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Fax: 0234-042-770981 E-mail: okike21@aol.com

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An African Journal of New Writing

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Poetry	Contents	Page
Don Burness	Lament for Innocent	
	Obidiegwu	1
Chukwudi Njoku	The Words of Yesterday	8
	The Power of the Story	10
	The Harmattan is Like Us	12
	Suicide	16
	Old Woman	17
Francis I. Ede	Lizzy	82
 Stories		
Ozioma Onuzulike	Death of a Refugee Boy	38
Chinedu Ene-Orji	The Honourable Member	57
 Essays		
George Nyamndi	<i>Bate Besong's Requiem for the Last Kaiser: A Promethean Reading</i>	18
A.N. Akwanya	Orthodoxy in African Literary Criticism: Need for a New Beginning	44
 Interview		
J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada	Interview with Isidore Okpewho	62
 Book Review		
Chinyere Ngonebu	<i>Blind Expectations</i>	83
Chika Nwankwo	<i>Not Yet African: The Long Voyage Home</i>	90
Chukwudi Anthony Njoku	Recreating a Master Craftsman: A Review of Ezenwa Ohaeto's <i>Chinua Achebe: A Biography</i>	108
 Art		
C.D Ekong	Cover page	
Notes on Contributors		114

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DON BURNES

Lament for Innocent Obidiegwu

In Obodoukwu, in the yard of flame of the forest, not far from the tennis courts, bee-eater perches, looking around -

Where is Inno Oyim?

In the hills above Onitsha, within sight of the great river at the Ikenga Hotel, friends gather, looking around -

Where is Inno Oyim?

At the tennis club, where iroko servers and volleyers stood tall in Nigerian tennis, where Inno and his sons, Joseph and George, played, the players, looking around -

Where is Inno Oyim?

In city and village, from Awka to Akokwa, fellow traders speaking of Inno and his *chi* of honour and decency, his *chi* that refused to bow to the new gods that have ravaged the soul of Nigeria. This is what our village taught us - to be worthy of ancestors. Ordinary people, looking around -

Where is Inno Oyim?

Far from Nigeria, Inno's American friend, *onye ocha*, who walked amidst flame of the forest and bee-eater, who played

tennis in Obodoukwu and Onitsha, remembering conversations
where masqueraders of memory, where *uli* artists of Nri and
Ugonabo wrestled with the old and the new, where language
paraded, *onye ocha* laments -

Where is Inno Oyim?



OZIOMA IZUORA**Evidence**

My friends call me Evi. I am Evi Okoye, a final year medical student. Everybody says I have a lovely name, albeit, unusual, for the part of Nigeria I come from. Funnily, hardly any of them bothers to ask what my full name is.

Evi is short for Evidence. Yes, my parents, my father, to be exact, named me Evidence. I am the evidence of all sorts of contradictory attributes. Of faithfulness and faithlessness. Of love and hatred. Of passion and cold bloodedness. A lot more I could name, if I cared to.

But I'll answer your question, my sweetheart, since you cared to ask. Not like many a village woman who got their answer without asking questions; or many a neighbour who generated a story that satisfied the curiosity of those who looked up to them to know about my origin.

You know my brothers and you're right to wonder how I fit in with them. They are dark, really dark. The richness of their mahogany contrasts sharply with my paleness. The darkness of their eyes, a thousand miles from my blue. So you wonder.

I am the last of a family that has five children in it. I could pass to the uninitiated eye as white. Yet, my mother was a full-blooded Nigerian. Oh, she was fair and pretty. So fair you'd almost think she was an albino. But she could never make a blue-eyed baby with my father, a man of such intolerably possessive dark genes.

That's how I came to be called Evidence.

My mother had won an award sponsored by the British

Council, to do a diploma in epidermology. She was a nurse at the Teaching Hospital at the time.

The council had a policy against giving awards to single ladies. Many a lady had either absconded on setting foot on the British soil or got married to anyone who had a right of stay, and never came home to be useful to the government for whom the council had undertaken the burden of training them.

Married women were preferred, especially if their husbands had engaging means of livelihood or ones so lucrative it would be unprofitable to abandon altogether. The council could never be sure with the men. With women, they always knew they were taking chances. The deciding factor in each case was whether the benefitting country realized just how much they were indebted to the British Council for. If the Nigerian government begged for it long enough, the council would count that as one more feather to its cap and send off one more lucky devil.

Now, my mother had four sons. Any married woman who could boast of a son was sure to come back. Her place in her husband's family was fairly stable. With four sons, the likes of my mother were prize cows. She was sure to come back! All the council had to worry about was whether or not she was pregnant at the time of departure. The British government was getting damned tired of acquiring citizens by default. They'd even started to snigger about the American government that claimed as citizens, even children born in their air space of some undesirable "barbarian" parents!

There was no doubt in the council official's mind after persistent questioning, that my mother was, indeed, sure of her last menstrual date and could not be unknowingly pregnant. Satisfied, they'd given her clearance to collect a visa off the British High Commission. Never mind that she couldn't pick an airline of her choice. It was clearly B-Cal. She had to be grateful, after all, she would still have chosen it if it came down to a choice between Nigerian Airways and B-Cal. Patriotism was for the comfortable. For those, also, whose governments had

welfare policies. A government that only begged from other governments would be asking for too much if it so much as muted the idea of patriotism.

