
A Review of A. N. Akwanya's *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems*, Kraft Books: 2012

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Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems is Akwanya's third and by all means fattest collection of poems, containing altogether over sixty poems spread out across seven sections. There is 'Mother Teresa of Calcutta' in which the persona is in amazed if worshipful wonderment at a certain elusive facility in Mother Teresa by which she seems to have carried out an otherwise forbidding life 'cause' almost as if without effort, as if she has been 'created/ for [the] cause;/ for this cause given three or four times/ the normal size of soul' (lines 2-4) with the result that 'in the face of the assignment/ no decision need be made/ no thought exercised' (9-11). But the almost incredible reposing of the facility in her is not all the fascination for this persona; even more *wonderful* to him is 'that it be granted a Mother Teresa/on moving on/ to have impassioned another/ with a double share of that unmeasured soul' (54-57). And this persona's lingeringly enchanted tone may have already given him

away as this one *impassioned*, Elisha-like, *with a double share of that unmeasured soul*.

There is an anguished anxiety of roughshod displacement in 'Vision and Mission,' and perhaps because it is such a dreadful and mind-racking consciousness, the ultimate gesture is to banish the thought:

Better not think of the day
of all the measurement by
theodolites
and hardy pathfinders;
the roar
of great earth movers
and the fatal charge
for trees unconscious
of their history,
their burden,
the unsigned peace they tower
over' (last stanza).

The 'conspiracy' in 'A Statistic' may already also pertain to the 'bats' of 'Vision and Mission,' for the relentless voracious 'encroachment' that ultimately displaces the bats from 'their undisputed property'

well parallels the ‘statistic[ization]’ of the ‘poor’ in ‘A Statistic’ with a similar roughshod unconcern, already signalled perhaps by the flippant indifferent unnominality of ‘No one’ who will not take notice of his victim, no matter ‘how many countless numbers of them,’ no matter if they ‘grow to eighty percent/ or ninety’. This unheard cry of a sufferer subsists in ‘Footprints Indelible’ though there is an underlying sense throughout that this cry is unheard, *cannot* be heard because the inflictor of the suffering is the primordial elements themselves. The result is that any manner of confrontation will quite amount to hitting one’s head against a wall to use the Underground Man’s idiom, that all the sufferer may do is *hope* that the ‘killer winds/ hav[ing] leave/ to do another try’ (50-52) will ‘perhaps finally dislodge [his] blight’ (53-54). But even this hope is itself already weighted with dreadful foreboding, as the hearing of the hitherto unheard cry, the oil-land in this instance, even for the brief duration in the third stanza unleashes catastrophe and adversity to the bafflement of oil-land:

Though your prayers have been
heard

and ferocious winds unleashed
to drive far
and scatter
the evil brooding over you
they have levelled
whole towns in faraway places
so that you have watched
dumbfounded,
uncomprehending;
the Highs too have wandered
all over the north
spreading draught
and chill
and misery
and have given new traction to
the Sahara’s
southern surge (Stanza 3).

The same sort of hope is probably what is nursed by the ‘parents’ in ‘Best Names’ in regard to the ‘delicate bundle/ which served for some months/ as the centre of their world’ (Stanza 2), being so invested with ideality, a cushioning shock-absorbent facility which is more in the unreality of what *may* be than the reality of what *is*.

The brevity of youth, the relentless advancement of ageing, and the curse ultimate of mortality are some of what exercises poetic impulse in ‘Losses Yet to Go’ as ‘gullies [are]/ eroded on either side/ by countless smiles’ over the rapidly accumulating years, while in ‘Home

is a Feeling' the exhausting terror of 'run[ning] (line 8) from 'hunting parties/ suspicious of your antelope limbs' (4-5) manifests a like nagging awareness of this life-threat. There is a laborious quest for 'refinement building to perfection' in 'Under Rule' with the frail supineness of 'the merely human'—another arguable modality of life-threat—eternally threatening the accomplishment of the 'settled existence' in 'The Human Spirit' where gratitude, a sentiment encountered already in 'Losses Yet to Go,' reappears, now as a category of industry which 'folks' live, love and toil at (line 16), all the time in an apparently losing yet grimly defiant struggle against life-threat, against the yoke of mortality.

