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THE NIGERIAN LITERARY ARTIST AND HIS SOCIETY*

by

R.N. EGUDU

In a very significant sense, there has always been an uneasy relationship (with varying degrees of seriousness in different places and at different times) between the artist and his society; and it seems to me that the current argument on the proper role of the African artist is part of an age-old tradition in which the artist is continually being required, by society, to justify the social relevance of his art. One might note that as early as Plato, the artist was viewed suspiciously as a sort of moral hazard, a poor imitator who, because his medium is several removes from reality, can impair the reason and harm the good with his 'inferior degree of truth.' In Plato's opinion, the artist has no business in the well-ordered Republic unless he can show that there is "a use in poetry as well as a delight."¹

It was because the artist-dramatist was thought to be doing a moral disservice to his society that playhouses in England were closed down in 1642, and ordinances made in 1647 and 1648 "ordering players to be whipped and hearers to be fined."² The zealous Puritans of the time saw the players and playhouses as disseminating disease and ungodliness, and as dwelling "amid incest, horrors, and perversities."³ By the Victorian era, the doctrine of 'moral aesthetic' had become the principal yardstick for assessing all literary works. To the traditional Victorians, art lies between religion and hygiene, and hygiene meant the health of the body politic. They insisted that the artist's first duty should be to communicate, and that the substance of his message must necessarily be of social and moral significance.

It was partly in reaction to this persistent demand for moral and ethical dimensions in literary works that in the

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last two decades of the nineteenth-century a movement of decadence set in, one that sought to cultivate difficult literature simply for the satisfaction of pure taste, leaving the "satisfaction of common taste to journalists and commercial artists."⁴ This was the art for art's sake movement which insisted on the "autonomy of art and artist, the rejection of didactic aim, and the refusal to subject art to moral or social judgment."⁵ For the artists of this group, art is so independent of common morality that it becomes immoral and so remote from subject matter that it becomes substanceless. In their opinion, "good art is static, above desire or loathing; bad is kinetic - either pornographic or didactic."⁶ And according to Arthur Symons, one of the leading figures of the movement, the ideal of Decadence was "to fix the last fine shade" which is "the quintessence of things."

Thus the artist left the middle class and the popular audience and dwelt in some ivory tower, becoming an exile in his own society. His works, meanwhile, began to generate in many people a condign sentiment of revulsion; the "readers and the ruling class led (him) to the gates of the city and sent him along."⁷ And the alienation of the artist from the society became complete. One can say that most contemporary Western artists have never quite returned from this exile. As Ezra Pound sees it, the artist is likely to remain exiled, broken, spoken against, mistrusted and thwarted.⁸

What is the significance of this to the position of the Nigerian literary artist in his society? What good, if any, has he got to offer besides the intellectual pleasure or aesthetic satisfaction which can be taken for granted since it is the eternal essence of his profession? These are some of the questions which this paper proposes to discuss and place in perspective, and illustrations will be taken from some of the works of Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, V. Chukwuemeka Ike and J.P. Clark.

It seems to me that the Nigerian literary artist, whatever else he may have embarked upon doing, has assiduously applied himself to his social responsibilities. He has reflected in his works constructive social commitment with considerable seriousness and striking vision. In our society, the artist can be seen as an important guardian of social justice, a barometer of our moral climate, and a disciple of truth.

The foremost Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, has remarkably shown the artist's ability to dissect the present social situation with a view to predicting the future. His political novel, *A Man of the People*,⁹ is, if anything, a study in political crimes and social injustice, anti-intellectualism and unreason, and a study in that schematic self-annihilation which according to the novelist characterised the first Nigerian Republic.