My mother was billed for a one-year diploma. She went for it. She behaved herself and came back exactly on schedule, one year later. She was a dream British Council fellow. While there, she mixed so well, so eager was she to drink in all of the tenets of the glorified British heritage. She came back, in some aspects, much more conservative than your average Briton. Even her tutors had not intended for her to have taken them quite as seriously as she had. But my mother was an exemplary student, so in all things, she practised what she preached and what she was taught to preach.

Her stiff upper lip, for instance, was so unbending that it took little for me to start an unending spate of chain reactions.

So you ask, how did I come about?

My mother's class was a balance of all self-respecting and contributing member countries of the British Commonwealth. As expected, various shades of both colours and opinions came into play. As these ambassadors had not gone all that way for a purely Commonwealth conference, a handful of the promising generation of Britons were occasionally thrown in to rub minds with the aided countries. Hopefully, they would help to bend the minds of these "rustics" towards the more desirable pear shape.

Excellent students immediately caught on. My mother did. There was Tony Mathews. He, with his girlfriend, Fiona, sought to immerse my mother into the mainstream of British upper class respectability. Mother attended cocktails and dinners in fine restaurants. Or visited families. And paid heavily to visit interesting countryside. Not for my mother all those second-hand clothes and shoes that fascinated her peers who always checked up the current rate of the naira to the dollar before they spent a pound. If she couldn't name the shop in some elitist conversation - the kind she now delighted in - she was not interested.

My mother was proper. So proper that she had thrown away any item that would have constituted excess luggage when she was returning. She shunned all those shameless Nigerian women whose hand luggage were so enormous they would render flight impossible for the big bird, but for the foresight of aeronautical engineers. When she got down at the International Airport in Nigeria, you could pick out my mother from the furthest end of the waiting lounge. She stood apart from the rest, her dressing and gait screaming prim and proper!

Her luggage was brief and to the point. Not for my mother, the endless trips to clear goods and bribe a thousand and one officials of the Customs and Excise Department and those of the Immigration. The police and the army too. Then the local security at the ports. Etc, etc. She was not a business woman. Anyone who used their stipend as they should was not expected to be able to afford enough to buy anything that was worth shipping. My mother was not greedy.

This she pointed out to the endless throngs of people who realized then that they were our friends and took out time to come and welcome her back. Many of them had not deemed it necessary to disturb our family unduly in my mother's absence. And anyway, it was necessary to give honour to whom it was due. For this, at least, I praised my mother. She had dealt them a blow I wish I could have dealt them myself.

The endless courtesy call soon ended. Name-calling began. My father was in the middle of all this. He was undecided whether to pitch camp with my mother or to give in to consanguineous sentiments and stay with his relations. Some of my mother's too. Grandma, for one, did not understand why her daughter should visit the very home of 'George' and let her go to her grave in rags! There were also mutual acquaintances of my parents! Mother remained adamant. In the end, my father had to doff his cap to her. But that in itself was belittling: Mother always got her way in everything.

She had had no doubts when this scholarship thing started. The questionnaires sent by the British Council were filled

in by my father. But it was my mother who suggested the words. Well, wasn't my father free to reject suggestions? But he did not. It was not that Mother was bossy. My father would be the first one to tell you she wasn't. She was just lucky father didn't object too much. She merely filled in gaps. Mother was soon bursting out of her clothes, obviously pregnant.

'Ah', people speculated, 'one for the road!'

'A gist from Obodo Oyibo!' How right.

I came right on schedule! Lovely, bubbly-blue-eyed bundle!

'My bundle of joy!', cried my father, really meaning it. 'My lovely daughter. The crown of my life! The evidence of my perpetual torture. No one will deny me the pleasure of the last laugh! I shall name you Evidence!' This was the one evidence my mother could not contest. And finally, my father had his way. My mother lived with her conscience. And her stiff upper lip!

CHUKWUDI NJOKU**The Words of Yesterday**

The words of yesterday haunt
Us, their permanence and enduring
Echo make us bite
Our lips, for the words of yesterday
Brought us here