In 'The Wrestler' age has already wreaked havoc on youth *wasting* his *muscles* (stanza 3); with the result that 'the wily old reaper' can no more take him seriously as he well might 'in his days,' if he charges 'these days' bare-handed for 'a tumble in the sand'(line 3). The putting out of 'both hands' (18) despite that all the 'energy' left is just what 'he could charge/ bare hands with' is itself a degree of resistance of age's rather peremptory enfeeblement of youth, a level of confrontation of the

monster, even if this is always already impotent, or as 'Back on Track' has it 'pathetic' (21). So that 'to fight down laughter's/ splutter behind averted hands' (19-20) at these feeble 'attempts/ in old age/ to get the good old terms/ back on track' (21-24) amounts to an act of generosity and benevolence (17-18). For otherwise this resistance, the attempt to get the 'good old terms' back on track is enough grounds 'more keen than the Christ's sword' (4-5) for the unleashing of domestic strife and division.

But the lure of this pathetic attempt may be premised on the sort of firm belief in 'This World was Made for Us' that 'this world was made for us' (line 4), indeed 'exists for us' (6). At other times as in 'Right to Life' it may spring from a haunting horror of a dreaded 'thunder/ spoken to the stricken ear alone' (stanza 2) that drives the persona to double anxiety and fearfulness. But it is in this poem also that the persona discovers from this anxious horror 'as nothing else could/ what [he] secretly long[s] for/ some device of magic or science to make' these necessary fatalities of his being and existence a mere 'folly richly instructed/ day by day' (Stanza 4). It may equally, in the light of 'Best Things' at least, derive from a

sense of the fervent temporality of these things, nominated 'best' in the parlance of the poem, no matter how much diligence, and tender care, and sleepless nights invested in the forestalling of their frustrating impermanence. This sense of the demoralising frustration of transience is heightened in 'I Know at Once' perhaps because now it is not so much the longevity of 'best things' at stake as that of the human subject himself, with his acute consciousness of 'the self/you want saved/beyond now/ beyond culture' (stanza 3), a *self* he is ready to displace even into fictionality if that is the price of rendering it eternal:

ah,
to climb into one now,
enfold my self
within its pages,
form my self into its characters
in indelible black!' (lines 35-40)

The career of capricious and rampaging evil, material and moral, in the guise often of murderous intolerance whether theocratic or secular is the charm of poetic impulse in some of the poems in the collection. And it may be artificial as in 'The Difference,' 'Twenty-first Century Civilization' or 'Adult

Troubles' where the toddler-persona craning his neck to the point of dizziness from being so intent on glimpsing the 'unseeing eyes' of those busy with technological and scientific advancements, is rudely earthed by votaries of a grim god whose appearance coincides with 'endless [non]peace' blighting every *aspiration* and *difference* in its intolerant unaccommodating shadow; or it may be elemental as in 'Conversation with Myself,' 'Sufficient for the Day,' 'Existences Greater than Ours,' or 'Democracy.'

There is the bewildering uncertainty at the inscrutable workings of the elements and Providence in some other of the poems, notably 'Seasonal' and 'Easter I;' and the paradoxical often self-debilitating processes of very 'civilization' itself in 'Easter II.'

oh, to have squelched like a
cricket
under the rampant boots of the
beginner and sustainer of
civilization.

In a number of the poems, the phenomenon of death is the poetry's enchantment: the ambitious if daring optimism looking to its ultimate defiance in

'Last Enemy' for instance. But to the extent that this optimism is equally mutinous and recalcitrant to the customarily nonnegotiable ordinations of Providence it must be accounted Faustian, which means already the occultation of its innate self-defeatism. In 'A Dream' the terror is of the human personage 'finding' himself eagerly 'awaited' by the dreadful phenomenon, its 'mysteries' offered quite 'forthrightly' to his utter bewilderment and horrification, especially as he has been led to nurse a 'hope' that all 'unprovided for effort will be mounted/ to save [his] last gasp' ('Alive or Dead'). In 'Bird of Passage' death is perceived as the frustrating signal of the futility and sheer vanity of very life itself and all its endeavours—called not with envy 'earth-bound compensations' in 'When You Grow Old and Knowing'—the fatal factor of levelling everything sublime and base alike to the *pointlessness and vacuousness* of 'a-bsolute equality.' Which is arguably the logic of the persona's passionate longing in 'When You Grow Old and Knowing' that the 'lad retain '[un]like all the rest of us' his craving and striving for the 'clouds,' perhaps because this is one endeavour that does not ultimately prove futile nor pointless.