In this frightful novel - frightful because of its brash recreation of dumbfounding truths - the young revolutionary intellectual, Odili Samalu, stands for intellectual awareness, social justice, reason, and moral consciousness; while Chief, the Honourable M.A. Nanga, who is also 'Doctor' in anticipation of an honorary doctorate degree promised him by an American university, is the very embodiment of mediocrity, political unreason, social injustice, and moral torpidity. He is a hypocrite who claims that he finds being a Minister the unhappiest experience, and yet would give anything to retain the post; a rogue who extorts the proverbial 'ten percent commission' on every foreign loan; a lecher part of whose ministerial desire is to indulge his passion; a machiavelian schemer who destroys his opponent in a bid to be returned unopposed. He is a brazen-faced politician who will make a virtue of his irrationality in a self-mocking confession; he advises Odili, his opponent: "leave the dirty game of politics to us who know how to play it." (p. 133) He is one of those mis-leading leaders who, according to Maxwell Kulamo, another revolutionary intellectual, "were ash-mouthed paupers five years ago" but "had become near-millionaires under our very eyes." (p. 139)

A government that is made up of people like Chief Nanga and his colleague, Chief Koko who organized the instant death of his opponent, Maxwell, a government that is composed of such blood-thirsty bigots should expect nothing better than an ignominious dismemberment. Thus according to Odili: "what happened was simply that unruly mobs and private armies having tasted blood and power during the election had got out of hand and ruined their masters and employers." And subsequently, continued Odili, "the army obliged us by staging a coup . . . and locking up every member of the Government. The rampaging bands of election thugs had caused so much unrest and dislocation that our young Army Officers seized the opportunity to take over. We are told Nanga was arrested trying to escape by canoe dressed like a fisherman." (pp. 162 and 165)

The author neatly rounds off this diagnostic and prophetic novel by passing a final verdict on the decadent regime and presenting the young intellectual, Maxwell, as a "hero and martyr." In the words of Odili: "I do honestly believe that in the fat-dripping, gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime just ended - a regime which inspired the common saying that a man could only be sure of what he had put away safely in his gut or, in language ever more suited to the times: 'you chop, meself I chop; palaver finish'; a regime in which you saw a fellow cursed in the morning for stealing a blind man's stick, and later in the evening saw him again mounting the altar of the new shrine in the presence of all the people to whisper into the ear of the chief celebrant - in such a regime, I say, you died a good death if your life had inspired someone to come forward and shoot your murderer in the chest - without asking to be paid." (p. 167)

Here then is Achebe's x-ray of the Nigerian society as it was organised and directed by the old regime; here is the artist's disinterested examination of the present which enabled him to prophesy future events. Such is his depiction of the moral depravity and inequity which characterised the era that only those who have successfully destroyed their social conscience could afford the indiscretion of blessing the dispensers of that social enormity.

One of the Roman terms for a poet is "Vates," which means, "a Diviner, foreseer, or Prophet" -- a title which the Romans bestowed upon the "heart-ravishing knowledge" of the poet.¹⁰ It is significant how this appellation fits the Nigerian poet of great fame, the late Christopher Okigbo. For he did foresee and set down for us in language that is full of vigor and passion, the dreadful disaster of the Nigerian Civil War, which has been the inevitable consequence of the political corruption and injustice that marked the preceding epoch.

Okigbo vividly, but cynically, presents the death of the old era thus:

*parliament has gone on leave
the members are now on bail
parliament is now on sale
the voters are lying in wait-*

*the cabinet has gone to hell
the timbers are now on fire
the cabinet that sold it-self
ministers are now in gaol.¹¹*

To the poet, the Cabinet, that is the Executive of the old regime, was not worth more than the ordinary cabinet or cupboard used for stocking papers and files. The analogy is striking: both are made of timber; both can be sold or bought; both can be on fire. The idea of parliament being on sale and voters lying in wait for the politician-purchaser of votes, recalls to mind with painful sharpness one of the major canker worms that ate deep into our body politic of old. Voters gave their freedom, conscience, and right to justice in exchange for the politician's money.

And naturally Okigbo foresaw an angry nemesis precipitating on that terrible era. The present chapter of the 'fanfare of drums' and 'wooden bells' will give way to the "iron chapter" in the history of the nation. What was to come he envisaged as an excruciating sort of circumcision, which has already been enacted by the "chief priest of the sanctuary," and which will be marked by "the bleeding phallus/Dripping fresh from the carnage" and crying out "for the medicinal leaf."¹² But the poet greatly feared that this terrible circumcision might constitute a futile purgatorial experience out of which no regenerated man would emerge.