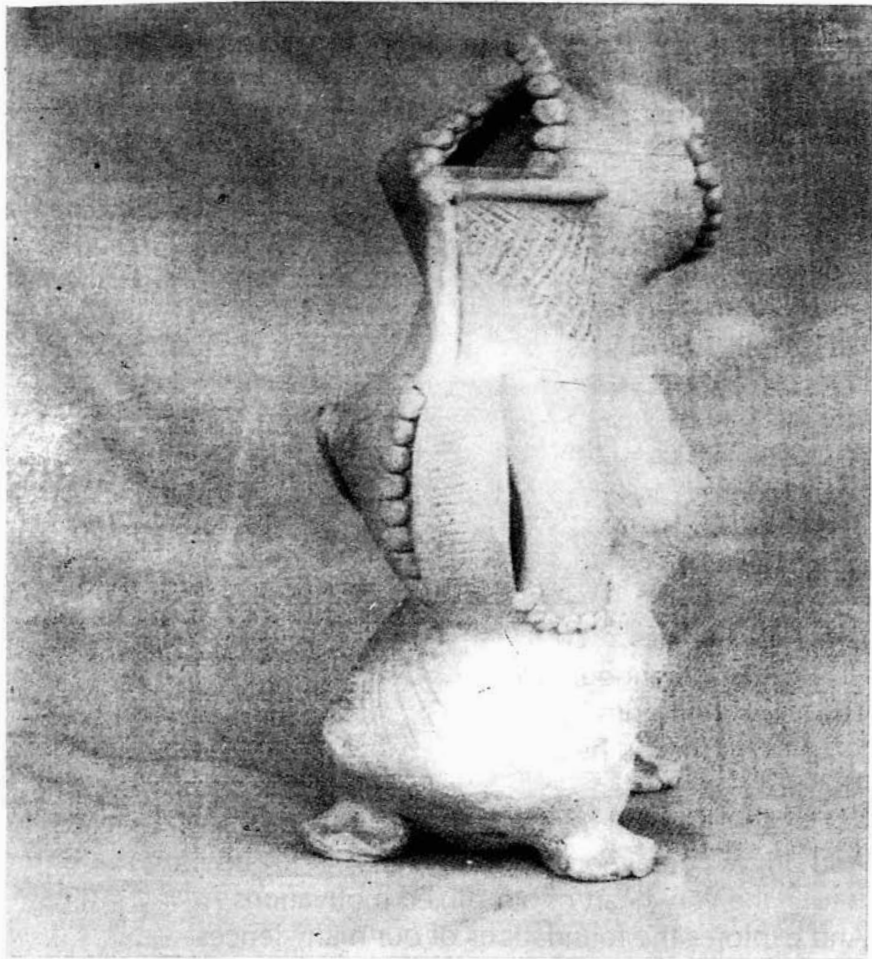
The laughters of yesterday make
Us cringe and cry, and
The cries of yesterday make us
Laugh, laugh at *their*
Recurrent ignorance and
Short sightedness

In today's words
We are laying out the folded
Contours of the laughters of tomorrow
We are shaping the curve of
The cries of tomorrow
The undulating graph of
The frowns of tomorrow

It will be a cry
For *us*
It will be a laughter
To our arrogant foibles

For we are still trading
And bartering
The words of yesterday.

(Leuven, 19 November, 2000).



METAMORPHOSIS

The Power of the Story

The power of the story

Is that

It walks like us

Eats like us

Runs like us

Believes like us

Is betrayed like us

Is deceptive like us

Cries like us

Doubts like us

Dances like us

Dreams like us

Struggles like us

Fears like us

Perspires like us

Laughs like us

The story invades

Our neighbourhood

The story steals into

Our locked hearts

The story pries open

Our tangled minds

And drives courageously through

the very heart of our mixed motivations

And explores the foundations of our many fences

The story is a snapshot

Of the intimacy of our bedrooms

An open door revealing the piles of files in our office

A window peering into

Our study and the ridges of our farms
 A keyhole view of our family,
Our country, our school, our teacher, our own father,
 Our friends, our myriad enemies
For the story is our photo album
 and the diskette copy of our memory
There is me, and there you
 Peeping out of every story

The power of the story
Is that
It is us

It is us wearing
 A different name
It is us living
 In a different place
It is us occupying
 A different space
It is us
It is us
It is us

And yet,
And yet, my brothers and sisters
Let us pretend
Yes, we must pretend
It is fiction.

(Leuven, 19 November, 2000.)

The Harmattan is Like Us

The harmattan is on its annual carnival
Visiting every hut
With that broad smile
And those sprightly legs
And, with practised hands, sweeping
The village pathways, soothingly caressing
My hair, peeping through my wrappers
And touching every pore of me
With that tender love unique to this lovely' eager
Visitor, blowing
Gently into the glowing fireside and
Roasting my corn and pears, listening
Attentively to our fireside gossip

The children are out on the village
Paths, clad in their nakedness, spreading out
Their hands like the princely eagle gliding through the sky
Eyeing the dry bushes for timid prey
Their eyes shut to a slit, allowing
The harmattan breeze to massage their exposed bodies
Their hearts full of throaty songs

Funny creature, the harmattan is full
Of play like a spoilt child. Sometimes, its temper
Changes swiftly, and its lashes are violent
Like those of our elementary school headmaster
Filled with sharp sand grains ... then, we, children, must
Stand still and be patient with its violent temper
For in a short while it is peaceful again, soothing, loving
Caring, tender, as if asking for our forgiveness

For its short temper
And occasional naughtiness

The harmattan understands us
For the harmattan is like us
Full of goodness and full
Of treachery
The harmattan is like us
With sharp eyes and keen ears
With a tender heart and an intelligent
Head

