

Voice: A Festival of Commonwealth Poetry, ed. Douglas Cleverdon
(London: Poetry Book Society, 1965):

The centrality of Christopher Okigbo in the development of modern poetry in Africa is an acknowledged reality. Perhaps the greatest tribute to Okigbo has been that paid to him by his friend and contemporary, Wole Soyinka, who, on the joyful and inspiring occasion of his receiving the Nobel prize for Literature, the first African writer to do so, in 1986, associated Christopher Okigbo with this great honour by setting up an African poetry prize in his name. The irony of this would not be missed by Okigbo himself who, asked by ^rMajory Whitelaw in 1965 whether he thought of himself as an African poet answered, "I think I am just a poet. A poet writes poetry and once the work is published it becomes public property. It's left to whoever reads it to decide whether it's African poetry or English." But beyond the irony is the reality of the acclaim with which Okigbo's poetry continues to be received.

Christopher Okigbo achieved a legendary status in African literature ^{within a short lifetime with} ~~with a life span of few years and~~ publications that fit into a slim volume of poetry. When he died in 1967 during the Nigerian ^{civil} ~~Biafran~~ war, there were extensive and intense reactions to the news of his death both inside and outside Africa. Within Biafra the legendary Okigbo was mourned not only by intellectual and artistic colleagues who wrote memorial poems in Igbo and English, but by the common people and soldiers who immortalized his name in the chant of lamented Biafran heroes.

Enyi o, enyi o
Enyi Biafra alaala

Chetakwanu Chris Okigbo
Chris Okigbo bu enyi Biafra
Chetakwanu ...
Enyi Biafra alaala, enyi etc.

(Translation)

Elephants, elephants
Elephants of Biafra have gone
Remember Chris Okigbo
Chris Okigbo is an elephant of Biafra
Remember (any of a list of heroes)
Elephants of Biafra have gone
etc.

Indeed there were many who shed tears for him who were never to cry again over the death of a colleague, the shock was that traumatic.

In Nigeria, Chris Okigbo was considered important enough for his death to be announced on the national radio network. Colleagues wrote memorials and biographies. J. P. Clark revived the journal Black Orpheus on which they had all worked together at Ibadan and published a full page obituary followed by the last poems of Okigbo as "Poems Prophesying War".

In journals and books notice was taken of the passing away of this charismatic poetic figure. ~~The~~ Transition announced "with the deepest regret, the death in action of ... Christopher Okigbo ... His greatest and most enduring contribution will be his poetry (which was always first published in these pages) and the way it became part of the magazine's credo. It set standards for younger writers and it helped define the magazine itself." The same issue also published a very informative and intimate statement on Okigbo and his poetry. Transition (no. 35) followed this up with a collection of poems in memory of Okigbo by Europeans and Africans. Africa Today ^{published} ~~commissioned~~ John Povey's ~~to~~

~~with~~ "Epitaph to Christopher Okigbo" African Arts called upon one of Okigbo's closest associates, Peter Thomas, who wrote a memorial tribute to Christopher Okigbo, ^{entitled} "Ride Me Memories," and Presence Africaine, at the end of an essay in which Sunday Anozie had studied Okigbo's early poetry, inserted a notice about the tragic death of Christopher Okigbo and declared that "His passing is a great loss to literature." When The Conch: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Analysis was started in 1969, the first issue was dedicated "In Memoriam Chris Okigbo" and contained a study by Anozie of Okigbo's "Distances" and several memorial poems to Okigbo. Ali Mazrui wrote a novel The Trial of Christopher Okigbo debating the justice or waste of Okigbo's death in sectional warfare. ~~Perhaps I should conclude by saying~~

~~For~~ ^{after} for several years ~~from~~ his death ~~to its anniversaries~~. ^{continued to} various writers ^{showed} their shock and distress at the loss of this legendary talent. ~~The following statement by~~ R.W. Noble in his review of several books on African literature in 1970 ^{said} will

~~serve as conclusion to this survey of reactions to Okigbo's death.~~

The death-by-war of Christopher Okigbo, one of the most outstanding modern poets of both Anglophone Africa and the whole English-speaking world, is the kind of loss which carries the memory back to the extinguishing of English talents in the First World War and more recently the death of Lorca in Spain. The cultural destruction, represented by Okigbo's death and the deaths of so many of his people, is a moral and extensive disaster. (West Africa, (July 4, 1970):

734)

The notice taken of Okigbo's death was a measure of how important he was considered in the field of African literature. This importance is a reflection of the centrality of Christopher Okigbo and his poetry in the discussion of African poetry. For

example, in the "editorial" to African Literature Today, ~~Nov 71~~ ¹⁹⁷⁵
 (1975) Essays on Criticism (London, Heinemann, 1975), though the volume contains no essay on Okigbo himself, it is the example of Okigbo that is used to establish the complementary nature of the influences, native and foreign, that impinge on the quality of African literature and also the complementary value of the criticism of that literature by African and non-African critics. In his essay on "The State of Criticism in African Literature" in the same publication, D.S. Izevbaye not only quotes Okigbo's snide comment on colloquia on Negro Art, he also uses the framework of a review of the criticism of Okigbo's work for the expression of several opinions with regard to pedagogic and academic approaches to criticism, the affective as against the objective/structuralist approach, the place of authorial amendments in the final interpretations of a poem, and so on.

Christopher Okigbo was a controversial poet and has been generally recognized as one of the most innovative poets that have written in English in the middle of the twentieth century. In the discussion of African poetry, he is a significant basis of debates

- a) on the nature and conception of poetry (poetry as ritual, as a religious, prophetic, mystic activity, poetry as a communal exposition and poetry as personal expression, the realistic and the mythopoeic);
- b) about poetry and meaning (should a poet aim at a paraphrasable meaning or express his deeper impulses and leave the issue of meaning to the reactions of the recipients; what level and complexity of language should the poet use);
- c) about the role of the poet (the question of person, the audience of the poet, the poet as poet and the poet as citizen, poetry as a revolutionary tool or agent of self-release by the poet);
- d) ^{about} the tradition of poetry (the place of traditional African and

foreign European and other elements, the sources of image and metaphor and myth, the influences on poetry in terms of the concept, nature, and language), and so on.

In the discussions and debates on these issues, Christopher Okigbo has featured prominently, in spite of the fact that the span of his life was short, and the volume of his production slim.

Adam Lively, while introducing the launching of Okigbo's Collected Poems in Edinburgh in July 1986, commented on "the body of his work which isn't much considering that he is such an influential and also controversial poet" and also mentioned that "He has been in the centre of a lot of controversies about the nature of African poetry and about European influences as against traditional forms." The Nigerian novelist, Ben Okri, on the same occasion simply referred to Christopher Okigbo as "a wizard".

Who, then, was this wizard, Christopher Okigbo?

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo was born at 2.30 a.m. on the 16th of August, 1930. This date should now replace all others. Except for J.P. Clark, who suggested that Christopher Okigbo was 37 years old when he died in 1967, practically all other biographies, including the one I wrote in Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo, give the 1932 birth year. His middle name has variously also been given as Ifeanyichukwu but is definitely Ifekandu. The date of the month is confirmed by a private letter of 27 July 1965, from Christopher Okigbo to "My dear Papa" in which he indicated: "I will come and see you at home with Sefi and my daughter Obiageli in the middle of August. We will probably arrive on the 15th, so that I spend my birthday, August

16 at home." Perhaps the 1932 date was introduced during Christopher Okigbo's university days when peer competition made people reduce their ages to indicate how young they were for their achievements.

The importance which Christopher Okigbo was to attribute to his role in traditional religion makes it necessary to go into some detail about his origins. Ojoto, Okigbo's home town, is about ten miles south-east of Onitsha, the famous commercial and educational town on the eastern bank of the River Niger in Eastern Nigeria. Ojoto is a rural community with the river Idoto running through it. It is made up of eight villages of which Ire is the fourth in order of primogeniture. Ire itself is a village made up of three kindreds: Oto, Izealor and Umuagwa in that order of primogeniture. Though Ire is the fourth in line in Ojoto, its first kindred, Oto kindred by which river Idoto runs, is the home of the high priests and the location of the shrines of the major deities of Ojoto: Idoto ("the pillar that supports Oto..") and Ukpaka Oto ("the oil bean tree of Oto"). Oto daughters tend to attract their husbands to come and set up home in Oto, rather than the other way round. That was how, though James Okoye Okigbo, Christopher's father, was from Umuagwa Ire, the Okigbo family home was built in Oto Ire, the home kindred of Christopher's mother Anna Onugwalobi. The Nweze family from which she came held the priesthood of Idoto, and Christopher was a re-incarnation from his mother's line of a former Chief priest, his maternal grandfather. Indeed, it was his maternal uncle Ikejiofor Nweze who had to hold the priesthood as Christopher's surrogate.

