

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

The Limitations of Universal Literary Criteria

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2b61d7j1>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 4(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Nwoga, D. Ibe

Publication Date

1973

DOI

10.5070/F741016422

Copyright Information

Copyright 1973 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

THE LIMITATIONS OF UNIVERSAL CRITICAL CRITERIA*

BY

D. IBE NWOGA

The subtitle for this paper is : The case for an aesthetics of African Literature. The question it tries to explore is whether, now that a comparatively extensive body of African Literature has been published, some conventions have been established, awareness of which is necessary for fruitful criticism of that literature. Has anything emerged which could be identified as a specific method for assessing the meaning, expertise and direction of African Literature? The title of the paper was suggested by reaction to the beginning of a review of the plays of Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark in 1963 by Martin Esslin. He had written there:

I must, at the very outset, disclaim any special knowledge of the social and cultural background from which these plays spring. Indeed, I presume that must have been the reason I was asked to review them in these pages -- to provide, for once, the corrective of a change of perspective, as it were; of focus, of viewpoint; to submit them, like organisms in a laboratory, to a survival test in vacuo by seeing how they appear to someone who, in the course of his professional work, has to read an endless succession of plays from totally different backgrounds and who will therefore, almost automatically, apply to them the same general yardstick; who will judge them not as African plays but as plays pure and simple. 1

His review of the plays was a corrective on the concept, but the presumptions of universal critical criteria which he stated have been very strong in the criticism of African Literature.

* This paper was originally presented to a conference on African writing at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 1973, and to a seminar on African Literature at UCLA.

The search for an aesthetics of African Literature is not as chauvinistic as it might sound. What emerges might not be exclusively African. All literatures -- either of different places or at different times for the same literature -- have had their conventions, but these may in fact consist of elements or stages of other literatures. Moreover, the validity of the question is not in any prescriptive effect in the sense that one can say that "This writer does not write in this way, therefore he is not an African writer." The resulting answer would be descriptive of assumptions and technical elements behind the literature -- hence, a statement on the proper or adequate critical tools which would constitute a means of getting at meaning and appreciating the felicities of our literature. Variations are bound to exist between one writer and another, but there must be some core of creative direction within a contemporaneous cultural milieu and it is this tradition that it is fruitful to start from.

Reactions to Western Critics

Critical attention began to be paid to African writing in the late fifties and early sixties and much of this came from European critics. It was presumed that since this literature was written in European languages, it had to be assessed in terms of the traditions of the literature of those languages. Much of the discussion at the 1963 Freetown 'Conference on African Literature and the Universities' tended towards a conclusion that African Literature written in English should be considered as English Literature, that this literature was "extending the boundaries of English Literature"² and that "we don't want to have a special paper on African Literature."³ African writers themselves resented a tendency to lower standards when assessing their writings. In 1962, Wole Soyinka, for example, was complaining that "European foreign critics are not helping by being Eurocentrically condescending, applying a different standard for writing."⁴

Stringency of critical standards is however not the same thing as an adequate or fruitful approach to criticism and it was clear to most African writers that significant criticism of their work was not emerging from people of different interests, traditions and backgrounds. The expression of this awareness was violent in 1962 when J.P. Clark displayed the various ways in which he thought European critics were trying to impede African writers through their criticism;⁵ and Chinua Achebe described three types of European critics of African writers, accusing even the best of them of a cocksureness based on ethnocentrically conceived certainties of aesthetic truth, concluding with an assertion that "No man can understand another whose language he does not speak" and adding in parentheses that

"language here does not mean simply words but a man's entire world-view."⁶ As late as 1967 the same matter was brought up in an interview with Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana and she declared:

I do not see that there is any validity in having someone who does not belong to the society from which the literature itself springs, telling you how to write. I'm sure you've heard every African writer say this, but I do not see how it can work. What I mean is, if the writing is from a certain background, it's only the people who are from the background who can tell the world, "This is good," and then the world takes it. To me it is so simple one doesn't have to talk about it. You know, nobody else but the English critical world could say that John Osborne is a good playwright. Now when you get England recognizing Osborne as good or bad, at any rate controversial, then other people become interested. See what I mean?"⁷

Perhaps the most virulent personal expression of the rejection of non-indigenous criticism is J.P. Clark's recent reference to Gerald Moore as "Old John Bull . . . alias Mr. I-know-my-Africa."⁸

The bases for these rejections of external criticism have been varied: some European critics have resented the tone of African writers in their criticism of European culture and European imperialism and have reacted by injecting into the criticism the extraneous factor of the supposed ingratitude of these African writers as biting the fingers that fed them; others, in the surprise that these primitives have actually written, and more, have used English to write, have tended to give condescending praise, often leading to championing the cause of a naive African literature and exhibiting a hungry acceptance of a quaintness and exoticism irrelevant to the real achievement of a literature; others still, more serious as critics, and determined to apply the same stringent standards of literary criticism, have nevertheless presumed on an understanding of Africa which they did not have. The summation of these opinions, I think, is the expectation of the writers that valid criticism of their work can only come from an understanding of their background and a recognition of the fact that they are trying to do something new and authentic to that background, both in the historical fact of their society and the independence of a literary tradition. It is perhaps this that makes

the writers impatient with criticism which tends toward the identification of the sources and inspiration of their writing in Greek drama and English poetry.