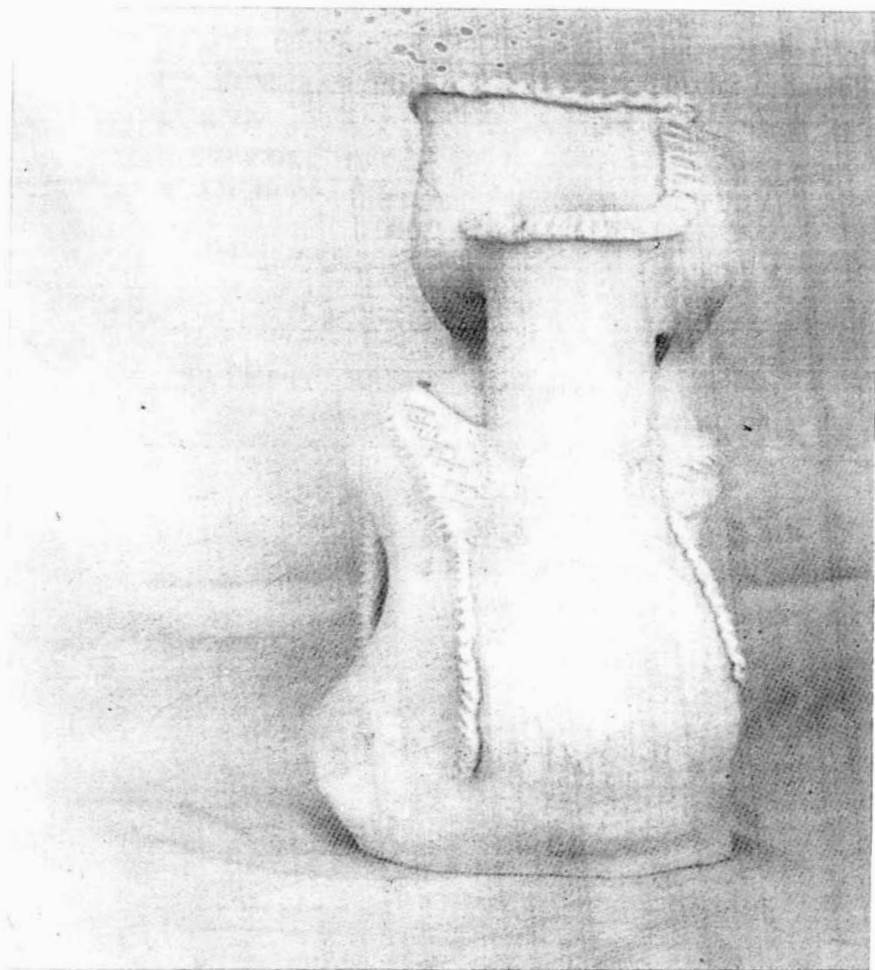
The harmattan is like us
Full of kindness and full of craftiness
The harmattan is like us
Understanding and unpredictable
Plain and mysterious
Coming and going, coming
And going
A member of our community and a member
Of that other community from where it comes
To us and to which it returns after visiting us

Sometimes, I wonder
Does the harmattan have a home?
Is he or she a nomad, roving from place
To place, doing the same things she does here to wherever
She goes
Or does she change her character
According to people she meets?
I never stop wondering, is she or he
Like the masquerades
Appearing in their seasons, colourful, full of life,
Full of song, and when the season is gone, retiring to the land
Of the aged spirits to await
another season of pomp and pageantry?
For the harmattan is always *ukwuoma*, and meets

us when the barns are full, full especially of the delicious corn
for the harmattan dances with gusto
for the harmattan has many songs and tunes
and you can hear the pipes join its song
with their soulful flutes
and you can hear the stately palms
swaying their heavy heads and long hairs gently
in tune with the irresistible rhythm of the cheerful harmattan
and you can hear the birds joining this happy band
weaving in their unending melodious love-songs
and lullabies
for the harmattan seems to urge us all to laugh
and postpone, if we cannot forget, our worries
for even lonely elders have a rich smile creasing their wrinkled
faces when the harmattan blows its horn and roves
our neighbourhood with its measured gaiety
and sometimes, its attractive carelessness ... for the harmattan
has a habit of spreading fire,
for sport or out of treachery, I do not know
all I know is that some people cry out their hearts
in this recklessness and insensitive hobby of the harmattan
the harmattan is like us
going and coming
coming and going
going and coming
is it the same harmattan every year?
I know not
It may be the father this year
And the mother next year
Or one of the sons or daughters in another year
For each harmattan has a different face
And different temperament
But they all resemble
For the harmattan is like us
Coming and going
And, I suspect, the harmattan

Has a soft spot for us
Coming and going
For the harmattan is like us.

(-Leuven, 6 June, 2000.)



UNTITLED

Suicide

Every door
Told his worried steps
"Hang in there!"
And he finally did.

(-Leuven, 1 June, 2001.)

Old Woman

Trembling hands clutching a stick
Trembling with responsibility
Stepping gingerly
On shifting grounds
Bearing the weight of a life time

(-Leuven, 30 December, 2001.)

GEORGE NYAMNDI***Bate Besong's Requiem for the Last Kaiser:
A Promethean Reading***

I. OF ACADEMIC ESCAPISM

Literary intellectuals have been able to purchase a relatively untroubled and marginally comfortable life by keeping their mouths shut about politics, by insulating scholarly and critical discussion of literature from any serious connections to the contradictions within the social formation. The academic study of literature has become a discipline, a profession, the condition for the possibility of which is the rigorous exclusion of the non-literary from its discourse.

It is with this observation that Sprinker (*Diacritics*, Fall 1982: 57-58) prefaces his critical assessment of one of America's leading Marxist theoreticians, Fredric Jameson, and of his epochal work *The Political Unconscious*. We observe in Sprinker's statement the literary intellectuals' aversion for attitudes that rock the societal boat. They have earned for themselves by varying artifices, a retreat padded by innocuous cerebral indulgences. About life and the cruel games ordering it, they have but precious little to say. If they must venture out of their sanctimonious towers and risk a statement, then such a statement must settle imperceptibly in the main flow of the tempers of the moment.