But is this not precisely because the kind of occupation here is in principle unattainable as opposed to 'our earth-bound compensations/ and dissipations'?

The present is contrasted to the 'past/ comfortable and cosy' as a nameless arbitrary dread in 'Terror Anonymous,' and the desperate desire is to go to this 'past' or else 'divert' oneself by 'rage and tears and throwing of stones,' a miserable enough rebellion as 'glacial fear' nonetheless goes on 'eating/ and slowly grinding your soul to dust.'

The vision of perversion and evil is as 'outrage'—political opportunism, religious bigotry, the vulgar obscenity of war—in 'There Comes a Time' and 'Amnesty.' Their tenacious viciousness and capacity to terrorize and agitate the human element is not just in the corporeal pain and privation but also in the pervasive 'randomness' ('There Comes a Time') of their operations 'leaving out lulls altogether,' not 'following expected patterns' ('Amnesty'). Yet, the singularly demoralizing intensity of 'Amnesty' is that here even 'God' so long subsistent as the sole infallible factor of retaining if only a wishful aura of moral stability seems too to have become overwhelmed by and subsumed in the sheer

preponderance of the depravity and moral confusion:

Today
a sacker of a rebellious Arab city
receives a woman's threat
of God's anger!

What a pure, innocent babe
Dostoevsky would have shot
back!

If you were God
where would you start? (lines 48-
55)

And might not the peculiar fortune of the 'chap' of 'Visitant on Tiptoe' be that somehow in his own cosmos this sole factor of retaining the aura of equilibrium still abides, 'whose...hands... broke his fall/ snatched back [a nearly miscarried] play/ from disaster'? Which is not to say that this fortune of survival is any happier than the misfortune of those who know consummate catastrophe. For it does not go unattended by *agitation* and *silentterror* (VII. Survived). For Providence retains its bewildering awesomeness in beneficence as much in malignancy; at any event it manifests in either aspect as randomly, and indifferently. And though those who may happen to

have been 'passed over/ without comment;/ for no reason' ('There Comes a Time') by the seemingly severer providential visitations such as the survivor-chap of 'Visitant on Tiptoe' has—his whole career is a veritable display of being 'fed more than once/ into the gaping mouth of a crocodile/ and withdrawn/ just at the closing of the powerful jaws: he loses his way almost irrecoverably in a forest; he is fed 'strong disinfectant' by 'an impish maid' and recovered luckily again by 'the man with the scorpion's remedy;' he is 'nearly taken in...war' and then again 'narrowly misse[s]' the fatal lot ('Visitant on Tiptoe')—might be more inclined to reckon *existence fair and just* ('There Comes a Time), and perhaps for that account themselves happier, it would still be a lopsided summation of the case. For it cannot be in the last analysis that survival here is any less sever a lot than non-survival; the fairness and justness of existence might turn out eventually to be much more in the unvarying irregularity and arbitrariness than the variety of the lots. Anyhow it is the survivor who bears all the burden of memory, vital and rancorous, of 'fear of death' (II. So Long Ago), of loss of dear ones, of the *shoddy* memorials staged for these, and the cruelly



AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING
 NUMBER 53, 01 JULY 2015
 ISSN 0331-0566

tantalizing visions of their disembodied apparitions that 'were over before he was minded to take [them]/ by the hand' leaving the survivor with all the bitter agony of unaccomplishment; of 'the silent terror' of 'something' that may have been 'missed,' something so delicate that it dictates the utmost

caution to the 'visitant' who must return only on 'tiptoe,' seeing that

nothing of those days
 must be shifted
 from under the dust
 settled over them... (VII.
 Survived)