The Problem for the African Critic

If this sounds like racial prejudice against non-African critics, it must be seen in its historical context that the early critical atmosphere of African literature was dominated by Western critics. Though it may be presumed that the African critic would be better placed than the European to get at the root of the African's achievement, it is perhaps necessary to note that such an eventuality is not automatic. A recent editorial in *Presence Africaine* brings this out:

*It is not important to associate the people with the interpretation of their cultural life and not to leave its interpretation and animation exclusively in the hands of an elite which is culturally dependent on the West and can be more easily manipulated and conditioned by the latter than an entire nation. On the whole, the situation of such an elite, which is culturally cut off from its people and lives outside its own civilization, promotes the ascendancy of Westerners (whether Africanists, or members of the University, or politicians) over the administration of our cultural affairs. Seen and written about through the eyes of a foreign culture, our people can only be the objects -- and not the creative subjects -- of their history."*⁹

What is said in the editorial applies both to the writers and the critics: we have been to the same schools and through the same cultural exile. But my interest here is with the critic. The African critic of my generation has to warn himself continually that his study of literature and literary criticism has been in a different tradition and that his preliminary aesthetic tendencies and certainties might have been directed outside himself and his genuine authentic reactions. He has to study to shed off those elements which no longer prove congenial to his sensibility and try to establish an approach which, though not completely divorced from the newly acquired criteria, nevertheless might have a different center. This accounts for the deliberately negative title of this paper. It can be a constant effort, trying to identify the limitations of the so-called 'universal' criteria -- which really mean the principles and processes learnt in University study of English

literature (and in this context, universal is the same thing as Western) -- and trying to recognize the manner of reaction to literature more homogeneous with African tradition and the modern literature of Africa.

The African who is a critic is not therefore automatically an African critic. He does not automatically offer the African writer the atmosphere of understanding which he craves, and some of what the writers have said about Western critics could equally well apply to the critic, African or non-African, to fulfill the role which the present state of our literary tradition and the nature of our literature impose on him.

What I intend to do in the rest of this paper is to suggest the background nature of shared concerns and outlook which operate among the writers, critics and their society; to describe what might, at least for the moment, be called a characteristic mode of African aesthetic perception; limiting myself to poetry, to illustrate how this can lead to a poetry demanding a particular method of appreciation; and finally, to suggest the function of criticism in the Africa context. My approach will be positive, and what "limitations of universal critical criteria" there are will only emerge by inference.

The Socio-Historical Context of African Literature

The facts of the recent history of Africa are well-known to any student of African affairs. Diachronically, there are the external events of the slave trade, economic exploitation, colonial domination, the struggle for and achievement of independence and the present management of African affairs by African civilians and soldiers with some neo-colonial intrusion. Synchronically, the situation is a little more complex: we have the contemporaneous existence of various types of acculturated states ranging from the relatively traditional modes of life to the totally westernized modes of life; there are the realities arising from contact with the outside world, both through the colonial experience and through the incredibly expanded media of international communication (I doubt that there is any village in Africa in which a radio is not to be found) -- factors which have not only created new patterns of economic, political and religious expectations and desires, but have also disrupted or confused the homogeneity of the traditional value system and sanctions among the general populace; there is, finally in this overabbreviated and overgeneralized catalogue, the fact of the manner in which government by Africans is operating in Africa -- the fact of the people's generated expectations from their 'representatives' in power and how these expectations are being fulfilled or not fulfilled.

I have not elaborated on these facts because that is not the point. What is important is that out of these experiences there arise certain expectations which influence the nature of the writers' work and thereby demand a certain critical direction. [Put crudely, this critical direction is the demand we make of our writers to tell us what to do with ourselves; the insistence found in many of the comments by African readers that the writers show positive commitment to the contemporary issues in Africa.]

One aspect of the events referred to above is that they are public, communal events. Their predominating impact on the minds and attention of the intellectual elite to which the writers and their audience belong makes for an audience-oriented literature. If one sought a period of English literature to which to relate this orientation, it would be found more in the literature of the period from Dryden to Johnson than in modern English literature. Events of traumatic nature to the whole community have taken place and are taking place. There are concerns felt, not so much by the individual in his personal capacity, but shared by the generality of the people. There is a sense of participation, albeit reducing in intensity recently, in the total movement of people in the organization of their affairs and their world. There is still a measure of faith in the perfectibility of human societies, that people have only to know what is right for them and their society and they would together struggle to achieve those aims.