It is an interesting detail that Sprinker commences his study of a Marxist, therefore active, thinker with an objugation of speculative academism. The purpose of this reproof is to

obtain a trading of literary priggishness for some measure of ideological fervour. Sprinker sees the literary critic as a man with a vocation to "identify the active sites of existing political struggle" (71), to ensure precisely that serious connection to the contradictions within the social formation which alone will enable his text "to play its part in political praxis" (Jameson 219). For, as Jameson makes clear, "everything is in the final analysis political" (20).

To the extent, therefore, that everything is political, academic escapism of the kind condemned by Sprinker consorts but poorly with the essence of Marxism. Because Marxist Ideology apprehends the world in conflictual terms, it has very little time for a patience with unfocused speculations, intended solely to gratify the mind. Such speculations rarely enfold the resolve, the exercise of will, which is the hallmark of prometheanism. x

One may want to know what an epistemological foray into the American brand of Marxism has to do with African drama and for that matter the drama of a Cameroonian playwright, however much he may be noted as a playwright on the continent.

If, while recognising that literature is "an essential part of the experience of a society—a way of dramatising its myths, ordering its insights and sensibility, celebrating its values" (Bradbury xi), we acknowledge equally "literature's numinous or universalising power, its strange ways of transcending the environment from which it derives" (Bradbury xi), then the community of concern between American Marxism and African theatre, Jameson and Besong shows limpidly through the vast geo-cultural divide. The distance between place and mind becomes crushed out of significance by the fraternity of intention between the two worlds and the two names.

Jameson is a Marxist thinker, Besong a marxist dramatist, one a befitting pathfinder in the other's reach for the sanctuary of Marxist ideology. To situate the ideological matrix underlying Besong's dramatic production is to resolve the fundamental

Bradbury here is in conflict with prometheanism

problem of identity.

In profiling the work of Bate Besong, the Nigerian - based critic Matumamboh says every writer is a writer in politics, but what distinguishes one writer from another is whose side of the political game he belongs to — the oppressor or the oppressed. (*West Africa* 1999:720). Matumamboh then states that "Bate Besong is a writer who unabashedly identifies with the underprivileged of society against the exploiting ruling class" (720) Besong's writings, therefore, emphasize the combative mission of the artist in a situation of unbalanced social coordinates. His own particular method consists in x-raying the "phthisic plasma" (Besong, *The Grain* 19) of society, in dismantling, so to speak, the social fabric, in order to locate the disorders in its structure. Besong is an angry playwright. His ire, always intemperate, is fired by social injustice. He refuses to be blinkered or to turn the other cheek. Instead, he lashes out, tirelessly, at those in society who mar rather than make: politicians, the bourgeoisie, administrators and the literati. He castigates their ill-doings so that a transformation can occur.

is this
engagement
all over again?

Our objective in this paper is to review Besong's image as an ideologue and aesthete so that a new status is fashioned for him which is a fitting reflection of his contribution to the drama tradition in Africa. To do this, we will investigate Prometheanism, as both an ideological and an aesthetic argument and see how our finding illumines Besong's art. We will juxtapose Prometheanism and Marxism for greater insights into Besong's world view. Finally, we will posit a view of Besong as a relevant voice in African drama and aesthetics.

ii THE PROMETHEAN PARADIGM

The dialectics of societal transformation returns the analytical discourse resolutely to the realm of Prometheanism.

Prometheus is one of the most academically visited of myths and this is so because of its almost inexhaustible potential for interpretative insights. According to Greek mythology, Prometheus, son of the Titan Iapetus, made mankind out of clay,

taught him many arts, and stole fire for him from heaven. To punish Prometheus, Zeus, king and father of gods and men, chained him to a rock in the Caucasus, where a vulture fed each day on his liver, restored regularly in the night.

The retributive import of this myth is of little moment to us. What we retain as significance is the theft of fire. This act by Prometheus engendered a number of symbols whose ontological powers suffuse creativity in a transcendental way.

Donoghue (1973) seized the occasion of the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in October 1972 to essay a typology of the imagination. This was an attempt to describe certain types of imagination active in literature. Among these was one in particular which he called Promethean. To Donoghue, imagination is central to the Promethean design. This is an important premise, because right away, it says something about the source, the mainspring, of the Promethean motivation. This motivation is lodged in the imagination. The Promethean act is not dictated by any external force but is fashioned, hatched and executed from within.

Donoghue sees the myth of Prometheus, in its simplest form, as telling a story to account for the origin of human consciousness. Prometheus stole this consciousness from Zeus and gave it as a gift to men, ostensibly in the form of fire. Since this theft, the Promethean imagination has always been defiant, theft in itself being the prototype act of defiance. This defiance at certain times expresses itself as revolution, as a mode of action which delights in tension and struggle, in the exercise of will. Conformism and immobility are thus loathsome to the Promethean imagination, an imagination which is never completely at home in the orthodoxy of a settled existence but is always restless, always insisting on transfiguring the given world until a new world rises in its place. This Promethean passion for transformation burns persistently and seems insatiable. Donoghue says that the Promethean hero is "one whose desires belong to another world than the one he inhabits, and often that other world is attested to by those desires and by nothing else at

Promethean
myths

f

f

f

f

all producible. Every movement the hero makes must first overcome custom and invent a new kind of gesture" (57) A typology of the Promethean imagination would therefore be an explication of the several ways in which men have risen above themselves by the possession of consciousness. This is the quintessence of the Promethean manifesto, the ideological framework which prompts and conditions action.

