary farmer as a glorification of the beneficence of the Earth goddess. The farmer’s reverential *cultivation* of the earth made him a foremost devotee of the Earth cult and thus a beneficiary of her bounty:

You never shaved the forest’s head with a blunt razor
No. You never did.
And so Earth pledged you the plenitude
Of eternal barns.

(Horses 8)

But the *oriki* subject was also a poet and therefore a celestial being sharing an affinity with the sky: “You were the Word which fell from the sky / And, touching earth, broke / Into a thousand truths” (10–

11). The cosmic threat posed to the cycle of life by the death of a farmer-poet who domesticated the earth by his arm as much as by his word is not to be underestimated: it is the threat not only of starvation but also of a reversion of the human garden to the eternal jungle:

Now revels the jungle with its shaggy head
Now revel weeds in places where last year
Yam raised a song and cassava caught the tune
In leafy parades of swelling roots

(6)

A harmonious and happy universe is threatened by death. The universal mourning of the dead is rigorously accounted for in the poem.

Like all great elegies, however, "For the One Who Departed" is a reaffirmation of the continuity and relevance of life in the face of death:

When the raging fire dies
It covers its eyes with a pall of ashes
The plantain tree is gone
Its grave composts a tribe of suckers

Who says the palm tree is dead
Who says the palm tree is dead?
Can't they see its spear
Stalking the antelope of the sky?

(Horses 12)

Osundare reaffirms the Wordsworthian insight that remembrance is an intimation of immortality. The remembrance of our beloved dead perhaps even more fundamentally privileges the implication of all humans in the commonality of the mortal condition, even in its reaffirmation of the immortality of the human spirit. The natural regenerative cycle is the poet's prime metaphor for contemplating the mystery of transfiguration in the human cycle. Life does not end in death; it is instead revived through that experience. In Osundare's schema in *Horses of Memory*, political memory is clearly appraised as crucial, but only in full awareness of the teeming density that typifies the texture of the human mind. The poem "The

Forest of Your Skin," which claims particular memorability for the sexual experience in a manner reminiscent of Walt Whitman's "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City," gestures toward that manifold labyrinth. Moreover, the iterative invocation as well as mapping of the female body in the poem in terms of the physical universe—"forest / of your skin," "softening terrains," "rounded hills," "petal of heavenly valleys" (78)—links human sexuality to universal nature.

In the title poem of the volume, the density of the human mind is further highlighted. "Horses of Memory" is an incantation, a supplication of Memory as the poet's muse. Memory is diverse in its manifestations—"Spraying petals of distant flowers," "Scribbling blood into pale musings," "Speaking flairs of eloquent thunders" (*Horses* 115); it is complex in the emotions it seeks to evoke or the actions it strives to elicit; it is also, in the Wordsworthian sense, a crucial intimation of immortality by linking the present not only to the past but also to the universal unconscious through the power of recollection or remembrance—"Looking back, looking forth / Like the bridge of musing waters" (131). Memory is redemptive in its critical appraisal of the past and consequent provision of a historical consciousness that guides responsible action in the present:

The ram wanders without remembering
it becomes an instant guest of the butcherknife;
the antelope jumps into an open trap,
wondering why it left its eyes at home

The nanny goat forgets its head,
whipped countless times for repeated offences;
there is a simmering tale, still,
in the hearth of a thousand seasons

(130)

The use of the slumbering ember in a bed of ash as a symbol of immortality (characteristic of Osundare's poetry) recurs in this poem:

There are singing embers
in the rubble of yester-fires;

an ashen prophecy unbinds the Word
in crucibles of remembered visions

(129)

In both instances, the ember is associated with the work of art; indeed, Osundare discerns in the metaphor a symbol of poetry itself, resurrected, phoenix-like, to new life from the compost of ash. Words are the horses of memory which a poet rides to truth; the unbinding of the Word is thus the liberation of the poet's imagination. Inspiration, in reality, is a process of recollection and revisioning.

A work of great intensity, "Horses of Memory" is a traditional ritual chant of possession with an incantatory refrain—"Hoof-throngs on memory's trail"—and a suffusion of traditional gnomic sayings: "The desert, the desert is / the memory of the sea; / every grain there is / is memory of the drop that was" (128); "The egg, the egg, is / the memory of the hen; / every chick there is / is memory of the yolk that was" (129). The vital role of music in inducing or enhancing entrancement and the union between the initiate and the spirit invoked is also acknowledged. The drum and the cymbal carry further than the frail human voice as instruments for the invocation of the otherworldly. Drums and rattles are distinctive African instruments of possession, and a type of rattle is also attached to drums. It would seem that in this poem Osundare invokes the cymbal as emblematic of syncretic African Pentecostalism.⁸ Even more importantly, the poem's presiding imagery—horse riding—comes from the experience of spirit possession. In his study of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Christopher Balme remarks on the centrality of equestrian metaphors in the discourse of possession among the Yoruba, noting that "the notions of horse-

8. In a private correspondence, not even remotely about Osundare's work, I asked the poet on May 30, 2015: "Were cymbals, like drums, used in Yoruba rituals of spirit possession? Or do they feature specifically in Christian Pentecostal entrancement?" Osundare responded: "To the best of my knowledge, it was indigenous drums that featured in traditional rituals of possession. Cymbals came much later from the West (especially Brazil) and became part of the Pentecostal accoutrements, assuming in Africa the kind of role they played in Brazilian Santeria and Haitian voodoo. Cymbals are thus elements of the religious syncretism that undergirds Yoruba/African Pentecostalism."

manship, riding, and being 'mounted' by a spirit are integral to Yoruba spirit possession" (217). The poet-speaker's will to privation and transformation indicates recognition of the disparity between a human's incarnate nature and disincarnate purity, and thus the need to completely subjugate that human nature in the striving toward transcendence. Reborn through and in the fire, the poet becomes a virtual shaman or demiurge, reconciling the antithetical elements of life:

Ride me like the fire
Joining seasons of steel
To seasons of molten laughter
Ride me, Memory. . .

(131)

"Horses of Memory" is a passionate prayer for transfiguration. In varying ways, spirit possession, poetic inspiration, and the poet's consequent power to transmute the ordinary into the timeless and strange; the permutations in the forge of memory; the audacious inscriptions of historiography; the self-renewals of the natural cycle; and political change—all exemplify the processes and forms of transformation.

The dialectic between politics and history, on the one hand, and poetry, on the other, remains pivotal in Osundare's art. The poet is engaged with history as it demonstrably clarifies the writer's vision. He is even more passionate about turning into memorable songs the often rather prosaic topical issues of the moment as they determine the weave and texture of common life and even more crucially the course of history. Yet Osundare's mode is not "verse pamphleteering," given the depth of his imaginative engagement with history.⁹ It is only to be expected that a writer with Osundare's enormous talents and ambition should seek to have his voice resonate beyond his time and place—that is, in his own metaphor, that his

9. Regarding "Elegy of the Wind" as Okigbo's last major poem, Obumsele considers it rather ironical that poems like "Hurrah for Thunder" and "Thunder Can Break" (which he described as mere "verse pamphleteering," given that the level of Okigbo's imaginative engagement with the linguistic medium is rather slight in those two poems) are often cited as models of Okigbo's newly achieved lucidity and public commitment and are reputed to have been influential in the development of Nigerian poetry (17).

songs of the season may remain songs of every season. Osundare's aim, consistent with that of many other writers interested in history and politics, is to strive to bring the social under a gaze to which timeless mythical experiences are familiar. In the best of his poetry, his steadfast demonstration is the possibility of the visionary exploration of the topical for the multiformity and density of human experience.

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