The African writer is operating within this context, varying in intensity of facts in different parts of Africa, but still demanding that he use his art in pursuit of public ends. Some conferences on African Literature have specifically emphasized this context, especially the African Scandinavian Writers' Conference in Stockholm 1967,¹⁰ the series of talks and discussions in the Africa Centre in London in 1968 under the title "Protest and Conflict in African Literature,"¹¹ and a conference held in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka last year under the title 'Literature and Modern West African Culture.'¹² The discussion has gone beyond the level of whether the writer should be committed to the nature of that commitment; to some it is necessary to have a definite ideological commitment, preferably to a Marxist ideal. Though some writers may feel it unbearable 'that people are creating for the writer an almost superstitious role. . . as if he were a special kind of human being who has certain duties, functions, privileges mystically set apart from other human beings,'¹³ the role is there. And this explains the tone of Wole Soyinka's bitter tirade against the writers of Africa when he claimed that "In the movement towards chaos in modern Africa, the writer did not anticipate . . . He was content to turn his eye backward

in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present. But never inward, never truly into the present, never into the obvious symptoms of the niggling, warning, predictable present from which alone lay the salvation of ideals." Admitting that the writings might have genuine literary value, he still is distressed that "the present philosophy, the present direction of modern Africa was created by politicians, not writers," and asks "is this not a contradiction in a society whose great declaration of uniqueness to the outside world is that of a superabundant humanism?"¹⁴

Partly resulting from the above, and partly derived from tradition is another aspect of the context, that of a greater emphasis on community than on persons. Where the individual (character in a novel, persons/poet in poetry) is emphasized, the dimensions of his individuality are undercut by the fact that he is a representative, a paradigm of states of being which extend through the community.

Moreover, the individual is part of a community which is supposed to bear his burdens and whose burdens, depending on his position, he certainly bears. An interesting side-light on this with regard to the artist's circumstances is thrown by a statement in an article by Cyprian Ekwensi published last month:

*All my life has been built round the formula that a writer has first of all to eat, to pay his rent, support a family. In our society a man does not run away from his responsibilities because of what he wishes to do. He weighs the consequences of his actions on his dependents, then adjusts his actions to the situation, sometimes to his own disadvantage. This spirit of selflessness has suppressed many a genius. At the same time it has kept family life going. If I had my way I would run away from everybody, shut myself up in a room in some strange land and go on writing. This is what many of the great writers have done. It tends to sharpen one's recollection.*¹⁵

The strains and joys of this wider responsibility of the individual not only affect the freedom of the writer as a person. They can also influence the tone of his writing when he writes on that society. The burdens and profits of community offer an area of thematic interest, and can influence the development of the content of the literary piece [especially with regard to characteristics and tone].

Perhaps the most intrinsic result of the described socio-historical context is the nature of the literature under discussion in that it is a literature of mixed traditions. Most of modern African literature is written in the language, not of the people, but of the former colonial masters. Literary traditions of the masters came along with the language, but the literary traditions indigenous to the people are still strong and viable so that we have a literature straddling two conventions with more or less comfort. These facts present to the writers crucial problems of choice. But this is a widely explored area and I will not enlarge on it. I will merely refer to a significant statement which Gerald Moore made in 1963:

*This encounter (of the African poet with the English language) presents problems which are not being faced by any European writer, and which haven't been faced by the European writer for a long time . . . Since the emergence of the vernaculars in the Middle Ages, I don't think we have had any corresponding experience of making this fundamental choice.*¹⁶

Within this context then, modern African literature was born and has grown to its present stage of maturity. The writer and his audience live within the environment of these realities and ideas and to the extent to which the context influences the writing, to that extent does an awareness of the context determine adequate understanding and direct the critic's functioning.

The Mode of Aesthetic Perception

For some years there has been a rather consistent critical rejection of negritude for a variety of reasons. One is that it refers one back, especially in much of its poetry, to a glorious African past -- innocent, brave, harmonious -- which the colonial demons came and destroyed. This is of course an overstatement and a myth, or rather, is not the whole truth. But I think the attack on it has been largely exaggerated too. Most peoples have had to build up a myth of their past, a myth which holds them from too violent a dislocation of tradition, a pillar onto which they can anchor their sense of continuity and meaningful progress. If it is a lie, it is a useful lie as many a widow knows who has tried to bring up her children with the memory of a brave and immaculate father, much to her chagrin if she had had a rough marriage. And it is not such lie after all, for Africa had its measure of innocence, of bravery, of communal harmony, and it did suffer its measure of external intrusion, oppression, exploitation and domination and nobody can deny it. Not one of the complaining writers

has failed to refer at least once to the facts and their repercussions. All the same it is a myth that could be dangerous by reinforcing what the Guyanan novelist, Wilson Harris, calls "victim stasis" and "victor stasis" -- psychological fixations which perpetuate themselves by constant projections outwards-- "victim projecting out of himself the making of monster/victor, victor projecting out of himself the making of monstrous victim." 17

What is more crucial and relevant however is the discussion on Senghor's concept of the difference of African man from Western man of the twentieth century and the accompanying claim that Africa has something to give to world civilization. With regard to the second part, I think it is pusillanimous to think that Africa has nothing specific to contribute to world culture but this again is an overworked topic which can only provide diversionary interest here. It need not detain us because we have sufficient problems to solve internally and, as Soyinka says, especially later in this question:

The myth of irrational nobility, of a racial essence that must come to the rescue of the white depravity has run its full course. The movement which began with the war cry of cultural separatism . . . has found latter day modification in a call to be the bridge, to bring about the salvation of the world by a marriage of abstractions. It is a remarkable fact that the European writer who had both the leisure and the long history of introspection to ascertain his spiritual needs has not yet sent out a call to the black writer for rescue. 18

So we are not better than other people; and, in any case, they have not asked us to come and get them out of their dessicated mechanical world. But are we in any way different? Or rather, were we different in any way which could be important for the proper understanding of both the themes and conventions of our literature?