The ideological framework finds artistic expression in a certain number of aesthetic features which make the Promethean text readily identifiable. One of these aesthetic features has to do with the writer himself. He is generally an artist with a towering personality, and deadly charisma. His names often have more charismatic aura than the sum total of his works. D.H. Lawrence, Milton, Sartre, Soyinka, Ngugi: all these artists dwarf any single product of their genius.

The personality holds a strong sway over the formal nature of the text. Among its most visible influences is the truculence which Donoghue identifies between the writer and experience (20). The archetypal Promethean text is always tense, always more deeply responsive to harsh themes than to genial themes, to the arbitrary than to the reasonable (53). To these writers, writing is a revolutionary act and, one which requires a dynamic syntax, a syntax of process and fulfilment (73). They are ready to take any liberties with the language to conform it to their purpose. We therefore observe in the genuine Promethean an inclination to free his aesthetic register from normative limitations.

iii *REQUIEM FOR THE LAST KAISER*: PROMETHEAN CLAIMS.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser (1991 subsequently *RLK*) enacts the drama of an African republic, Agidigidi, under black rule. H.R.H. Baal Njunghu Akhikirikii, the conceited potentate and his coterie of sycophantic hangers-on keep the masses in a condition of misery through the ruse of demagoguery and repression. The church, the army, the police and white colonialist agents all join

the necessity
of the person
in promethean
crit.

forces with the brutal leadership to frustrate any attempt by the people to attain freedom.

The mounting suffering provokes a groundswell of protest under the brave championship of Woman, the intrepid female revolutionary leader, and progressively the tables are turned. Ahkikikrikii and his accomplices are swept away by a popular uprising and the action ends with the masses celebrating in music the birth of a new dawn. Symbolically, the play starts with Ahkikikrikii in a half-open coffin. The mood at this beginning stage is eerie, dark, violent. This first fragment ends with the coffin closing and entombing the tyrant to the accompaniment of funerary music, total darkness and then a final eclipse.

The rehearsal at the beginning becomes at the end the tragic finale for the regime. Ahkikikrikii blows off his own head after which day breaks and music permeates the air. The action has come full circle: darkness has succumbed to light, tyranny to popular governance. Throughout the struggle, light holds centre stage as the ultimate reward for victory.

Of all Besong's plays, it is in *RLK* that the Promethean temperament is most incisive. For sure, his other plays, notably *Obasinjom Warrior*, *The Death of the Most Talkative Zombie*, and *The Banquet* all provide stages upon which the playwright equally seeks a Promethean redemption for man. In all these plays, Besong "signals and boldly foregrounds what he considers obnoxious and detestable in human nature, blowing it up out of proportion in order to seize the attention of the public" (Mutamamboh, 720). Besong summons in these different productions a concern for human welfare through an impeachment of destructive forces. But this concern receives added power and immediacy in *RLK*, for it is in this play, more perhaps than in any other, that are dramatized with particular intensity the conflicts of integrity, light and primeval naivety, on the one hand, and on the other, narcissistic colonialism, corruption and the dungeon. A bridge emerges here between the redemptiveness of Prometheanism and the ideological combativeness of Marxism. And consciousness in the mortar of

this bridge, for consciousness is the one trait which the two sides of the bridge share in a fundamental way, the one trait which on either side of the bridge constitutes the launching pad towards a new (in other words, transfigured) society.

iv THE MARXIST STATEMENT

Marxist dialectics is sustained in *RLK* by a triangular construct made of (1) white colonialist agents, (2) their black bourgeois surrogates, and (3) facing the demonic pull of these two forces, the masses.

RLK dramatizes history as the chronicle of cultural aberrations. It returns to and explores that particular moment in a society's experience when European culture arrived, toppled African value systems and, in their place, planted the politics of money. Appropriately, therefore, the agents are incarnated by a French ambassador and a Swiss banker. The French ambassador bodies forth the European causality in the drama of the African situation. More particularly, he emblemizes a specific form of European influence in Africa, here the French. In him are captured the domineering cynicism, the fawning contempt and the sneering disregard that stamped the French colonial mind. To him, Africans, all of them, from the apes at the top to the wretched down below are embarrassments to nature's scheme of things. They are all 'nigger punks' (26), "insane beasts" (28). His anticommunism is as virulent as his contempt for the African native is unremitting. He views Djugashvili Stalin (a thinly-veiled reference to John Fru Ndi of the Social Democratic Front) as the head of an Evil Empire who hates god Francois Mitterand and the French. He must therefore be destroyed, and along with him, all such threats to the status quo as the national conference, "an enemy to be killed on sight" (25). As a vintage product of French capitalism and as its agent in African, the Ambassador does not miss any opportunity of planting the French flag on the slightest area of economic promise. For example, he claims the oil resources tapped by SONARA as the "oil of solidarity between civilization and Agidigidi" (25). The civilization he is referring

to here is western, but more particularly French.