Mr. James Okoye Okigbo, Christopher's father, was a teacher in the service of the Roman Catholic mission. His travels as a headmaster provided the background experiences of Christopher Okigbo's childhood which feature prominently in his early verse. Mr. Okigbo lived in mission/school stations extending through most of Igboland. In his early career, before Christopher was born, he lived in places distant from his home, in the Mbaise and Orlu areas which are now in Imo State. In 1930 Mr. Okigbo was living and teaching in Onitsha. During that year Christopher was born, Anna Okigbo having to go home to the village to deliver the child. It would be true to say then that Christopher spent his first six years between Onitsha and Ojoto since most teachers spent their Christmas holidays in their villages, and also teachers' wives who were industrious took their young children with them during planting and harvesting seasons in their villages while the teachers stayed at the mission.

At the age of six, while the parents were living at Amawbia, Christopher Okigbo lost his mother Anna. This was a traumatic experience. His eldest brother, Lawrence, remembers Christopher calling the mother as she lay in the coffin, and he suggests that this is the basis of the address to "Anna of the panel oblong" in Christopher Okigbo's poems. From then on Christopher and the others were looked after by Eunice, a relation of their mother who served as their father's housekeeper. Eunice is reputed to have had a lovely voice and to have been an expert in telling folktales and singing the accompanying songs.

Mr. Okigbo moved to Ekwulobia in 1936 after his wife's death. Again this was important for Christopher Okigbo's later poetry, for this was the location which the madman JADUM operated,

making his witty claims to all wisdom and all woman. It was also here that Christopher started his early primary school and encountered the comic teacher that became Kepkanly in his poems.

EDUCATION

It was in 1939 or 1940 that Mr. Okigbo moved to Asaba on the western side of the River Niger across from Onitsha and it was here that Christopher completed his primary school studies. It was from here that Christopher passed the entrance examination and went to Government College, Umuahia.

The implications for his poetry of the life of Christopher Okigbo as the son of a teacher, moving from station to station and to the village will be further explored as we deal with the poems and their images, and characters and themes. But some general statements may be made at this point. One ~~is general and~~ relates to the environment of life of the teacher's son in those days, the other is particular to the character and temperament of Christopher Okigbo.

At the general level, those of us who were the sons of headmasters in the late 1930's and early 1940's were the children of two homes, one the variable home dependent on the regular postings and transfers of our fathers, the other the village home to which we had to return either with our mothers during school term if we were young enough, or during school holidays, or generally at Christmas with the mass return to the villages of all those who lived in towns. Whether at the mission station or in the village there was always an element of difference and separateness between the teacher's son and other children who

"would respect him, watch him from some distance, court his friendship but also occasionally provoke him." The multifarious experiences of the teacher's son would cover the religious and educational activities of the mission station, and the village activities - work, leisure, festival, and song and dance, watched from a distance or perhaps engaged in as a participant observer.

Umuahia Government College, in 1945 when Christopher Okigbo became a student there, was an elitist institution to which a few of the best brains produced in the Eastern region of Nigeria were admitted by a competitive entrance examination. In the tradition of the colonialists, only [^]^ few were supposed to go to secondary school or ~~U~~University, and those were supposed to be trained to be English-type gentlemen to be admitted into the colonial civil service. Eastern Nigeria was saved educationally by the religious bodies which had set up some excellent secondary schools and ~~T~~eacher training institutions. However, Government College Umuahia gave excellent academic and sports education and produced some of the best writers in English from Igboland. The Principals were English gentlemen and clerics, the games of England -cricket, hockey, football, tennis, boxing - were played, the piano and other forms of artistic activity were introduced.

Christopher Okigbo learnt and became proficient in several of the games - soccer, cricket, hockey, track events, boxing, and chess. As Bernth Lindfors has further established through a study of the Umuahia Government College Magazine of 1949-50 and other sources, Okigbo was "quite active in extra-curricular activities, serving as a member of the Arts Society and the Chess Club, editing a house magazine with V.C. Ike, and playing the role of Defending Counsel in a Dramatic production of The Trial

of Hitler². He was also entrusted with certain responsibilities: it is recorded that when a new wireless set was installed in the assembly hall on September 22, 1949, Okigbo was put in charge". Bernth Lindfors also gives specific information on the games in which Okigbo excelled, the prizes he won, and his style of play.

V.C. Ike, the prolific novelist who was Christopher's classmate, remembers, on the lighter side, that Okigbo had a voracious appetite for food. This appetite became even more ravenous when the dish was beans. On the more serious side, he recollects that while they were at Umuahia, Christopher's eldest brother, Pius, a brilliant scholar and avid reader, lived as a senior civil servant in Aba which was only forty miles away. Whenever there was ^{enough} free time, Christopher would travel to Aba, return with a collection of literary material, exciting but outside the school program^g, which he devoured greedily.

From Government College, Umuahia, Christopher Okigbo succeeded in gaining admission to University College Ibadan. This was an important academic achievement, considering that Ibadan was then a colonial elite institution designed to train the few graduates that the British believed were all they needed for the colonial educational and administration services. Though Christopher Okigbo was admitted to do medicine, he transferred to classics after his intermediate examinations. In this change he was following ⁱⁿ ~~on~~ the footsteps of his senior at Government College who was then an Ibadan University College student, Chinua Achebe.

His academic performance was not outstanding, and this was complicated ^{by} ~~with~~ personal habits which were not best suited for

scholarly achievement. Though he had won the Latin prize in Secondary School, Latin was not offered by the school for the School Certificate. Moreover, classical studies involved Greek which he had never studied before. But Okigbo could have achieved better than his third class honours degree at the end of his classics studies if he had put his full energies to the assignment. ~~He~~ He did not.

Athletic and sporting activities featured prominently in Okigbo's student career in Ibadan. In the 1950/51 session, he was the best batsman on the cricket team. He also devoted vigorous energies to trying to build up a strong soccer team in the early years of his career at the University.

The testimony of friends and Okigbo himself shows that this too was a time when Okigbo broadened his social horizons. He read vast amounts of all kinds of literature, he engaged in musical activities, and he was very keen on female company. With regard to music, Okigbo claimed in one of his interviews that he accompanied both Wole Soyinka and Francisca Perreira on the piano in musical evenings at the University. He also said he wrote music seriously up to the end of his undergraduate days. The intensity of his interest in music was to show later when he described the influences on his imagination ^{at the time} when he wrote his poem sequence Heavensgate. In addition, ^g ~~to all these~~, Okigbo also tried to found a student newspaper, University Weekly, but it "ran into trouble because I didn't have enough money to continue publishing it."

The image I have tried to create ~~above~~ ^{one} is ~~the image~~ of a very vibrant and volatile personality with a wide variety of interests and sharp and intensive participation in all of them.

This quickness of reaction and response features in the career of Okigbo after he left the University.

When he graduated in 1956 Okigbo went to Lagos where he ran through a gamut of employments. He worked with private business companies, like the Nigeria Tobacco Company, and the United Africa Company, before he was reclaimed by the Federal Government with whose scholarship he had studied. In the Federal Service, he was engaged as a Private Secretary to the Federal Minister of Research and Information, till, in 1958, he was sent to Fiditi, near Ibadan, to teach in Fiditi Grammar School. He taught there from 1958 to 1960.

FIDITI AND FIRST IBADAN PERIOD.

This period is marked by three important aspects: his literary and other leadership activities in the school, his interaction with the University of Ibadan and ^{his involvement in} other Ibadan cultural activities, and the blossoming of Okigbo's poetic talents. It was while he was in Fiditi that his poetic talent manifested itself.

Bernth Lindfors's explorations of Okigbo's activities as a teacher, derived from reports in the school's annual The Fiditian, show that Okigbo contributed much more than the teaching of Latin to the school. He gave much encouragement and skilled coaching to the football team and provided them with modern equipment. He became the patron of the boxing society and gave them hope. Table tennis improved in the school because of his guidance and example. Beyond sports, he also became the patron of the Senior Literary and Debating Society. The

secretary of the society reported that he was an "energetic and virtuous leader" and praised his initiative in "influencing other educational giants to give lectures to boys." The list of these lecturers included Dr. Pius Okigbo, the brother of our poet, and important names from the University of Ibadan. The topics, in addition to some general ones, included classical and poetic subjects. Christopher Okigbo himself proposed a series of six lectures ^{as an} "Introduction to Poetry" and had given one of them ~~by the time the report was written which described the lecture~~ ~~as very interesting.~~ Before the end of his teaching career in Fiditi Grammar School, Okigbo had also participated in founding a Prose and Poetry Society which was "inaugurated on amount [sic] of the burning enthusiasm of boys to study prose and poetry".