I am checked in the middle of an intended tirade by the realization that the matter is suddenly too simple. There are no people, who are not peculiar in the sum of their cultural values -- English, Canadian, American, Chinese, Russian, African, etc; there is no society in which there has not developed a way in which its people relate themselves to the world and to their fellows. Perhaps it is the overstressing of this peculiarity that is culpable. Perhaps also the definition of this peculiarity could be misguided. But, especially

in the context of literature written within one culture in the language of another, it is essential to grasp some points of this difference polemically, to clarify any peculiarities of expression or form in that literature.

Senghor, writing about the African philosophy of being, says of African ontology:

*Far back as one may go into his past, from the northern Sudanese to the southern Bantu, the African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially static objective, dichotomic; it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict. The African on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis.*¹⁹

I quote this passage because there is hardly anywhere else where he states the issue in a less controversial manner.

A basic thesis is expressed here, capable of being developed in a variety of ways. Senghor directs it, in his quest for what Africa can give to the world, into a higher "morality in action" so that "for the African, living according to the moral law means living according to his nature, composed as it is of contradictory elements but complementary life forces. Thus he gives stuff to the stuff of the universe and tightens the threads of the tissue of life."²⁰ He also expounds a theory of art in which he claims that it is 'rhythm -- the main virtue, in fact, of negritude -- that gives the work of art its beauty' explaining rhythm as "simply the movement of attraction or repulsion that expresses the life of the cosmic forces; symmetry and asymmetry, repetition or opposition: in short, the lines of force that link the meaningful signs that shapes and colors, timbre and tones, are."²¹

In all the debates on negritude what I find of greatest significance is the suggestion in the paper out of which the above was quoted of the relationship between perception of truth and what Senghor calls "the mystic civilizations of the senses" [which incidentally he also saw in the Slav and Germanic peoples of the late 19th century.]²² My understanding of the issue is related to a distinction between modes of

knowing -- that whereas traditional Western man has evolved a more detached, analytical mode of understanding of his world environment and aspects of human functioning, traditional African man retained a more holistic, instinctive mode of understanding. I try various expressions to describe this mode -- spiritual absorption, instinctive perception of whole meaning, sensitive interaction -- but these are words that have their meaning in the language of a cultural mode of perception which is particular and rationalistic. The total of these expressions however comes close to what I mean, for which the word 'rapport' may be used.

The reduction of these modes of knowing to a dichotomy of "emotion" and "reason," (Kofi Awoonor, for example, appeared to presume that Senghor says that "the African is only emotion and not reason"²³) and some utterly innane attempts to reproduce this misconceived phenomenon in works of art, have led to the emotional rejection which has attended the idea. The danger is that in the hustle and bustle of rhetoric there is the tendency to throw away the core of truth with the bulk of nonsense. If the "purity and innocence of Africa" is not the truth, if the girl soaping her body and laughing in the rain is not the symbol of the African reality, does it automatically become true that "the educated African from abroad . . . who walks about with his mouth open, startled by . . . the black man's heightened sensitivity, has come back to recolonize us; that he is repeating the damnable old cliché that we have come to associate with the colonial or the European who comes to Africa with that back-to-the-womb expression on his face"²⁴

In Achebe's poem, "Vultures," an illustration is taken from the facts of the Second World War.

*. . . Thus the Commandant at Belsen
Camp going home for
the day with fumes of
human roast clinging
rebelliously to his hairy
nostrils will stop
at the wayside sweet-shop
and pick up a chocolate
for his tender offspring
waiting at home for Daddy's
return. . .*

The bitterness of the irony here derives from the fact that both activities by the Commandant of Belsen are real, none pretended. The Commandant did commit the atrocities of the Camp. The Commandant did love his family. Perhaps what is wrong with the current discussion of the African personality or negritude is

illustrated by the conclusion of Achebe's poem:

*Praise bounteous
providence if you will
that grants even an ogre
a Tiny glow-worm
tenderness encapsulated
in icy caverns of a cruel
heart or else despair
for in the very germ
of that kindred love is
lodged the perpetuity
of evil.²⁵*

Both the praising of providence and the despair are static reactions as against a dynamic reaction. The point is that any attempt at "correcting" the Commandant at Belson Camp would have to be by dynamic interplay of one factor of the reality of his personality against the other. This dynamic principle is taken into account in another of Achebe's poems, "Beware, Soul Brother." Irony is intended in the opening lines but it is an irony of judgement rather than of fact:

*We are the men of soul
men of song we measure out
our joys and agonies
too, our long, long passion week
in paces of the dance*

He reminds us of the parallel truth:

*Our ancestors, soul brother, were wiser
than is often made out. Remember
they gave Ala, great goddess
of their earth, sovereignty too over
their arts for they understood
so well those hard-headed me
men of departed dance where a man's
foot must return whatever beauties
it may weave in air, where
it must return for safety
and renewal of strength.*

And so he warns:

*But beware soul brother
of the lures of ascension day
for others there will be that day
lying in wait leaden-footed, tone-deaf
passionate only for the deep entrails
of our soil . . .*

*Take care then, mother's son, lest you become
a dancer disinherited in mid-dance
hanging a lame foot in air like the hen
in a strange unfamiliar compound.*²⁶

The point I have been making is that the acceptance of a different mode of knowing, is not a denial of wisdom; that the statement about intuitive knowledge or 'heightened sensitivity' does not automatically become a "myth of irrational nobility" or a rejection of a sense of practicality in the management of day-to-day affairs.