The Swiss Banker, the other agent of western exploitation, is more immediately concerned with money. He shares the French Ambassador's strong hatred for communism: "Only a messiah can save this part of the Kingdom from the epilepsy of Marxist-Leninism and Stalinist catastrophes which work through oppositionist epilepsies" (7). The hatred leads the banker quite naturally to a similar condemnation of all the forms of democratic revolutionism and especially of the national conference, which he sees as a leprosy that has no place in emerging nations, and which tried leaders always avoid (24). The underlying ideological motivation for this statement is revealed by a certain number of contextual determinants. Five such determinants readily come to mind: (1) The particular emerging nation (here Cameroon) in the throes of a popular clamour for a national conference. (2) National conferences have already taken place in other emerging African nations (Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Tchad, Benin) and have demonstrated their ability to reveal malpractices and in certain cases (Congo Brazzaville and Benin) have led to the overthrow of the regime. (3) The speaker (here a Swiss Banker) is a white hawk preying on tender African economies. (4) In Cameroon, the popular call for a national conference had been summarily dismissed by the regime as *sans objet*. (5) As predators come to abuse the naivety of African leaders, European business and financial agents are always minded to confirm these leaders in their absolutist delusions.

But if the two Europeans share the same capitalist belief in matters of money and who should own it, they however show little or no readiness to do business together. In fact, they are highly suspicious of each other and their relationship is always traversed by a strong undercurrent of rivalry and mutual distrust. On balance, though, the Swiss banker appears more realistic than his French rival. He advocates democracy in the developing world as the only way out for the West, a show of pragmatism which unnerves the French Ambassador considerably, causing him to lash back nervously: "I'm not gonna leave my turf and be

jumped by another gang. And get me buster: It's your gang against mine" (27). In this game of gangs, the worsted side is neither the French nor the Swiss but Agidigidi. The masses in *RLK* are ruled by a tyrant who boasts of his godlike attributes. In his frenzied utterances at the play's opening, he says of himself, "I am the consciousness, the Temp and Heart-Throb of Iduote... I am the Universal pedagogue and Pointing Rod... I'm in all places at the same time" (1). This claim of omnipotence is also bulwarked by his associates. The political high priest Atangana considers him as a "divine master who will transfer the United Nations Headquarters to our most blessed paradise" (2).

There is something ludicrous about this portrait which only the conceited potentate himself seems not to apprehend. Even his name, Ahikikirikii, is a cornerstone in the entire satirical structure.

The real man is presented by the dramatist himself in a stage comment. "At 61 he is crazy, ruthless and immensely cunning" (22). These are the traits which the French Ambassador salutes in hailing the man as "a distinguished genius of politics"(22). This salute betrays the lopsidedness of the criteria with which the colonialists informed their support for African leaders, and by the same token unbares their causal role in much of Africa's turmoil. A mind that extols ruthlessness and cunning cannot mean well.

The man described by the Ambassador as a distinguished genius of politics is indeed a ruthless tyrant, a thief and murderous robber (70), a dwarfish thief in a messiah's robe (70). He is in the eyes of the Swiss banker, "an impenetrable negro-a drugged fool" (23).

Such a tumoured psyche naturally fathers a hideous monster of a regime. Ahkikirikii's dispensation is at once a "corrupt and tyrannical kleptocracy" (20), "a government without justice" (70), a "regime made up of the vilest rogues and traitors" (20), "a two-headed monster with four eyes of rigour and moralization" (2). The logical by-product of such a demonic set-up is a hollow propaganda which breeds distrust and is divorced

from the interests of the people, from their daily needs (3). This clique is not sustained by any sense of autonomy. They are not masters of the situation but the visible tools of western colonialist designs, "willing appendages of capitalism" (12). A reckless system such as this one naturally causes society to lose its venerableness. Agidigidi is thus said to be a country "suffering from kwashiokor" (27), "a sad country" (23) in which the passive people (33) "are without food or hope" (5). The state of decrepitude is such that "All the waters in the ocean can never clean the filth in (the) country" (8). Whatever freedom Ahkikikikii's grip spares the besieged people is but "freedom of the cage" (10). The sentinels standing watch over this cage are the church, "the staunchest ally of those who treat our workers the way they treat their exploughs" (13), and the army and the police "which behaves against its own people as if it was an army of occupation" (2).

In the story of *Promeheus Unbound* by Aeschylus, the characters Power and Violence are seen dragging Prometheus. Having been rivetted to a rock by Hephaestus, Prometheus declares solemnly that one cannot fight against the power of necessity. Fire is a necessity in man's life, for it teaches all the crafts necessary for survival. In the troubled universe of *RLK*, power and violence belong on one side, necessity and hope on the other. Over these two camps reigns static tyranny to which the two forces react differently. Whereas the regime and its mentors struggle to protect and strengthen this tyrannical status quo, the people on the other hand struggle to bring it down through a revolt. This revolt in the Promethean sense is the necessary first step in the process of self-consciousness. The masses have been held in the darkness of slavery for too long and now a new need is felt for the overthrow of this slavery.

This new need is incarnated by Woman and the student. Woman emblemizes the Promethean ideal of revolt against tyranny. It is she who provides the basic fillip to the people's cause, for she possesses a strong mind and a will of steel. The climactic exchange with Etat-Major André Abessolo, career toe-

breaker and torturer, crystallizes into focus her stout refusal to let evil have its way:

Our children won't be hungry anymore. We won't see our old folks all twisted up with the rheumatism of injustice; the water of exploitation running down their faces. We are here to destroy the robbers in paradise! They have created their own Robben Island. Their separate Amenities Acts. But soon all that will be over (21).