All the activities described above show Christopher Okigbo as a young man who was dedicated to sports, to the upliftment of the youth, and to wide intellectual and literary pursuits. Being in Fiditi, which was only a few miles away from the University of Ibadan, made it possible for him to pursue these enthusiasms further in contact with people of like interests in the ~~University~~. Some of the lecturers he attracted to his school - like Mr. Esan who spoke on "Latin as a dead language", Professor John Ferguson who gave a series of lectures the last one of which was "The love of Aeneas and Dido", Mr. Grillo who lectured on different occasions on "Scansion" and "Poetry" - showed that he was taken seriously by the academics at the University.

In addition to this level of contact, it was during this period that Okigbo started his interaction with the younger generation of students who were going to be important figures with him in the development of modern African literature. It was

during this period that he met J.P. Clark who was then a student in the English Department at the University. Christopher's eldest brother, Pius, and J.P. Clark's eldest brother had been friends and prepared their minds for the meeting. Clark, in writing of this acquaintance, speaks of Chris not being part of the Horn "except while he was at Fiditi and shunting to Ibadan to and from me in 1959-60. I introduced him to the paper as he spouted the Old Classics to me and I the New Greats to him. That's how he met Pound, Eliot, and Yeats..." Clark commented. It might be more valid to say that J.P. Clark intensified Okigbo's awareness of and interest in the poetry of the Moderns since, as we have pointed out already, Christopher had an earlier interaction with modern poetry of various types generated by his eldest brother Pius.

The Ibadan contact while he was teaching at Fiditi was, one must conclude, explosive in establishing poetry as the medium of self-expression for our poet. And this was partly accounted for by the literary atmosphere of Ibadan at the time.

One of the consequences of Okigbo's involvement with this environment and his interaction with the students, was the first publication of his poetry in the student poetry magazine The Horn in 1959 and 1960. "Debtor's Lane", the first Okigbo poem to be published, in The Horn, ^{3,} ~~1~~ 2 (1959) was later to be republished with "Song of the Forest", the oldest poem of Okigbo dated 1957; "Lament of the Flutes" dated 1960; and "Lament of the Lavender Mist" (1961) in Black Orpheus 11 (1962). Meanwhile, "On the New Year" was published in The Horn, ^{3,} ~~1~~ 4 (1960). Also "Love Apart" which was to become the fourth movement of "Lament of the

Lavender Mist" and "Moonglow" were written in Ibadan in 1960 and "Moonglow" was published in the student magazine Fresh Buds in 1960.

These poems constitute the ~~Early Poetry~~ of Christopher Okigbo and mark his entry into the career of poetic creativity that would make him the African poet of his time.

~~In concluding this introductory section of this biography, it is necessary to introduce the concerns of Okigbo poetry.~~

A ~~perception~~ A perception of the themes of Okigbo's poetry depends on whether one is considering individual poems, poem sequences, or the total framework of Okigbo's work. For example, one of the earliest debates on the theme of Okigbo's work was the series of analyses and counter-analyses of "Love Apart" after it was published individually, and yet it was to turn out that the passage was one movement in a poem of four movements. Various critics have studied individual poem sequences, and, in line with Okigbo's own "Introduction" to Labyrinths, others have taken a global look at the progression of the sequences in the Okigbo canon. From the combination of these, a preliminary summary may be made of the topics and themes of Okigbo.

The bulk of the poetry of Christopher Okigbo is aimed inwards, at the exploration of the nature of experience. On the public level, the poems incorporate references to and inspiration from the events of African and Nigerian history: the processes and implications of colonization and cultural and religious conversion, the political tragedies of the murder of Patrice Lumumba of the Congo and the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria, and ultimately, the mad rush of events that led to the 1966 military take-over of the reins of government in Nigeria,

the subsequent pogrom against Eastern Nigerians and the civil war that took Okigbo's life. Okigbo however subsumes most of these events into a series of poems which form what he describes as a "fable of man's perennial quest for fulfillment." His mythopoeic imagination makes him transcend each given event or memory, surround it with myths and symbols from various cultural and literary traditions, and derive from it a poetic statement which is not merely a comment on or a description of the event or memory, but a distillation of the eternal essence of that experience. The nature of this quest and how each poem sequence contributes to the total exploration, Okigbo's development as a poet and how influences of various traditions contributed to the content and manner of each presentation, ^{need to} ~~will~~ be explored ^{in this} ~~in this~~ ~~sketch.~~

"Song of the Forest" though it was not to be published till 1962 as one of the "Four Canzones" was written even before Christopher came to teach in Fiditi Grammar School. It is dated Lagos 1957 and is thus Okigbo's oldest extant poem. In his interview with Lewis Nkosi in Ibadan in August 1962 he was to explain that it was when he stopped writing music that he turned to poetry because he could use only one medium of self-expression at a time.

"Song of the Forest" was a direct outcome of Okigbo's Latin studies. It is a translation and adaptation of the first verse of Virgil's first eclogue Tityrus. The model suited him because he was then living in Lagos and could, from there, reflect on the village and see and project the life of ease in the open air of the village youth:

You loaf, child of the forest,
 beneath a village umbrella,
 plucking from tender string, a
 Song of the Forest.

Contrasting his own life to that of the village youth he calls himself "runaway", a term which in the form of "prodigal" was to feature centrally in his poetry. But here he emphasizes the element of compulsion - "must leave the borders of our land, fruitful fields, must leave our homeland." This nostalgic preference for the village environment could have been an unconscious influence from Negritude, (Anozie) but it was already there in the Virgil model. What Okigbo did add to the pastoral form which he borrowed was to transform it from a vehicle for urban discussion among the urban elite about the pastoral shepherds into a modern subjective tool for reflecting on the position and feelings of the poet himself. (Leslie)

While "Song of the Forest" was written in Lagos, it was the Fiditi environment which produced the first published poems of Okigbo, "Debtor's Lane" and "On the New Year". "Debtor's Lane", written in 1959, first published in The Horn, ³~~1~~, 2, in 1959, was to be republished in Black Orpheus, 11 (1962), as the second poem of the "Four Canzones". "On the New Year", written earlier in 1958, was published in a later issue of The Horn (³~~1~~, 4, [1960]) and never republished, except in studies of The Horn as a journal, till Okigbo's Collected Poems came out in 1986. W.H. Stevenson contrasts J.P. Clark's participation in The Horn with that of Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka who "were already older, more finished poets when they contributed to The Horn" and he comments specifically on "On the New Year" as "not without the familiar Okigbo power". This power, is, of course,

recognized from hindsight since this was really the second Okigbo poem to appear in print. Robert Fra^ser, in his study of "Poetry and the University, 1957-63" after explaining how "the experimental poetry of the Modernist source had a deleterious effect upon early West African poetry in English" made one exception, that of Christopher Okigbo. He attributed Okigbo's success in this mode to the fact that "the allusions and echoes Okigbo found in these poets [of the modernist tradition] were to literatures which he had encountered in their own language. He was thus not dependent on the kind of second-hand acquaintance with the international classics to which lesser talents fell foul" (~~pp. 87-88~~). Fra^ser illustrated the "unforced cosmopolitanism" of Okigbo's early poetry with "On the New Year".

The poem "On the New Year" is indeed an early poem and therefore not as tight and firm as Okigbo's later poetry, but it is important in two ways. One can now see that it carried a theme central to Okigbo's poetry, and that it was an early manifestation of his approach to poetic style, both in terms of picking up echoes from other poets and juxtaposing them to make his points, and in the use of private and public symbols and images whose meanings are ultimately cumulative.

What "On the New Year" does is to present us with a reflection, provoked by the transition from the old year to the new on the cyclic pattern of human hope and ultimate frustration. At this stage, the concept manifests itself as romantic despair. The pattern is figured by events, situations, and fragments of memories and half-forgotten statements. The active elements are "the midnight funeral", the warder, the wagtail singing over lost

souls, the church bell, the pilgrimage, the cross, and, above all, time in its hourly, seasonal, and eternal frustrating hopeless cycle.

We have to think of ourselves as forever
Soaring and sinking like dead leaves blown by a gust
Floating choicelessly to the place where
Old desires and new born hopes like bubbles burst
Into nothing ... [~~Collected Poems, p. 5~~]

With hindsight, the critic today can appreciate that one of the difficulties of Okigbo's poetry arose from the fact that the elements of his mythic structure came to him mostly fully formed from his poetic beginnings before it was clear to his readers that there was a mythic structure within which to seek meaning in Okigbo's poetry. While we were looking for this usual type of "versified intelligibility" for the meaning of individual poems to emerge from the simple collection of words and lines that form the poems, Okigbo was working with a set of words, images and concepts whose full meanings would emerge with the fullness of the exploration of those words, images and concepts ⁱⁿ the full corpus of his poetry.