The vision was that of suffering, futility, barrenness, blood, death and total blackout! The prophecy, one might say, was of coup and war! Thus in a climactic poem titled "Come Thunder" the poet breaks out in fluent anticipatory sorrow, like the reputed diviner of old:

*Now that the triumphant march has entered the last
street corners,
Remember, O dancers, the thunder among the clouds . . .
Now that laughter, broken in two, hangs tremulous
between the teeth,
Remember, O dancers, the lightning beyond the earth . . .
The smell of blood ready floats in the lavender mist
of the afternoon.
The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors
of power;
And a great fearful thing already tugs at the cables
of the open air;*

*A nebula immense and immeasurable, a night of deep
waters -
An iron dream unnamed and unprintable, a path of stone.*

...

...

...

*The arrows of God tremble at the gates of light,
The drums of curfew pander to a dance of death;*

*And the secret thing in its heaving
Threatens with iron mask
The last lighted torch of the century¹³*

It is hardly easy to find a better pre-natal description of the coup and the war that followed. The images of broken laughter, smell of blood, death sentence in ambush, "night of deep waters," "iron dream," "dance of death," and the quenching of the "last lighted torch of a century"- all these depict the horrifying experience of the Nigerian crisis.

But Okigbo's timely warning, like Achebe's, was not heeded. The erstwhile rulers were not prepared to give up corruption or restore social justice. The ordinary people themselves accepted the situation as a *fait accompli*, and reacted to it merely with the "laughter of resignation to misfortune,"¹⁴ without any desire to fight the evils of the time. But the artists have done their work. They diagnosed the society's malady and accurately predicted the repercussion that would follow if it was left untreated.

The artist, therefore, is that unreverend or un-consecrated codifier of the moral tempo of the society who, in the words of the Irish exile, James Joyce, is ever trying to "forge in the smithy of (his) soul the uncreated conscience of (his) race."¹⁵ For he dissects the society not only at its political level but also at its moral level. Thus the Yoruba dramatist, Wole Soyinka, in *The Trials of Brother Jero*,¹⁶ invites us to a moral indictment of the Reverend Jeroboam in his various cloaks of charlatanism, hypocrisy, and fraud. This play realistically, if harshly, exposes the crass materialism and base mundanity which today characterise the lives of many religious leaders in our society, who parade before us as the indispensable sales-agents of a Spiritual Insurance Company.

Brother Jero is one such agent who has graduated *summa cum laude* in crafty salesmanship. His first duty as the ready-made prophet of the Lord is to betray and denigrate his mentor, the Old Prophet, who tutored him, and whose position as prophet he finally usurps. And in order to successfully mislead his congregation, Jero fabricates an impressive appearance which paradoxically is the outward sign of his inward inequity. Thus in one of his many self-expository confessions he says: "It becomes important to stand out, to be distinctive. They will look at my velvet cape and they will think of my goodness. Inevitably, they must begin to call me 'the velvet-hearted Jeroboam, Immaculate Jero, Articulate Hero of Christ's Crusade' I have not breathed it to a single soul, but that has been my ambition. You've got to have a name that appeals to the imagination - because the imagination is a thing of the Spirit - it must catch the imagination of the crowd. Yes one must move with modern times. Lack of colour gets one nowhere even in the Prophet's business" (Sc. III).

It is this quest for forged charisma that makes Jero deceive his congregation into believing that he has no house to sleep in, and that he spends more than twenty-four hours everyday praying on the Beach. And he congratulates himself on his success so far: "My disciple believes that I sleep on the beach, that is, if he thinks I sleep at all. Most of them believe the same, but for myself, I prefer my bed. Much more comfortable. . . . Still it does them good to believe that I am something of an escetic." (Sc. III). Furthermore, to sustain the falsehood that he is a prophet, he always prophesies what requires no prophecy: "They (members) begin to arrive. As usual in the same order. This one always comes earliest. I have prophesied that he will be made a chief in his home town. That is a very safe prophecy. As safe as our most popular prophecy, that a man will live to be eighty. If it doesn't come true, that man doesn't find out until he is on the other side." (Sc. III).