The picture here is of Zeus' men before Prometheus's bold stand. Hunger, injustice, and exploitation are the natural fare of a people with neither will nor hope. Like their mythical counterparts, the masses in *RLK* are deficient in combativeness. They sit and suffer. And the grimmer the outrage against them the more resigned seems their acceptance. Dr. Akonchong, one of the unemployed academics, underlines the blend of Orwellian prying and Stalinian brutishness that dogs the lives of the masses when he says it is easier to walk on water than to express one's mind in Agidigidi (37).

Woman is alone, in this atmosphere of hushed surrender, to spark off the revolt susceptible of effecting a salutary mutation in society. She has seen unbridled power and its corollary violence in action. She has observed kleptocrats create for the people a nightmare beyond even their worst dreams (26). This alliance of totalitarian oppression and daylight rape of the land has led to the logical conclusion in her mind that there can be no way for the people outside of revolutionary action (8). The courage, the daring, required to forge ahead with the revolution is fed by the looming threat of perdition. The rulers do not care for the masses. They use brute force to stay in power, with the rest of the population steeped in misery. The people are therefore left with no other option but to take change of their own destiny. This much Woman cautions: "we fool ourselves if we believe that these parasites care for us!" (58).

Picking up and giving meaning to their own lives is one way in which the people attempt to ascertain their own consciousness. Woman's inspiring leadership has caused the scales of ignorance to fall from their eyes. And the ignominies they see have stung them into revolt. They have now found a new voice and they use it to summon a speedy reparation: "Get rid of the robbers! They people must govern now! (58).

In the classical Marxist ideological scenario of *RLK*, this point of popular anagnorisis veers the final resolution into sight. The popular uprising hastens the demise of Ahkikirikikii's fatuous reign. The army, heretofore his main ally, deserts him. Assnought Ngongo, his literary exegete, commits suicide. The French Ambassador Cracker Crooker faints and (apparently) never regains consciousness. The leader's own suicide by a gunshot comes as little surprise. The people win and the Marxist ideal of popular governance is upheld. It is "Poet as Mandela" who writes the epitaph on the tombstone of Ahkikirikikii's convulsive dispensation:

"Your government has always been above the people. You've reached the pinnacle of slaughter and desolation where you mocked the memory of the slain. The people are above government! Your regime was made up of the vilest rogues and traitors" (70).

RLK celebrates the death of a potentate whose reign negated collective happiness and progress. It condemns the pernicious music of colonialism in Africa's dance of self consumption. The play is clear and conclusive in its indictment of Western materialism as the remote controller of the cataclysms in Africa. This is why it upholds nationalism as a fundamental requirement in Africa's quest for genuine freedom. Leaders of the kind portrayed in the play can only lead their countries further away from freedom because they have no care for the people's interests. Much of the play's overt didacticism is meant

complete them. However, I have a rough view of what I am going to call this one. It's likely to be called *Tidal Rage*.

J.O.J.N: What's it about?

Okpewho: It's a story set in Rivers State of Nigeria. I am moving away from the areas I am familiar with. But I have done some research on the setting. It's about the problem which people living in that area are encountering - the oil pollution, the curtailment of whatever gets down to that side, especially the dams that have been built in the upper reaches of the Niger and so on and so forth. People are suffering. I am trying to explore this suffering, again from a writer's angle. I am simply exploring the problems the people are living with. That's the broad concern of the work.

J.O.J.N: Were you attracted by the environment, like the streams and the rivers? I know that some writers purposely set their works in such environments.

Okpewho: No, I don't have a romantic view of settings. As a matter of fact, such things are not described at all. To some extent it's like *The Last Duty*. I don't speak at all. It is the characters who speak. It's an epistolary work - two characters are communicating with each other all the way through. So the entire story is told in letters. I don't speak at all, so I do not have any chance at all to describe scenery. I am not attracted by scenery, I am attracted by the problem, the kind of psychological and other stresses which operate here.

J.O.J.N: So, I begin to sense Alice Walker already, *The Colour Purple*, which is essentially epistolary.

Okpewho: I came to Ibadan in 1976 to teach. I have taught Creative Writing among other courses. About 1977, I started letting my students experiment with the epistolary novel. That was long before Alice Walker published *The Colour Purple*. Alice Walker is not an influence at all. I simply think that the epistolary novel is a very effective form of exploring the minds of people. It is in that sense that it is somewhat like *The Last Duty* because the characters are allowed to speak and they give us the benefit of their minds, their thinking, their views, their own descriptions of what goes on.

J.O.J.N: What of Mariama Bâ?

Okpewho: Bâ's is one long letter. Characters in her work don't exchange letters. The one letter is so long that it becomes the story itself.

J.O.J.N: Thank you.

Okpewho: You are welcome.

FRANCIS I. EDE**Lizzy**

Lizzy

In beauty and kindness lies the lure

Like a sprouted tendril after the sun

Lizzy

Sweet, enduring and captivating

Like the nectral fragrance that spellbinds
the butterfly

Lizzy

The sight of you lights

The candle of my heart

And your nearness inflames it

Lizzy

In the sanctimonious shrine of your love

I supplicate, enthralled in its reflective glow

of purity and free flow like INEWE unmindful of its course.