"Debtor's Lane" the first Okigbo poem to be published, was next in the line of Okigbo's production. Some structural peculiarities of the poem may be noted immediately as characteristic of Okigbo's writing. One is the instruction after the title that the poem is to be performed with the accompaniment of "drums and ogene". The instruction with "Song of the Forest" was that it should be accompanied with ubo, a local hand piano. It was this that created for the reader a picture of the "child of the forest" in his hands the ubo or local hand piano, out of which he is "plucking" a song of the forest under a village

umbrella tree. Later poems would not only request accompaniment with musical instruments - "with two flutes", "with three flutes", "with drum accompaniment" etc. - but some of them ^{would} ~~will~~ be named after musical instruments: "Lament of the Flutes", "Lament of the Drums", "Elegy for Alto" etc. The implications of these musical elements will be discussed later. In the case of "Debtor's Lane" drums and ogene (gong) call for a dance movement.

Another structural factor to be noted here is the separation of the stanzas into A, B, and A and B. This immediately calls up the solo/chorus structure but, more specifically, the chorus structure of Greek theatre with which Okigbo was familiar through his classical studies. Again the practice of chorus performance in Greek Theatre implied patterned movement by the two parts into which the chorus was divided.

Though "Debtor's Lane" was written in Fiditi in 1959, its theme is provoked less by that environment than by literary sources. The element of Fiditi being a hide-out is there in the statement of the A speaker who contests a putative past of hectic social activity with the present:

No heavenly transports now
of youthful passion
and the endless succession
of tempers and moods
in high societies;

But, as noted by J.P. Clark who first published it in The Horn, and others who have written on the poem, "Debtor's Lane" is heavily dependent for its sounds and even its images on T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men".

~~With this study of three early poems, let me move on to a summary of the implication of Okigbo's early corpus. "Love~~

Apart^{ly}, written in 1960, and published separately in anthologies and even in the Collected Poems in 1986, was a translation and reworking of an extract from the Spanish poet, Miguel Hernandez's "El amor ascendia entre nosotros". It found its final resting place as the final coda of the longish ^esequence "Lament of the Lavender Mist" which was to be the fourth of the Four Canzones. "Moonglow"^{ly} written in Ibadan, was published in Fresh Buds, the journal of English Department of the Nigerian College of Arts and Science in Enugu in 1961. It is a reworking of the Igbo children's story that the dark image in the full moon is that of a man who went to work on Sunday and so was ^{given}~~set~~ on the punishment of for^{ever} hewing wood:

And there engraved on the dead world,
Moonman,
bowed in shame over the beam
I see you,
hear ever your penance as you measure
cup after cup your strength,
and Time
day after day its length.

Indent

"The Four Canzones"^{ly} the first major appearance of Okigbo's verse, finally appeared in Black Orpheus in 1962 (number 11) and contained poems written between 1957 and 1961. In addition to "Song of the Forest" and "Debtor's Lane" already discussed, it contained "Lament of the Flutes" and "Lament of the Lavender Mist". "Lament of the Flutes" was written in Ojoto in 1960. It represents a home-coming both at the physical and the emotional levels, what Sunday Anozie calls "a feeling of reconciliation in the poet". It recalls with some imagistic adaptation memories of childhood activities and environment.

Day breathes,
panting like torn horse—
We follow the wind to the fields

Bruising grass leaf ⁽blade and corn

...
 Night falls
 smearing sore bruises with Sloans
 boring new holes in old sheets, etc. ~~etc.~~

The central questions posed by this return concern what future to pursue - the religious service of Idoto or the sacrifice to Idoto through his poetic activity.

Shall I offer to Idoto
 my sand ⁽house and bones
 these ~~we~~ write no more on snow-patch?

The flavour ⁽of imagery from old English is there in the phrase or kenning "sandhouse and bones" for the human body. To write no more on snow-patch carries the connotation of ephemerality as whatever is written in a patch of snow quickly dissolves in the melting of the snow. But "snow-patch" is also a likely play on words and concepts by ^{Okigbo} ~~Christopher~~ suggesting the empty sheet of paper on which one writes. ^{He} ~~Okigbo~~ suggests one answer to his question about the avenue of service, not directly but through the combination of the old and the new in the poetic personality and style he was to evolve:

Sing to the rustic flute.
 Sing a new note.

Okigbo was to describe to Lewis Nkosi in ^a ~~the~~ 1962 interview his style of work:

As much as possible, I keep practicing ^s - I mean I try to keep informed. If I have nothing to say, I translate from Latin verse into English verse or from Greek verse into English verse and vice versa. I mean if I have nothing to say, I just keep translating - keep playing with work because I have seen that a poet, apart from being a writer, is also a technician. ~~(CPCCO, p241)~~

Clearly most of the early published poems of Okigbo are reworkings of poems, some translated, some ^{re} ~~re~~constructed, from other poets, given a local setting and flavour.

THE NSUKKA PHASE

Christopher Okigbo joined the staff of the new University of Nigeria in October 1960 as its officer in charge of the Library. He was not professionally qualified and had never worked in a ~~Library~~ before then. Chinua Achebe has told the story of Okigbo's quest for this job under the general framework of "he relished challenges and the more unusual or difficult the better it made him feel". Okigbo bought a book on librarianship, read it up on the journey from Fiditi to Nsukka, attended the interview, and won the job.

Okigbo's sojourn to the Nsukka environment was brief but centrally significant to his growth and achievement. And Biafran death! He told Vincent Ike that it was a compulsive urge to keep the Federal troops off the sacred grove of academe that made him take up arms.

The Library to which Okigbo came in October 1960 was two rooms in the Faculty of Education building. As assistant Librarian in-charge, he was responsible for organizing the collection of books and other documents and the management of the staff. Perhaps his largest single collection was the 12,000 books, parts of journals and pamphlets donated by the Founding Father of the University, the Right Honorable Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. By January 1961, a substantive Librarian, Dr. Rev. Athaide, assumed duties as the ~~University~~ librarian. By October 1961, Christopher Okigbo was posted to the Enugu Campus of the University where, again, he had to take charge of the ~~Campus~~ ~~Library~~ which was acquired as part of the merger process which made the Nigeria College of ~~Arts~~, Science and Technology at Enugu part of the University of Nigeria. By the middle of 1962,

Christopher Okigbo had resigned the library job of the University of Nigeria and taken on the challenge of representing Cambridge University Press in West Africa. In the history of the University of Nigeria written for its Silver Jubilee, Christopher Okigbo is memorialized, listed as one of the library staff who had died in the University's journey to its 25th birthday, ~~(p.145)~~, described as "the man who though not professionally qualified got the University going as assistant Librarian" ~~(p.42)~~, and his contribution and influence is acknowledged for "generating creative and literary work in the early years of the University" ~~(p.158)~~.

During the Nsukka phase, Okigbo continued his interest in sports, especially football. He coached and captained the Nsukka community soccer team which was successful in some of the inter-city competitions in the then Eastern Nigeria.)

Chess was another game that held much interest for ~~Christopher Okigbo~~ ^{him,} and he was an aggressive, enthusiastic player who could spend long hours at the game. ~~Anozie has described how well Christopher played with reference to a game he watched Christopher play against his elder brother Pius. A vivid memory my wife has of Christopher is of someone who would knock at our door as late as one o'clock in the morning, sweep into the room when the door was opened and demand for the chess board and me, he could sit and play till 5 a.m. He would not eat or drink. Then he would drive back to Enugu at that hour in the morning.~~

Clearly games played a large part in ~~the~~ ^{his} life, of Christopher ~~Okigbo~~ and he showed proficiency and dedication to playing and coaching several of them - football, cricket, table tennis and

chess. What is interesting is that the strategies which he adopted in his gamesmanship would be evident in his poetic strategies. Secondly Anozie, who saw him play at Nsukka, summarizes his perception of the persona of Limits, (and one attaches this description to Okigbo,) "as a smart centre-forward; the poet himself unites the offices of a spectator, a linesman and a radio announcer covering the game" ⁱⁿ a complex of interactions within the same imagination with the game/poem. Bernth Lindfors is more direct in his presentation of the strategies of Okigbo in the game he played.

He excelled in offensive rather than defensive positions - inside forward in soccer, batsman in cricket, aggressive puncher in boxing and ping-pong. He was the kind of player accustomed to making moves to which others had to respond.. He was, in other words, a quick and elusive trickster-athlete bent on avoiding capture and scoring goals.

Okigbo's involvement in games drew to a close at Nsukka. The opportunity which Nsukka offered him was in the area of vigorous literary communion. The University of Nigeria opened with a higher percentage than it would ever achieve again, of undergraduates studying English Language and Literature. Some of these students were very bright and enthusiastic. Among their lecturers were some enterprising staff from England and America, ^{particularly} ~~Among these~~ Mr. Peter Thomas ^{who} was to offer the opportunity for intense communion between Okigbo and himself and his students.