The principal preoccupation of Brother Jero is the brutal exploitation of worshippers, whom he rightly calls his "customers," and this exploitation is the essence of his religious life. For, according to him, "I always get that feeling every morning that I am a shop-keeper waiting for customers" (Sc. III). This materialistic tendency has led him to defraud Amope, the wife of his ministerial assistant, Chume, of the famous velvet-cape which he has refused to pay for.

But the situation which brings into sharp focus all the vicious aspects of 'Reverend' Jero is that in which he craftily lures a parliamentarian into the web of his mumbo-jumbo for the purpose of extracting as much money as possible. Applying his usual incantation which is now reinforced with the psychological apparatus of hypnotism, Rev. Jero holds the parliamentarian spell-bound and deludes him with the 'prophecy' that he will soon be made "Minister for War." He says: "I saw this country plunged into strife. I saw the mustering of men, gathered in the name of peace through strength. And at a desk, in a large gilt room, great men of the land awaited your decision. Emissaries of foreign nations hung on your word, and on the door leading into your office, I read the words: 'Minister for War.'" (Sc. V). The parliamentarian awaking from his state of mesmerism and ecstatic confusion, finds the prophet has vanished. Then he says: "Vanished. Transported. Utterly transmuted. I knew it. I knew I stood in the presence of God." (Sc. V). Ironically, however, the prophet has run away for dear life from Chume who has accused him of adultery with his wife, and is now pursuing him with a sharpened cutlass!

Here then is a Rev. Minister of God as Wole Soyinka presents him to us - a man who is supposed to lead men to salvation, but succeeds only in leading them to delusion; a man, who, in the classic tradition of Geoffrey Chaucer's fraudulent Pardoner, can best be described as a spell-binder in the garb of holiness; a man, that is, for whom the miraculous transfiguration of Christ is anticlimatically supplanted by the "divine transformation" of a beautiful young girl, a "daughter of Eve." Apart from inviting the attention of our clergy to this ugly, and perhaps realistic image of their profession, Wole Soyinka appears also to be asking those of us on the lay side whether we have not all along been mere customers to one or more Rev. Jeros for whom we ignorantly constitute a mass of mechanical instruments for some materialistic satisfaction.

Another Nigerian literary artist, V. Chukwuemeka Ike, has recreated for us another important aspect of our society, the so-called intellectual life in the university. In his novel, *The Naked Gods*,¹⁷ Mr. Ike unveils before us various ramifications of life in the University of Songhai. The major point of interest in the novel is the obnoxious and diabolical rivalry between Dr. Okoro and Professor Ikin, who are vying for the post of Vice-Chancellor; and between the American supporters of Dr. Okoro and the English supporters of Prof. Ikin.

Dr. Okoro is a young impetuous lecturer without any previous university teaching experience, who by seeking cheap popularity among students has earned the flattering appellation of "O.K. Power," and who throws drink parties for Professors and Senior Administrative Staff with a view to facilitating his advancement. His qualification for candidacy in this competition for Vice-Chancellorship consists in his Ph.D. degree obtained from a renowned American university, and in his being a Songhaian, for it has been agreed that the present American Vice-Chancellor should groom an indigenou academic member of staff to take over from him. On the other hand, Mr. Ikin is a much older, level-headed, and typically abstract-mined professor with many years of experience. Though he is also a Songhaian, his major disability in the contest is that he has not got the Ph.D. degree. As the Vice-Chancellor has observed: "My first worry is that he hold only the B.A. degree, and a guy with that academic qualification could not command the respect of academics." (p. 12) And as regards the Americans' obsession with the Ph.D. degree, the Registrar, who is English, has remarked: "I've not come across a more doctorate degree conscious group of people in all my fifty-odd years." (p. 205) In any case, the fact that Prof. Ikin has not got the doctorate degree, his professional status notwithstanding, has made the Vice-Chancellor and other Americans on the staff frown at his candidature and sponsor the cause of Dr. Okoro instead.