One may digress a little further into wider fields and insist that there is not only one way of arriving at truth. I found the following passage in an exhilarating book *Mathematics and the Imagination* and I will quote it at length:

The problems of the infinite have challenged man's mind and have fired his imagination as no other single problem in the history of thought. The infinite appears both strange and familiar, at times beyond our grasp, at times natural and easy to understand. In conquering it, man broke the fetters that bound him to earth. All his faculties were required for this conquest -- his reasoning powers, his poetic fancy, his desire to know.

To establish the science of the infinite involves the principle of mathematical induction. This principle affirms the power of reasoning by recurrence. It typifies almost all mathematical thinking, all that we do when we construct complex aggregates out of simple elements. It is, as Poincare remarked, "at once necessary to the mathematician and irreducible to logic. . . mathematical induction is not derived from experience, rather it is an inherent, intuitive almost instinctive property of the mind. . .

*. . . Without any sense of discontinuity, without transgressing the canons of logic, the mathematician and philosopher have bridged in one stroke the gulf between the finite and the infinite. The mathematics of the infinite is a sheer affirmation of the inherent power of reasoning by recurrence.*²⁷

Validity and value do attach to a type of knowledge which "without transgressing the canons of logic" comes in an inherent, intuitive and almost instinctive manner. My argument is that if it should be the case that for a variety of reasons, including the homogeneity of a closed society which breeds a proliferation of instinctively held archetypes of intellect and emotion, the African should be found to have a predominating tendency towards this intuitive, almost inherent type of knowledge, then it should be recognized, not indeed as exclusive, but as characteristic.

Now to return more specifically to our topic -- the mode of aesthetic perception. Wole Soyinka, talking in 1962 about the audience response to his play *A Dance of the Forests* revealed a preference for a non-rationalized perception of meaning:

But what I found personally gratifying and what I considered the validity of my work, was that the so-called illiterate group of the community, the stewards, the drivers -- the really uneducated non-academic world -- they were coming to see the play every night . . . If you allowed them, they always felt the thing through all the way, and they came night after night and enjoyed it tremendously. I never asked them what they made of it, you know . . . The only time when they become quite frankly lazy is when they find that their instincts to reject what seems strange are supported by a columnist in the paper, they suddenly feel, 'Oh! yes, we thought that you know, I mean what's all this nonsense,' but left to themselves, and given the proper guidance, I have no doubt at all that we have one of the most interested audiences, in any event, in any cultural event, here in Nigeria.²⁸

The crucial words here are: "they always felt the thing through all the way . . . I never asked them what they made of it. . . ." I think what is excluded here is a specifically analytical understanding. By "felt" here I don't think that Soyinka is talking about emotional or sensuous response in their Western connotations. Perhaps rapport is the word, the direct interaction between the observed art object and the as yet un verbalized archetypes of the subject's spirit or soul or imagination or sensitivity or totality of person. Soyinka's appeal for "the proper guidance" is for the critic to identify and verbalize these archetypes to give support to the rapport -- and Kofi Awoonor has suggested one guiding principle when he said he could quite easily understand *A Dance of the Forests* because 'in one aspect it's simply a kind of cycle of events

cutting through the history of a people; and this makes a lot of meaning to me if you see some of the traditional performances of any society in West Africa.²⁹

The same mode of perception is presupposed in Christopher Okigbo's reply to an interviewer who asked him why his poetry was so hard to understand:

Well, because what we call, understanding . . . passes through a process of analysis, if you like, of the intellectual -- there is an intellectual effort which one makes before one arrives at what one calls the meaning. Now I think it is possible to arrive at a response without passing through that process of intellectual analysis, and I think that if a poem can elicit a response, either in physical or emotional terms for an audience, the poem has succeeded... 30

'Physical' and 'emotional' here are attempts to give some definition to a generalized non-intellectual response. In another interview Okigbo talked of girls in a secondary school in Northern Nigeria crying when he read some of his poems to them -- though they could not identify the reason for their reaction.³¹

More recently, Kofi Awoonor talking about his strange haunting novel *This Earth, My Brother*, acknowledges that he was inviting the reader to share in the protagonist, Amanu's vision, adding:

*There is an invitation to participate in the festival of the senses. I think if we go back to the festival of the senses, our destruction of things and people will cease.*³²

Perhaps I don't quite understand what is implied here by "the festival of the senses" but it sounds very close to Senghor's "the mystic civilization of the senses" especially when Awoonor continues to say that Amanu's long journey in the novel is both on a realistic and a mystical level.