^e
~~Peter~~ Thomas has described how, soon after he started his seminars in his house for his Honours English students in October 1960, "somewhere about dusk, a slim, trim, round-face young Ibo, with close-cropped hair, and a quizzical, slightly brooding look, appeared" and asked for permission to sit in on the seminar. This was Christopher Okigbo, who was then, as Peter Thomas noted,

"a very efficient" acting Librarian. The relationship blossomed into an association of minds which Peter Thomas has written about in memorials, and which Christopher Okigbo recognized in his poem "For Peter Thomas". Though this poem did not survive into Labyrinths, it was published in the original version of Heavensgate and concludes with an affirmation of intimacy and acknowledgment of inspiration.

I am mad with the same madness as the
moon and my neighbour
I am kindled from the moon and the
hearth of my neighbour.

Peter Thomas has a copy of "Lament of the Flutes" in which Okigbo had inscribed "I could never have written this if I did not meet you". The title of Heavensgate was taken from a set of poems which Peter Thomas then had in manuscript. His summary of these meetings in Nsukka and later is that "always there was in our meetings a sharing of views, of music, or of silences, and an exchange reading of our poems - though he preferred to have me read his for him, because he said I made them sound better".

One of the students at the seminars taught by Peter Thomas was the now renowned critic and publisher Sunday Anozie. Anozie has given the description of the impression which Okigbo made on the students, especially himself, and how he was regarded on campus. In his Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric (~~London: Evans; New York: Africana, 1972~~) he reports that Okigbo struck him as "very individualistic, impressive and learned", a first impression that was to be "borne out by later experience". Again, this relationship grew. Okigbo was inclined towards bright younger people whom he would encourage to develop the best potential in themselves and to whom he would give his company,

advice, books and friendship.

Most noticeable was Okigbo's informality and unconventionality. This appeared specially in his mode of dress. In a ~~University~~ Campus that was formal enough to demand that staff give their lectures in academic gowns and students ~~not~~ ^{be} be admitted to the august presence of the Vice-Chancellor unless clad in that outfit, it was exciting and liberating for the young students to see their acting Librarian moving about "in a pair of Khaki shorts and an open-breasted short-sleeved shirt with the bottom all loose, and roughly shod in an old pair of sandals". This attracted a lot of the students to him, and he gave much hospitality and encouragement to those he found mentally exciting. His conversations were vigorous and literary. M.J.C. Echeruo who was then a young colleague emphasized this: "He had a passionate involvement in poetry and an eccentric manner which made that involvement all the more exciting; it was fun talking poetry with him".

Part of Okigbo's style in life and letters may have been deliberately designed to shock neighbours and friends with this unconventionality and mischievousness. He told my wife once that when he lived in Nsukka his neighbour was the expatriate Head of the English Department. The wife was very inquisitive about the comings and goings in Okigbo's house and would constantly peep out through the curtains at the house. Okigbo decided to shock her. One afternoon he brought out his local straw mat to the veranda of his house and, having ensured that the woman was peeping out, began vigorously to divest himself of all his clothes. The woman was so shocked she nearly fell out through the window. ~~Mrs. Nwoga, in retrospect, is not sure~~



~~whether Okigbo was trying to shock her or had actually shocked~~
~~Mrs. Noonan~~ ^{This is} ~~But it was probably a true story since Okigbo~~ ^{it}
~~concluded that the woman never peeped out again. But certainly~~
~~that~~ accords with Okigbo's personality which had a tendency to
 create an atmosphere, to generate vigorous scenes.

To complete the picture of Okigbo's life in Nsukka and its
 impact on his poetic development, one must refer to his contact
 with the non-campus life of the Nsukka environment. He developed
 an interest in village people and activities, and, given his
 character of absorbing creative and literary performances,
 derived new inspiration from village rituals and festivals and
 masquerade performances and poetry.

It was while he was in Nsukka and Enugu that Christopher
 completed "Lament of the Lavender Mist," and published the "Four
 Canzones", and also produced the final drafts of Heavensgate
~~(Mbari, 1962)~~ and Limits (Transitida, 1962; ~~Mbari~~, 1964).

"Lament of the Lavender Mist" is a love poem. ^{That is,} ~~Perhaps one~~
~~should have said~~ it is a poem about love except that it is not in
 the abstract; there is an addressee. In its style and
 phraseology it comes close to the Heavensgate poems which were
 being crafted at the same time.

Why it requires "three flutes" while the earlier "Lament of
 the Flutes" requires "two flutes" still needs to be explored.
 The first stanza of the first ~~of~~ of the four movements of the poem
 appears to carry two pictures which have no apparent link

Black dolls
 Returning from the foam:
 Two faces of a coin
 That meet afar off...

This is characteristic of early Okigbo poetry: a staccato juxtaposition of logically unrelated phrases and images and concepts. These certainly alert the reader to an approach to meaning which is not based on the logical or even visually or imaginatively coherent elements. One is alerted to the openness of the senses and the mind to a variety of incoherent and even discordant bits of experience. The meaning one obtains is a feeling which may or may not be definable in encapsulated summary, but one which is vigorous and occasionally illuminating.

In prosaic terms, one is tempted to identify "Black dolls/Returning from the foam" with village belles returning from the stream. The juxtaposed image of the coin, again in prosaic terms, suggests some comment on the communality of the nature of women, whether black or white, whether rural or urban. But there is too much extra material in the poem to allow one to settle down with these prosaic equivalences.

The next stanza personifies the sea and draws a visually vivid and sensitive picture of the sea, the foam where it hits the shore, the serenity beyond the foamy contact line

Sea smiles at a distance
with lips of foam
Sea walks like a rainbow
beyond them

The next stanza takes us away from the black dolls and the sea itself into the psyche and memory where the dolls are redefined and qualified:

all caps → ~~Dolls~~
Dolls...
Forms
Of memory,
To be worshipped
Adored
By innocence:

Creatures of the mind's eye
 barren -
 Of memory -
 Remembrance of things past.

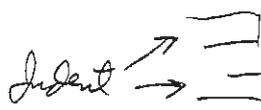
That last line pulls us back into the compositional strategy of using phrases taken from just about anywhere in contexts not related to their original use. "Remembrance of things past" is the exact title of a series of novels by the late 19th and early 20th century writer Marcel Proust. Thematically one is again tempted to adopt this unit of lines as a statement on the nature of ^{the} man-woman relationship: How desirable women are in retrospect or to the eyes of innocence, how really the consummation of contact is valueless. But we are swept on to another plane when violent images of external and internal reality are juxtaposed intrusively and here we have many of the symbols and images of later poetry

Eagles in space and earth and sky
 Shadows of sin in grove of orange
 Of alter-penitence, ~~etc~~

Echoes in the prison of the mind
 Shadows of song of love's stillness, ~~etc~~

ending with a surprisingly vivid and sensitive, humanized^Z, image of a natural phenomenon of dead leaves in a garden seen as lying, having been "wounded by the wind"³

The second movement of the poem takes us further away from a realistic interpretation of the poem. The Lady of the Lavender Mist is seen as a powerful, threatening and fruitless force

Ident →  scattering
 Lightning shafts without rain,
 Came forging
 Thunder with no smell of water -

The third and fourth movements present the processes and phases of contact between the persona of the poem and the Lady of the

Lavender Mist. She is further identified with the "spirit of the wind and the waves". The interaction is staccato and violent, partly insulting and frustrating, and finally unfulfilled.

The fourth movement ends with the often anthologized and debated "Love Apart". In its full context, it clearly reflects a physically unconsummated love. The earlier lines show the progression from the insulting "offer ^{red me} ~~me~~ love in a/Feeding bottle" to "But the outstretched love/Dried as it reached me -". Those earlier lines also contain an example of Okigbo's use of supposedly private symbols which are actually taken from the Igbo tradition. "Kernels of the water of the sky" is a direct translation of "aki mmili igwe" which was what, as children, we called the hailstones that came with the stormy rains. And we used to run around in the rain and pick these hailstones but they quickly melted and hardly got into our mouths - an apt image for the frustrating love relationship which was being described in this movement.