The moral climate in the University of Songhai is glaringly depicted by the attitudes and actions of the chief actors and the other characters in this drama of the negation of professional morality. Dr. Okoro purchases from a medicine man a charm with which to harm his rival, Prof. Ikin. And this incident has resulted in a biting anonymous letter to the Vice-Chancellor, part of which reads:

"Sir,

There is a strong rumour that you are being commandeered into presiding over a primitive pagan ritual on this campus, to discover the person who left a charm on the Professor's door. As part of the ritual, every member of the staff will be required to jump over the detached door, in the belief that the guilty person will collapse in the attempt. The mere contemplation of such a primitive, pagan, and unscientific ritual should be a source of shame to its protagonists, be they high or low. . . .

A university that has a faculty of science cannot endorse directly or indirectly anything to do with charms. All right-thinking staff members look on you . . . to call an immediate halt to the charm episode." (pp. 109-110)

And aside from planting a charm on Prof. Ikin's door, Dr. Okoro bribes the mother of the Chairman of the Provisional Council with "one bottle of Martell brandy and two pieces of expensive Akwette hand-woven cloth" (p. 154); he had been informed that the chairman never says 'No' to his mother's request or command.

The American Vice-Chancellor, who is zealously sponsoring Dr. Okoro's cause, knows very well that Okoro is too inexperienced to succeed him, yet he gives him support for purely political rather than academic reasons. He says that his other worry about Prof. Ikin is "a rather selfish one, speaking as an American." "Songhai is our one opportunity to plant the American type of university in Africa. Unless my successor is in sympathy with the goals of American higher education, our three-year efforts here would be brushed aside as soon as our backs are turned. . . ." (pp. 12-13).

On the part of Prof. Ikin, he has no time for canvassing any of the authorities. But his wife, the boisterous, nosy, nagging and flirtatious Mrs. Ikin, does more than is necessary in this direction. She is prepared to give anything in exchange for the title of "Mrs. Vice-Chancellor." Thus she gave her self-body, soul, honor and the rest - to the lecherous old chief of the community, His Royal Highness, Ezeonuku III, the First Class Chief of Onuku Province, who yields influence over the University Council and Administration.

Furthermore, the American Ambassador, realising that the Songhaian people seem to favor Prof. Ikin, instructs the Vice-Chancellor (to the latter's dismay) to propose Prof. Ikin to the Council for the post, and underscores the importance of his stand thus: "Capture the education of a nation, and you capture the nation's *creme de la creme*. Capture a nation's university education, and you set the tone for the rest of the educational system. Remember what the Jesuits said: 'give me a child till he is five and I will answer for him for the rest of his life.'" (p. 171) It is because of this selfishly motivated struggle between the Americans and the British that the Vice-Chancellor says to the Council: "Several months ago, a

commentator observed that Songhai University was a miniature United Nations. He meant his observation to be complimentary. Unfortunately, some of our staff have interpreted him literally. Consequently, one finds distinct camps where there should be one campus." (p. 225).

As regards the Council members, some of them who have been opposed to Prof. Ikin's candidature soon change their minds in his favor when the Chairman announces "that the American Government has approved a six-week all-expenses-paid study tour of American universities and other educational establishments for every member of Council." (p. 229) This is the Council members' own bribe in the whole deal. But one of them, Dr. Fiofuma, still opposes Prof. Ikin because he himself wants to be appointed Vice-Chancellor.

Significant in the circumstance is the reaction of some of the Assistant Lecturers, who appear to be dangerously scandalised by the spate of machinations on the campus. One of them, Mr. Opara, relevantly remarks: "Won't it be wonderful if all kinds of godfathers cease to influence progress at this university? . . . We would all work harder if we were assured that hard work pays." (. 23) A more vocal Assistant Lecturer, Mr. Osita gives his own views about the ugly situation on the campus in a rather angry tirade. Having always insisted that he should like to consider himself "an intellectual, not a schemer or a politician," he now says:

There are no more than one or two intellectuals in this university. . . . This is the only university in which dons spend all their time scheming or dispensing charms or romancing after village girls or colleagues' wives - concerned with everything but the traditional preoccupation of intellectuals (p. 159) The crucial thing is that our intellectual community has been laid bare for what it is worth. The public now knows that we devote all our time to building camps around personalities rather than to academic pursuits. . . . (p. 160) (As far as Osita is concerned, neither of the contestants) has any publication to his name. . . . What has Ikin ever published, apart from articles in Songhaian newspapers describing the school system in Songhai? What has Okoro published, even in newspapers?" (p. 161) (He concludes that) when an intellectual believes that he can rise to eminence through politicking,

he sees no value in learned publications. I'm afraid Okoro seems to be like one of those false intellectuals who choose to rely on nocturnal visits and unscholarly activities for their progress. Give him twenty years and he'll complain that he has no time or facilities for research. (p. 162)

The assistant lecturers thus constitute a kind of corrective moral voice in this free-for-all fight for advancement by all means more foul than fair.

In the final analysis, however, a conclusion in which nothing is actually concluded when, to everybody's surprise, Prof. Ikin rejects the offer of the Vice-Chancellorship. His reason is that the conditions attached to the offer seem absurd to him. He thinks it ridiculous that he should be required to "travel all the way to the States in order to study the philosophy of Songhai University", and that the Ph.D. degree should be mechanically awarded to him after just a short year's stay in America. This reasoning is in complete consonance with the view he has always held that the university authorities should "learn to judge a man by what he produces rather than by the degrees he has accumulated." (p. 111)

We thus see how the artist has depicted various immoral attitudes and actions that are possible, and perhaps probable, in any university in our society: cliquism, politicking, charm trafficking, anti-intellectualism, and neo-colonialist tendencies represented by the American and British camps. He has also indicated through the words of the Assistant Lecturers what he considers a true university teacher's right professional attitude and ambition. The university of Songhai is not any particular university in Nigeria, but its ugly features may constitute a replica of what possibly obtains in any of our universities.

The last of the functions of the literary artist in our society, which we will consider in this paper is that of the disciple of truth. Because of his 'omnipresence' through imaginative capacities in both the visible and the supersensual worlds; because of his special ability to acquire knowledge at *a priori* and *a posteriori* levels (speaking epistemologically); and because of his possession of that finer sensibility which is one of the cardinal virtues of an artistic visionary, the artist assumes a position on both the empirical and metaphysical planes which enables him to comprehend life in several of its aspects.

He therefore attains a profound understanding of life which the ordinary mechanical operation of human intelligence may find astonishing. And since "it is often his unresolved conflict which becomes the theme of a writer, rather than the serene and integrated elements of his personality,"¹⁸ the tendency of many a literary artist is to expose the not-too-palatable elements of the reality of human existence.

It is this tendency that has led the modern artist to anti-utopianism or anti-humanism. This is an artistic and philosophical doctrine which fights against the pretense that humanity is steadily progressing towards a Buddhist Nirvana or an earthly paradise which will be characterised by good government, great happiness, and moral excellence. It rejects the romantic and utopian optimism of the previous ages which, according to the philosopher, T.E. Hulme, paints a delusive picture of man as an "infinite reservoir of possibilities."¹⁹ Rather, the anti-humanist recognises and accepts the fact that we are in a "new dark age of barbarism and vulgarity" marked by spiritual degradation and commercialised humanity; that man, in accordance with the doctrine of original sin, is a being of basic imperfection; and that the "world [is] no longer to be regarded as a glorious place with which man [is] naturally in harmony, but a landscape with occasional oases . . . mainly deserts of dirt, ash-pits of the cosmos, grass on ash-pits."²⁰

Thus Wole Soyinka in his near-existentialist exploration into the meaning of life, comes up with the sad truth of the meaninglessness of man's existence. In his poem titled "Death in the Dawn,"²¹ Soyinka presents an incident in which a motor-car has crushed a pedestrian to death. And looking at the lifeless body, the poet quietly remarks that the victim, who is a microcosm of corporate humanity has been "silenced in the startled hug" of his own invention - an invention that is equipped with "the wrathful wings of man's Progression." For the poet, man has become the architect of his own annihilation in a world where God appears to be an absentee Land-Lord-Creator, or at best an indifferent spectator of the drama of man's organised tragedy. And this tends to confirm the basic truth of the "cosmic absurdity of man's lot."²²