Let me conclude this section then by stating that there is a strong evidence to suggest that the characteristic mode of African aesthetic perception is non-analytic or non-intellectual, but relies essentially on the achievement of rapport with the art object. This response can be analyzed and Robert Plant Armstrong's *The Affecting Presence* (University of Illinois Press, 1971) is a very interesting analysis of this phenomenon.

Senghor's analysis in terms of cosmic vision and the interplay of life forces is also interesting. I would myself suggest a more prosaic explanation in terms of the abundance of uninhibited archetypes and sensitivity to which the work of art relates in the subject. All these can be debated. But the phenomenon itself is a reality -- the response itself is non-analytical.

The Nature of Poetic Expression

The implications of this mode of perception in literary expression I will discuss only from the poetic genre for purposes of meaningful limitation. I will refer only to the Nigerian Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyika. A principal effect is that it would give rise to a poetry which, in some crucial manner, would have an emphasis on the individual phrase or what has been called a "lyric total" that is, in spite of or helpful to the total expression. Let me illustrate briefly how this has worked in traditional poetry. It should be borne in mind that traditional poetry is of various forms and is to be seen in a variety of media. I mean here that some poems are, for example, to be found in the context of dance in which their contribution is only a partial element in the total effect. In these contexts we find an emphasis on simplicity of language and paucity of images so that the senses are liberated to participate in the other elements of song and dance. Where imagery of the symbolic kind enters, it is limited mainly to the chorus which might just be a statement of intense meaning repeated after each sole statement, a statement moreover which is of such popular circulation that though its import continues to retain its impact, its meaning is quite clear. In a dirge dance, for example, the statement "mgbala ezele" -- "the fence has collapsed" will be repeated interminably by the chorus of dancers while the solo cantor will weave in, at will, and perhaps without the dancers listening, a description of the dead person and his qualities. In a war dance the chorus will be repeating "mbaogu okweere nwoko" -- "the boast of bravery befits a man" while the soloist describes the prowess of the community of fighters and the cowardice of the enemy.

At the other extreme is the poetry which relies on its verbal content and quality for its effect [in addition, of course, to unreproducible elements like visual (facial and body) movements and tonal timbre of the reciter]. This is the peak of poetic expression and is accompanied by musical instruments. This is adult poetry, found in various contexts -- religious incantation, praise of kings and warriors, dirges -- but sharing in the formal quality I have referred to which I will now try to expand on.

Without prejudice to what Ali Mazrui calls "versified intelligibilities," simple poetry in which personal moments of experience are communicated with beauty and ease,³³ the tendency in much African verbal art is to catch a moment or a whole experience once and for all in an expression of intense sharpness. This tendency, incidentally, features in other areas of aesthetic representation -- in the motifs of painting, sculpture, music, dance, masquerade. The idea is to re-create an idea or an experience by representing it in a diversity of such expressions rather than to state the reality or to analyze it. A dirge from Nsukka will illustrate the point.

*A great tree has crashed down
the birds are scattered in the forest
Your name gave us passage in strange lands
this then is what has happened?
When danger struck like lightning you led the attack
is this then the end of your journey?
What you had you gave to the people,
is your store now empty?*

Alas! Alas!

*Earth's path has been dammed.
Hand stronger than hand has broken the hand
a trap has caught the tiger
Tree at the gate that blotted the matchet's edge
this then is what has happened.*³⁴

The discussions on the relative contributions of traditional African literature and modern European traditions have already taken place. This, moreover, is no study of traditional African poetry. But I think I need to restate some factors which have to be taken into account in achieving understanding for criticism of the new tradition. The dirge above, centers on one central perception of the misfortune of losing a strong support of a family line. More importantly, it creates this sense of loss through a concatenation of individual expressive categorical images drawn from a variety of levels of existence, drawing equivalences between one and another at a symbolic level. Quite a few of the images are separable as praise names for the dead person.

Of what importance is this for the understanding of our modern poets? One of the functions of the critic in modern Africa is to create an atmosphere of understanding for our artists in such a way that presumed difficulty will not obstruct the growth of a literary audience. And one of the biggest stumbling blocks at the moment is the presumed obscurity of the poets.³⁵ The question then is whether the pattern of poetic expression I have described does have enough influence on the poets so that

a realization of the fact can help provide an insight into their method and release the reader to their significance.

In Sunday Anozie's challenging book on Christopher Okigbo I find the following comment:

*This recognition (of an idea in a section of Okigbo's Silences) is not at all the result of any attempt to probe logically the poet's mind, since in fact this is quite impossible, especially in a movement whose dialectic is obscure. Rather than a logical recognition, a sympathetic response is here attempted to the ambitions of a poetic art still struggling to find its feet and which throughout the poem, Silence I, is mainly concerned with cross-breeding visionary and aesthetic symbols or images with rhythmical variations in a frail reaching after a musical and dramatic suggestiveness.*³⁶

Without agreeing with the particular interpretation of meaning, one notices certain factors here which relate to the tradition discussed earlier -- the non-necessity of a logical process of understanding, the approach from sympathetic response arising from a poetic method of "cross-breeding visionary and aesthetic symbols or images." Okigbo was to mature from his early poetry in which these symbols and images had a rather complicated structure of dialectics, to the prophetic declamatory poetry of "Path of Thunder." The pattern of combination was to ease out, but the poems were still to rely on heavily symbolic units of imagery.