"Lament of the Lavender Mist", which may be taken to conclude Okigbo's juvenalia, was not a completely meaningless poem. Yet it contained the challenging code to seek its meaning outside the logic of its presentation, in characteristic Okigbo fashion. Indeed it carries much of interest — thematically, symbolically and stylistically — that prepares us for his major works. As Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie wrote, "the theme of memory as an important experiential dimension to our poet's imaginative vision, is now more symbolically expressed than previously. In style, the canzone is more broken in rhythm than the earlier pieces. It is evocative of meaning cummulatively through phrase

juxtapositions; repetitions and rephrasings; freely collocating images from Christianity and African religion" (CPCO, 293)^e

Two of those major works, Heavensgate and Limits, were produced and refined at Nsukka between 1960 and 1962. Anozie has described how he met Okigbo in his house while he worked on the poems

I arrived promptly at 5 o'clock and saw him lying down in short pants on his raffia carpet, with papers and books scattered all over the table and the floor; there was also a small typewriter in a leather case. These papers, I later found out, were the original manuscripts of Heavensgate and Limits, nearly all completed but being retyped and, as was Okigbo's ~~work~~^{work}, retouched.~~se~~_{went,}

Heavensgate was Christopher Okigbo's first major publication. It was one of the publications done by the Mbari Writers and Artist's Club at Ibadan in 1962, and it was instantly recognized as an important new development in African poetry.

The poem sequence Heavensgate is now one of the units in Labyrinths (1971) and is available in that publication. As usual, with the republication, Christopher Okigbo reworked sections of the poem, combined some units and dropped some others. D.S. Izevbaye has presented these revisions in his essay, "Okigbo's Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird; a Reading of Heavensgate (1962)"^v. But basically the poem retains the same structure and meaning. ~~With the~~^{In} Labyrinths, Christopher added an introduction which gives his perception of the poems, and some notes to the more often mistaken elements of private symbolism.

In the "Introduction" to Labyrinths,^g Christopher gives this information on Heavensgate:

Heavensgate was originally conceived as an Easter sequence. It later grew into a ceremony of innocence, something like a man, an offering to Idoto...; the celebrant, a personage like Orpheus, is about to begin a journey. Cleansing.. The various sections of the poem, therefore, present this

celebrant at various stages of his cross.

This is far from being an easy statement on the meaning of a difficult poem. But some key factors towards the comprehension of as much of the poem as possible are to be extracted from this presentation: Easter, innocence, offering, cleaning, celebrant at various stages of his cross. The striking juxtaposition of Christianity and Idoto worship and the Orpheus myth also alerts us to strands of religious and mythical traditions that inform the imagination of our poet.

Heavensgate, in Okigbo's chosen final version, consists of five sections: The Passage, Initiations, Watermaid, Lustra and Newcomer. Early reviewers of the publication spoke of the "ritualistic feeling of the whole poem", the "organic fusion of Christian and pagan imagery", the "atmosphere of myth and legend" and of Okigbo as "a poet for the ear and not for the eye" (Ulli Beier). They spoke of "measure, control, craft, and a refinement of utterance that at time verges on the precious" and of "honesty and rigor" (Denis Williams). But there was hesitation in attempting to interpret the poem till Sunday Anozie suggested "the totality of this poem as richly exploratory of the creative process in poetry and of what has earlier been referred to as the poet's own personal myth or predicament" (CPCO, 53).

As more of Okigbo's poetry became published and the organic link between them was seen as intrinsic, later critics began to articulate the position of Heavensgate as the first stage in a journey that was Okigbo's poetic life and poetic myth. Izevbaye ~~can then say~~ ^{said} that "Heavensgate is an account of its own uncompleted quest only" (CPCO, 75) and Udoeyop that "Heavensgate is the beginning of Okigbo's journey into consciousness" (CPCO, 72).

55).

Heavensgate is Okigbo's presentation of the growth of his mind/personality/psyche up to the time of its writing. This growth is figured in both religious and artistic terms in poetry of great musical effects and humorous play with the sound and meaning and even appearance of words. The element of humour is most often neglected and this has led to the search for deep meaning where the play on words should be enjoyed for its own value. Indeed, friends led Christopher to revise the poem and remove some of the most witty punning and nonsense word collocations ~~that was~~ possible in the English language usage of Africa.

"Passage" starts with obeisance to Idoto, the deity of the river Idoto, an obeisance that involves humility, contemplation and expectation and also identifies the protagonist as one who is crying "out of the depths". Strictly, the poem is not an invocation in the sense of inviting the presence of the deity. It is more like a prayer of acknowledgement and supplication. In this prayer, we are introduced to the village deity of the poet's birthplace, to the totems and legends of her worship. The two other poems that make up "Passage" call up the experiences of childhood - not only the poet's childhood but the childhood of the world

Dark waters of the beginnings
and the childhood of a day

Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom
Foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of

but this is a sunrise that already presages the end of the world,
since we were taught from the Bible that, since the first

destruction of the world was by water, the next and final one will be by fire. The protagonist emerges as a sad, lonely person, a mournful bird of prophecy with a mother to lament. We also experience an environment, recalled by phrases and references and echoes, ~~the~~ the active childhood environment of Christopher in Catholic mission compounds; "orangery", "silent faces at crossroads", "festivity in black", "loft pipe organs", etc.

"Initiations" recreates the various learning experiences through which the poet grew. The first poem of the sequence concerns the religious and educational elements from modernity, especially the mystery of initiation into the Christian religion. An attitude of rejection of that initiation is generated by various factors - "scar of crucifix", the direction of the preaching, the derogatory implications of the geometric symbolism. But there is the characteristic Okigbo humour in this poem. Kepkanly, mentioned three times in the poem, is described in Okigbo's footnote as "A half-serious, half-comical primary school teacher of the late thirties". The hidden linguistic joke is that the teacher's name was derived from the fact that he used to command the schoolboys' marching with "Aka ekpe, aka nli" (left, right) which, pronounced fast, yields Kepkanly. Indeed, the end of that poem is nostalgic - "but the solitude within me remembers Kepkanly...."

The other two poems of "Initiations" draw from the village aspects of the learning process, encounters with spectacular wits. Jadum was a madman who got his name from his prefix to his riddling statements

Jam Jam Dum Dum...
Say if thou knowest

Upandru, the other wit, is described in the footnotes as "A village explainer". What emerges from these two poems is a conception of poetry as "logistics", a manner of statement affective but not necessarily logical and which is open to "the errors of the rendering..."

"Watermaid" provides a beautiful phase in the progression of the poet. The solitary child mourning his mother, has matured through a learning experience to the stage of expecting and encountering briefly the object of man's desire. To me, the poems in the "Watermaid" sequence constitute the sensitive highlights of Heavensgate.

The four poems of the "Watermaid" sequence recreate anticipation, brief encounter, the sense of loss and the concluding despair. These poems have been the least revised of Okigbo's poem and this indicates how ^{nearly} ~~near~~ perfect ^{they were when} they came to him from the beginning. The object of desire, "Watermaid" could quite easily be whatever girl Christopher was interested in at this phase of his growth, but, within the mythic framework of his poetry, the figure has grown into the figure of the mammywater of local legend, and may also be interpreted as another shape taken by the goddess of the poet's quest.

Thematically, therefore, "Watermaid" reflects another facet of the frustrating development of our solitary protagonist — the urge to write with the goddess/love/muse and the disappointment and despair that arises from her brief but unfulfilling appearance.

"Lustra" portrays the attitude and process of cleansing.

Okigbo did say that the process was a ritual necessitated by his change of place of habitation. But it fits into the whole Heavensgate sequence in terms of the protagonist's having to resort to the act of penitence to improve his readiness for a successful encounter with his goddess after the aborted encounter in "Watermaid". The event is set in a clearing among the hills, and the offerings are traditional ritual gifts. The tendency has been to see this poem in terms of Okigbo's return to traditional religion. But Okigbo refused to be tied to any religion, for the second poem of the sequence moves over to take its image from the Christian liturgical system.

"Newcomer" has been seen as Okigbo's vision of his readiness, after the cleansing, for a new life of communion with his muse/goddess. I am aware that this unit is a mixed bag of poems written for occasions like the birth of Christopher's niece, Georgette's daughter; and, in the original version, for his friend Peter Thomas. The first poem of the unit, the Angelus poem, shows a violent reaction to the angelus bells, "the bells of exile" here indicating a withdrawal from the demands of Catholic devout practice of saying the Angelus prayers at the 6 hourly intervals. But Okigbo is careful here to indicate that the mask over his face is "my own mask - not ancestral", and that the mask is generated out of two traditions, one derived from calvary (Christianity) and the other from the "age of innocence" (traditional religion). The violence against Christianity is because it is the most serious prison out of which he is breaking.

At the time Heavensgate was published in 1962, it was not clear to anybody that it was the first sequence in a set of poems

that would be organically linked to explore experience of the type which Okigbo's poetry was to become. What was strikingly evident was that here was a new, strong voice in modern African poetry. Sunday Anozie could correctly write "Heavensgate is indeed a serious slap in the face of our Nigerian poetry readers who have not yet grown out of the 'patriotic' nausea, the 'palm-tree' - and 'River Niger' sentimentalism of Chief Osadebay's 'Africa Sings' and its coterie" (~~CPCO, 48~~)² Here indeed was a vibrant music maker with words whose poems could be heard but not seen, a sensitive and controlled craftsman who was jolting the sensibility of the complacent modern audience with the introduction of ritual paraphernalia from traditional religion and confronting the taken-for-granted Christian orthodoxy, a cultural revivalist who, calling himself a prodigal, returns to pay obeisance to his traditional deity, Idoto.