Another Nigerian poet-dramatist, J. P. Clark, strikes the same sad note of man's unenviable lot in life. In his sardonic view of life, Clark sees the child's cry at birth as the early morning clarion announcing man's tragic dance

from the womb to the tomb. Clark's play, *Song of a Goat* contains an early indication of this attitude to life: "You know now that each day we live/Hints at why we cried at birth."²³ Every day of man's life is an unhappy reenactment of that anguished cry. And in the poem "Cry of Birth,"²⁴ Clark adumbrates this theme with details that hargague the reader with their brutal reality. "The echo of childhood" rolls "back into piquant memory/the anguished cry of birth," which has prepared the stage for the spiritual stupor, incessant material pursuits, the "wanton motions bedevilling our breast," the "harrowing shriek of pain and factions," and the "echo of despair and stress," all of which punctuate and lacerate human life and confirm that we are "poor castaways to this drakling shore" we call life.

What one may find disturbing in this view of life is actually the shock of recognizing an existential truth; and one is tempted to say with T.S. Eliot, "Pray for us at the hour of our BIRTH,"²⁵ and *NOT* at the hour of our DEATH. This is rather hard, but it may also be the truth behind the illusion of life. In his search for the truth about man's life, the artist has to probe beneath "petrified hypocrisies"²⁶ in the society. And in a society which has the restoration of the "dignity of man" as one of its numerous quests, the pursuit of truth will have to be seriously reckoned with. The reality of man and his purpose in life must be central to this quest; and the limitations of man are relevant aspects of his reality and dignity. Thus the literary artist always tends to look at man in society in his various aspects - man as the fallen angel, or man as evolved from the ape!

It is therefore likely that some people will be inclined to regard the literary artist as a pest harassing our conscience and our entire social and intellectual life. But if he is a pest, he can only be very adequately likened to the Socrates of Plato's *Dialogues*, who, when defending himself against the charge of intellectual intrusion into the life of other people in his society, said:

I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing, persuading, and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me. I dare say that you may feel out of temper . . . and easily strike me dead . . . and then you would sleep on for the

*remainder of your lives, unless God in his care of you send you another gadfly.*²⁷

In the same way, one can equally say that the Nigerian literary artist is a god-sent gadfly to his society, and that he is persistently endeavoring to rouse the society from its social, political, moral, and intellectual slumber.

Footnotes

1. *The Republic*, Book X, p. 607.
2. See George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 287.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
4. William York Tindall, *Forces in Modern British Literature* (New York, 1956), p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See "The Rest" in *Selected Poetry*, p. 100.
9. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1966).
[Page references to the novel will be enclosed in parentheses in the text.]
10. See Sir Philip Sidney, "Apologie For Poetrie" in *The Great Critics*, ed., James Henry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (New York, 1951), p. 193.
11. Christopher Okigbo, "Elegy for Slit-drum," in *Labyrinths* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 68.
12. Okigbo, "Elegy for the Wind," in *Labyrinths*, pp. 64-65.
13. Okigbo, "Come Thunder," in *Labyrinths*, p. 66.

14. Achebe, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
15. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: The Viking Press, 1944), p. 253.
16. Anthologized in Soyinka's *Three Short Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).
17. (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1971).
18. Thomas Blackburn, *Robert Browning* (London, 1967), p. 56.
19. Vivian D.S. Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry* (London, 1958), p. 152.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Contained in *Idanre and Other Poems* (London, 1967), p. 10.
22. See Sampson, *op. cit.*, p. 912.
23. *Song of A Goat* (Ibadan, 1961), p. 41.
24. "Cry of Birth," in *Poems* (Ibadan, 1962), p. 15.
25. *Four Quartets* ("Little Gidding").
26. See Keorapetse Kgositsile, "My People When Nothing Moves," in *Seven South African Poets*, ed. Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 92.
27. See Plato, "Apology" or "Socrates's Defense" in *Dialogues of Plato*, ed. J.D. Kaplan (New York, 1950), p. 25.

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