Soyinka's poetry, different in point of view and emphasis, shows the same dependence on units of imagery. Without Okigbo's encyclopaedic vastness of areas of reference, but with an intense knowledge of the resources of Yoruba mythology and literary traditions, Soyinka still constructs his poems from a sensibility which in one event sees the events' cosmic equivalents and repercussions and re-creates the experience in terms of affective units of imagery. A very enlightening study of *Idanre* by Femi Fatoba in a recent issue of *Nigeria Magazine* brings this out. Fatoba is flamboyant in his expressions but the two following passages make a point.

Something else which came to my mind was that I was brought up (and that very badly) on Western literature and had failed all along to realize the 'death' of WORDS in the West. By WORDS, I mean words in the sense of vehicles of magic

and magic in the sense of creations of sensations and phenomena which are beyond verbal explanation. We refuse to bring WORD back to life because the trouble of raising it from death demands belief in those ancient codes of life, like ordinary human trust and moral uprightness; and most important of all, the absorption of the good in the old into the best of the scientific present and future. A total rejection of the past is one of the main ingredients in the poison which killed WORD. We then prop up its shadow and paint it in loud colours as if that would seal the gangrene in the letters which go to make up words.

And later:

One image attracts the other and they all shock one with a bloody and magnetic force which pulls one out of the dark exclusives of the mind into a reality which stings the eyes and the conscience and pricks the flesh like sharp hot nails.³⁷

Again the mythic, mystic vision which sees in each event its parallels and meaning at various levels of existence, and the magic recreative power of symbolic images as the source of meaning rather than through the dialectical logic of development. For time past, present and future are subsumed in the single moment of epiphanic understanding. This is the peak to which African poetry, traditional and modern, aims.

Briefly, in the context of this paper, I will mention two other points. One is, that a poetry that relies so heavily on the use of images must require in the reader or critic a depth of understanding of the mythology, traditions and imaginative literature of the community from which the writers come. The cultural significance of the images becomes the essential ingredient of meaning (as Anozie aptly brings out in contrasting Paul Theroux's interpretation of the rainbow image in Okigbo's *Heavensgate* and the real significance of the rainbow to Okigbo and the Igbo.³⁸) And there is not much of Soyinka that can be understood without a deep knowledge of Yoruba mythology and oral traditional literature.

Secondly, this poetry, even when it is most abstruse and mythical is still public and man/society oriented. Of his *Silences*, (which are perhaps his most obscure after *Distances*), Okigbo says in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*: "Both parts of *Silences* were inspired by events of the day: *Lament of the Silent Sisters*, by the Western Nigeria Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba; *Lament of the Drums*, by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son".³⁹ Soyinka was later to say of *Idanre*: "*Idanre* lost its mystification early enough. As events gathered pace and unreason around me I recognised it as part of a pattern of awareness which began when I wrote *A Dance of the Forests*. In detail, in the human context of my society, *Idanre* has made abundant sense.... And since then the bloody origin of Ogun's pilgrimage has been, in true cyclic manner, most bloodily re-enacted...'⁴⁰ In both it is the fate of a people and their hopes rather than the fate of individuals, that is the theme. In both the mythical cycle of chaos and regeneration is seen in terms of the society. A sociological awareness of the ontology and mentality of a people will help prevent the interpretation of their symbols in terms outside the orbit of their poet's possible meaning. Pessimism, for example, is not cosmic in the poetry but related to specific situations; and the apocalyptic poet of Africa still has a strong faith in the awakening of the storm into a harvest season, of the night into a dawn of sunlight. So, Soyinka at the end of 'deluge',

*And no one speaks of secrets in this land
Only, that the skin be bared to welcome rain
And earth prepare, that seeds may swell
And roots take flesh within her, and men
Wake naked into harvest-tide;*⁴¹

and Christopher Okigbo's last lines of poetry, some of it borrowed from the Spanish, proclaim:

*beyond our crumbling towers -
Beyond the iron path careering along the same
beaten track*

*The glimpse of a dream lies smouldering in a
cave together with the mortally wounded birds.
Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let
this be the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether...*

*An old star departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new star appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever...*⁴²

The Function Of Criticism

I have dealt with my topic by indirection because I believe that the reality of a different tradition establishes the need for a different approach, and the areas of this difference will determine the areas of changed perspective. So I will conclude briefly.

From what I have said so far it may be deduced that the critic in Africa is called upon to be more of a literary citizen than a literary scholar. For one thing, the writer and "his mid-wife" the critic are operating in a context of a literate community in which, when books have served their specific role for studies and the acquisition of skills, they are not much regarded (except thrillers) and aesthetic pleasure is mainly derived from oral situations. An interested and participating audience for the writers has still to be created. Secondly, a greater percentage of this audience has a limited comprehension of the language in which modern African literature is written. More importantly, we are dealing with a new literature the traditions of which have been in the formative stage. Most educated Africans have been brought up on the English tradition and the most creative of African writers have been forging a tradition for themselves more congenial to their environment and sensibilities. The critic therefore has to gather the threads of this new tradition and communicate it to his people to open the literature to them.