The overall meaning of Heavensgate would emerge when the set of poems to which it belonged was completed and the mythic pattern of Okigbo's development became manifest. What was clear right from the beginning was the set of concerns that featured in the poem - religion, both Christian and traditional, education and the childhood experiences, love and desire, frustration and, above all, the mentality of a suffering and confused protagonist who is confronted with these experiences - "the Orpheus figure at the beginning of his quest"³

Another aspect of interest ^{immediately} generated by Okigbo's poetry ~~at~~ ~~once~~ was the matter of the influence that liberated his imagination into the creation of this vibrant, new poetry in Africa. Okigbo himself was to reply to a Transition

questionnaire, and, in an interview with Lewis Nkosi, assert that he wrote under the spell of the impressionist composers. As he put it to Lewis Nkosi

- when I was working on "Heavensgate", I was working under the spell of the impressionist composers Debussy, Caesar Franck, Ravel, and I think that, as in the music of these composers who write of a watery, shadowy, nebulous world, with the semitones of dream and the ~~nuances~~ of the rainbow, there isn't any clearly defined outline in my work. (CPCO,

242)

nuances

He also would acknowledge the influence from Raja Ratnam, Malcolm Cowley, Stephen Mallarme, and Rabindranath Tagore. But it has been established that he was intensely influenced by Ezra Pound whom he probably deliberately neglected to mention anywhere. J.P. Clark has noted about the "Watermaid" sequence that "The bright aura and dazzle, the armpit, the lioness, the white light, the waves as escort, the crown and moonlight, the transience of the maid like 'matchflare in the wind's breath,' the mirror and gold crop, all constitute an apparatus completely taken from Pound's Cantos 6 and 104..." Egudu has also established that even beyond these phrases and images, Okigbo was heavily influenced by the technical aspects of Pound's work, especially the techniques of phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia, i.e "throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination"; "inducing emotional correlation by the sound and rhythm of the speech"; "inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual and emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed" (CPCO, 33).

In Heavensgate then, Okigbo establishes his protagonist as a prodigal, a consciousness aware of the need for a new journey of self-discovery which has to start with a cleansing, a prodigal

who has to restore himself to a unified personality and psychic stability.

The other major work completed at Nsukka was Limits. Okigbo described it even before it was published.

My LIMITS was influenced by everything and everybody. But this is not surprising, because the LIMITS were the limits of a dream. It is surprising how many lines of the LIMITS I am not sure are mine and yet do not know whose lines they were originally. But does it matter? ~~(Transition 2, 5, 122)~~

While talking to Lewis Nkosi in 1962, he described its parts and the stages of the writing.

Limits is in two sections, first published separately, in Transition, 2, 5 (1962): 18 - 19, and Transition, 2, ^{6/7}~~5~~ (1962): 39-40, and later published in book form by Mbari in 1964. These two parts are named "Siren Limits" (parts I-IV) and "Fragments out of the Deluge" (parts V-X). In the interview, Okigbo spoke of "Siren Limits" as the prelude and said that he wrote it early in August 1961, that there was a gap of three months before he did the other parts, but that the whole work was not ready till May 1962.

Okigbo also spoke of the sections of Limits in classical musical terms. Showing how much his imagination was ^{suffused}~~suffered~~ with the strategies of the musical composers

The limit is, I will say, the limit of a dream and the prelude is about one-quarter of it divided into four parts, the first one which is the prelude to the preludes, and the second one which is a response by a chorus, the third one is the first development, and the fourth one is a divagation. Then we go into the heart of the work itself; there are six parts to the main work itself and the last one is almost an epilogue. ~~(CPCO, 238)~~

The statements by Okigbo are interesting, in terms of introducing one to an appreciation of his mode of thought in connection with the poem. But in terms of the usual approach of

extracting meaning out of a poem, they are not very helpful. The central concerns of Limits have been seen in two directions: the private personal and the public national/cultural.

"Siren-Limits" the first four poems of the sequence, operate mainly at the private level. The first poem re-introduces the protagonist at an act of sacrifice. It sets the scene at a time-space environment that is mysterious - "palm grove" "between sleep at waking" and recalls the Idoto/watermaid figure of devotion now addressed as "Queen of the damp half light". The claim at the end of the poem that the protagonist has had his cleansing, links Limits with the preoccupation in Heavensgate. The quest for self-fulfillment, which is our poet's predilection, is seen in terms of a desired union with the Queen, and this union requires an act of subjection and self-purification from our protagonist.

While the second poem of the sequence gives a sedately moving picture, sustained through a single consistent plant image, of achievement, the third strains at conveying the picture of a frustrating and frustrated pilgrimage. These two poems have formed the basis of several interpretations of the "Siren Limits" as a statement on national cultural suppression, or on the artistic achievement and frustration. The interpretation of Okigbo here as elsewhere is at the interpreter's risk in terms of what external realities to attach to the pattern set up by the poet.

The third poem is also an illustration of how an incident can be turned in the imagination and poetry of Okigbo, into a much larger phenomenon and be so treated as to assume the

dimensions of a universal myth. Okigbo's statement that "Limits was written at the end of a journey of several centuries from Nsukka and Yola in pursuit of what turned out to be an illusion" contains a mythic time factor "a journey of several centuries". But the poem in which this is recreated is much bigger in its use of the pilgrimage motif set in a large nebulous world and ending in mysterious awakening to failure. The critic, Dan Izevbaye, attributes this technique to "the basic symbolist preoccupation to distill the poet's personal experiences into an aesthetic experience not necessarily related to the original experience" (CPCO, 312)

The fourth poem re-introduces us to that female figure again, the subject of dedication and devotion by the poet, this time made ugly, dangerous and distracting

Oblong-headed lioness -
 No shield is proof against her -
 Wound me, O sea-weed
 Face, blinded like strong-room.

At the end of "Siren Limits" then, we are recalled to the perennial quest motif, after a presumed fulfillment as a persona/poet and an apparent disastrous failure of action, and a continuation of the theme and quest is promised in the concluding lines

When you have finished
 & done up my stitches,
 Wake me near the altar,
 & this poem will be finished...

"Fragments out of the Deluge" the second part of Limits, recreates a more external environment of cultural and national conflict. Okigbo himself described it as rendering "in retrospect certain details of the protagonist and of his milieu - the collective rape of innocence and profanation of the

mysteries, in atonement for which he has had to suffer immolation^W. This section takes its images and allusions from various historical and literary sources right back to the beginning of literature in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh. The references come as close and personal as Flannagan ("a well-known Irish Priest of the 1940s"), Eunice ("my childhood nurse known for her lyricism"). Reference is made to Picasso for his painting known as Guernica and to William Cadenhead's Flights of Fancy and Lays of Bon-Accord for the curse

Malisons, malisons, mair than ten -

The sequence is not purely external. At various points we are presented with images of a suffering, rejected protagonist. But the main strokes of this part of the poem reflect vigorously on the destruction of the innocence and traditions of the protagonist's environment. Poems VIII and X are the most dramatic in presenting the activities in terms of "a fleet of eagles" snooping "out of the solitude" over "the forest of oil bean". The destructive action is described in terms of the entering of the grove of mystery and despoiling the twin-gods of the forest. The rout here, which Okigbo attributes to external forces as part of his strategy for referring to the impact of the colonial political and religious activities on African ~~culture~~, was historically committed by the people of Ojoto in 1929 against their gods who had turned vicious to them. It is part of Igbo tradition for people to destroy and remove their deity if the deity fails in the duties for which it was recognized or turns round and breaks the contractual relationship with the people by inflicting unexplained violence on them. But Okigbo uses ^{even} that

~~even~~ successfully in this poem to revive in very dramatic imagery the history of colonial cultural contact.

What links the whole poem is the figure of the Sunbird. At the beginning of "Siren Limits" we have the talkative "weaverbird". In Limits VIII, we are introduced to the sunbird which warns of the impending attack and doom. Nobody listens and the holocaust ensues. But at the end

The sunbird sings again
From the LIMITS of the dream, ..

The underlying theme that emerges here is the validity and undying nature of the creative ideal and the fate of the community which rejects it". (~~D.I. Nwoga, CPCC 105~~) It is therefore Okigbo's statement on the growth and nature of the poet and on his position in the community.