The manner of critical awareness which this calls for is one not dominated by any dogmatic knowledge of systems. Aesthetic certainties derived from any established traditions will only jeopardise the chances of full response. And this matter is complicated for the African critic by the dual need to encourage the writers and yet offer them the full depth of searching criticism which is necessary for the valid growth of our literature. But another Nigerian critic, Dr. Abiola Irele, has presented these specific problems in great width and I will conclude with his words:

The double relationship of this literature to two imaginative traditions, with the particular forms of human universe which lie behind each of them, calls for a special orientation of criticism in dealing with it, an orientation which is sociological by implication. It involves a process whereby the very differentiation that marks the two frames of reference of this literature imposes upon the critical function important adjustments of those

principles worked out in the Western tradition, to the peculiar modes of sensibility which feature in the African works, and which derive from the African background, of which the uses of language, both conditioned by and conditioning the traditional modes of feeling and apprehension, constitute a distinct social reality.⁴³

Footnotes

1. "Two Nigerian Playwrights," reprinted in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier, Longman, 1964, pp.255-262.
2. Gerald Moore in *African Literature and the Universities*, ed. Gerald Moore, Ibadan University Press, 1965, p. 85.
3. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *ibid*, p. 87
4. "Interview with Lewis Nkosi," reprinted in *African Writers Talking*, ed. Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, Heinemann, 1972, p. 176.
5. "Our Literary Critics," *Nigeria Magazine*, 74, September 1962, pp. 78-82.
6. "Where Angels Fear to Tread," *Nigeria Magazine*, 75, December 1962, pp. 61-62.
7. "Interview with Marine McGregor," reprinted in *African Writers Talking*, p. 25.
8. "Interview with J. P. Clark," in *Palaver, Interviews with Five African Writers*, Texas, 1972, p. 16.
9. "The African Critic and His People," *Présence Africaine*, 83, 3rd Quarterly 1972, p. 7.
10. *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. Per Hastberg, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968.
11. *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, ed. Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Munro, Heinemann, 1969.

12. *Literature and Modern West African Culture*, ed. D. I. Nwoga, soon to be published by Ethiope, Benin, Nigeria.
13. J. P. Clark in *Palaver*, p. 20.
14. "The Failure of the Writer in Africa," reprinted in *The African Reader* ed. Wilfred Cartey and Martin Kilson, Vintage 1970, p. 138.
15. "The Power and the Penury," *Drum*, Nigeria edition, April 1973, (p. 19 - for some unknown reason, the pages of *Drum* are not numbered).
16. "The Language of Poetry," *African Literature and the Universities*, p. 96.
17. *Kas-Kas: Interviews with Three Caribbean Writers in Texas*, University of Texas, 1972, pp. 46-47.
18. "The failure of the Writer in Africa," p. 141.
19. "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," *The African Reader*, p. 184.
20. *Ibid*, p. 186.
21. *Ibid*, pp. 191-2.
22. *Ibid*, p. 189.
23. *Palaver*, p. 62.
24. Ezekiel Mphahlele, discussing *The African* by William Conton in *The African Image*, 1962, pp. 22-23.
25. *Beware, Soul Brother*, Nwamife 1971, pp. 39-40 (where Commandant is misprinted "Commandment"; *Christmas in Biafra and other Poems*, Doubleday, 1973, pp. 58-59.
26. *Beware, Soul Brother*, pp. 29-30; *Christmas in Biafra*, pp. 46-47.
27. Edward Kasner and James Norman, Pelcian, 1968, pp. 42-43.
28. *African Writers Talking*, p. 177.
29. *Ibid*, p. 34.

30. *Ibid*, pp. 143-4.
31. Marjory Whitelaw, "Interview with Christopher Okigbo," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 8, 1969, pp. 28-37.
32. *Palaver*, p. 60.
33. "Abstract Verse and African Tradition," *Zuka I*, September 1967, pp. 47-49.
34. Unpublished. But what is said of the poem can be seen in a variety of publications - *Yoruba Poetry* ed. Ulli Beier, *Igbo Traditional Verse* ed. Egudu and Nwoga from Nigeria and collections of the poetry of other areas of Africa.
35. I have done a study of this issue of obscurity in "Obscurity and Commitment in Modern African Poetry," *African Literature Today*, 6, 1972.
36. *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric*, Evans, 1972, p.118.
37. "Idanre - An appreciation," *Nigeria Magazine*, Nos 107-109, December-August 1971 (actually came out in 1973) pp. 101 and 106.
38. Anozie, *op cit*, pp. 43-46.
39. *Labyrinths*, Heinemann A.W.S. 1971, p. XII.
40. *Idanre and Other Poems*, Methuen 1967, p. 58.
41. *Ibid*, p. 62.
42. *Labyrinths*, p. 72.
43. 'The Criticism of Modern African Literature,' *Perspectives on African Literature*, p. 20.

* * * * *

Dr. Donatus Nwoga, a well-known critic, is an Assoc. Prof. and former Head of the department of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His publications include an anthology of West African Verse and Poetic Heritage: *Igbo Traditional Verse* (jointly compiled), reviewed elsewhere in this issue.