Though these two major poems were finished by the time Okigbo left the University of Nigeria, their publication belongs to a later phase of his life. To conclude the Nsukka phase of his life, one must mention the value of this experience in terms of the opportunities it gave him - opportunities which apparently he used enthusiastically to renew and strengthen his contact, not only with the village environments of Nsukka and Ojoto, but also his contact with his father and his new family. And also with Sefi, the daughter of the Atta of Igbira, the wife he would marry in 1963.

Not much is said about this aspect of Okigbo's life, but it was important to him. Peter Thomas did mention how much Okigbo was in love with Sefi. Living closely with Christopher as mature adults that shared much in common, ~~Peter~~ Thomas was able to separate his internal moods from his outside behaviour. In the

memorial to Okigbo, he declared:

In private, the mask of mischief and bonhomie would sometimes be discarded - though seldom for very long - and I could see why it was that most of the poems made such profoundly sad, often nostalgic, music. For one thing, there was his wife, bonded to a school in the North, up near Lake Chad. "Every time I meet her," he told me once, "I fall in love all over again." And I remember his radiant face and contagious joy when he announced the birth of the daughter.."

The birth of the daughter would not be till Ibadan 1964. But the separation from Sefi lasted through the Nsukka days.

A December 16, 1960 letter from Christopher to his father is practically all about Sefi:

My dear Papa,

.....

I am sorry Sefi could not come home last month. She was not granted local or casual leave to travel. But she is coming down this week end. She hopes to arrive at Nsuka [sic] on Sunday Oe [sic] Monday. I will therefore bring her home some time next week.

As regards the wedding: I am not yet sure when it will be. Sefi and I have to agree on the timing when she arrives.

I hope you and the family are well. I will be coming home with Sefi next week.

Your affectionate son,
[Signed]

Obviously, Sefi had won the heart of the family but the Government that gave her her study scholarship claimed her services. It is not clear, however, that Christopher would have desired to live permanently with her. Sunday Anozie has said that Okigbo could not live happily under the same roof for a long time with a woman *Went*. How much of this was bravado and how much represented Christopher's true sentiments? When Christopher wrote that "Limits was written at the end of a journey of several centuries from Nsukka to Yola in pursuit of

what turned out to be an illusion," one is tempted to speculate that this journey was a frustrated visit to the location where Sefi was engaged in teaching at the time.

THE SECOND IBADAN PHASE

By the time Heavensgate was published, Okigbo was living in Ibadan as the West African Representative of Cambridge University Press. As he put it in his answer to the Transition Conference Questionnaire "Now I am talking books for Cambridge, and writing poetry in my spare time. The first is a means to livelihood, the second a vocation" [~~2, 2 (1962): 12~~]

As the Nsukka phase had given him an opportunity to read more books, to listen to more music, and to make more contact with traditional and home realities, this Ibadan phase was to expose Okigbo to more public events, more contact with other writers and more international travel.

The first time I met Christopher was at the Kampala Conference of African writers of English Expression in June 1962. Every report of this Conference has highlighted three activities in which Christopher Okigbo was involved. One was the shocking statement by Okigbo that he did not read his poems to non-poets. Some critics have clung to this statement in order to emphasize Okigbo's elitism. To take this statement as seriously as it has been taken shows a misunderstanding of the personality of Okigbo. The occasion had given him an opportunity and he took every opportunity to create scenes. He was a person who would not waste his time doing or saying anything unless it was going to generate waves. And this statement did shock the audience. In reality he did read his poems at the Conference. And one has to

place the offending statement beside a later one in which Okigbo described the reaction of secondary school students to his reading of his poetry - how the children captured the affective experience without going through the process of logical understanding. Surely he read his poetry to these non-poets before they derived that experience.

The next aspect of Okigbo's participation was in his initiating discussion on the thorny question of what constitutes African literature. He was later to refuse to tie any tag of African or Negro to his own writing. But during this Conference he posed searching speculations as to the definition of African Literature - whether it was literature written by Africans, or by anybody on African subjects, or ^{possessed of} ~~on~~ special characteristics that are African. The tendency of the Conference was not to be too emphatic on circumscribing and localizing literature.

The third aspect had to do with the entertainment aspect. After-Conference sessions were vigorously held at the night clubs in Kampala, and Christopher was as enthusiastic as anybody else in taking advantage of the offerings at the clubs.

He was an eccentric, highly respected member of the Conference, and practical discussions led to his being appointed the West African editor for Transition, the intellectual journal being then edited in Kampala by Rajat Neogy. Indeed, Okigbo's poems soon started to appear in Transition.

Okigbo set up house in Ibadan in a rather grand fashion. Many have described its peculiar feel. Marjory Whitelaw took note of it when she interviewed him in 1965: "His house was large and well-furnished, with possibly an Italian air about it." The poet and critic Paul Theroux described its "white rugs and fake

fur walls and white cushions everywhere. Americans told me they hated the decor - 'It's not African,' they said, 'It looked Italian, like something out of Fellini'. It was clean and very comfortable and it was obvious that Okigbo was very happy in the house." Mrs. Nwoga remembers vividly the impression the house made on her during a visit in 1964:

It was part of creating a dramatic atmosphere . . . I was completely taken aback by his house, it looked like something out of a film set. The chairs were white fur and there were no arms to the chairs. You had to take off your shoes because the carpet was also white fur. And then you go on to a higher level and he was going to have lunch and this steward came out with tall red fez and a huge red cummerbund and a white shirt and white jacket - like something out of a Hollywood film set . . .

All these add up to the lack of conflict in Okigbo's mind and personality over the issue of "Conflict of Cultures" which ~~dominated~~ ^{discussions of} ~~critical attitudes to~~ African literature and its themes during the period. His house and furniture reflected his attitude of eclecticism, his willingness to use whatever resources were available to him from anywhere in the world to fashion his life, facilities and poetry, the more striking the factors the better. He made this very point in an interview with Robert Serumaga in London in 1965:

^{it is a lot of nonsense talk all this}
I think that ~~all~~ we hear nowadays of men of two worlds, ~~is a~~ lot of nonsense. I belong, integrally, to my own society just as, I believe, I belong also integrally to other societies than my own. The truth, is that the modern African is no longer a product of an entirely indigenous culture ... Personally I have never experienced any conflict whatsoever in this direction. I wear an Italian jacket, ~~and a tie,~~ and I'm very comfortable. I'm not wearing Nigerian dress. I'm not comfortable in Nigerian dress, ~~but that,~~ doesn't make me non-Nigerian. This afternoon I ate lamb chops, tomorrow afternoon I may eat pounded yam at the Nigerian House, and I will still enjoy it.

of course,

- I'm not Italian, I'm an African. I wear

The house that Christopher Okigbo set up at Ibadan did not take a family into account. Though he married in 1963, he did not

bring his wife to live in Ibadan with him. This ^{may have been} ~~is still~~ possibly because she was teaching in Northern Nigeria. But she had enough social connections to be released from her scholarship bond and transferred to Ibadan if Okigbo had so insisted. I believe that Christopher could not really have shared the same house with a wife. He said as much to his friends, and Kole Omotosho ^{of} has reported the influence ~~of~~ this statement made ~~in~~ in 1965 on him:

Okigbo said he could not imagine a situation whereby he would live in the same house with a woman as his wife. I knew he was married... At that time I had read ^a ~~biography~~ of writers, poets, artists and it seemed that there was one constant problem: they never seemed capable of sustaining a marriage relationship. Being in close contact with one poet who expressed the same sentiment must have predisposed me to the ~~the~~ feeling I carried about with me for many years that one could not be a writer or an artist or a poet at the same time as a husband and a father. [CPCCO., 30]

Over the period, however, Okigbo ^{maintained} ~~kept~~ good contact with the wife. When their child was to be born in 1964, he insisted that the wife ~~had to~~ come ^{to} ~~over~~ to Ibadan to give birth to the baby at the University Teaching Hospital. Yet, when the period of serious labour ^{of} started, he ran away from the hospital. He did not show up till his elder brother Lawrence paid the bills and brought the wife and child from ^{the} hospital.

Okigbo was devoted to the child, ^{and he acquired a} ~~He should be.~~ ~~He had a~~ ~~very good~~ reputation as a lover of children. The testimony left by Chinua Achebe of the ~~relationship and~~ pranks played between Okigbo and Achebe's son of three, illustrates how playful Christopher could be. Indeed, he had inspired so much affection in the boy that when Chinua brought the news of Okigbo's death, the boy was provoked to a sensitive cry of "Daddy, don't let him die" which provided the title of Chinua Achebe's anthology of

memorial poems in honour of Okigbo.

Okigbo did not, obviously, have much of a chance to play with his own daughter, ~~But~~ there must have been some regular contact. When he came back from the Edinburgh Festival and a business trip to London in July 1965, he wrote to his father indicating that he would be visiting home with his wife and daughter, Obiageli.

(Editor, perhaps you could reprint here the letter of 27 July 1965 attached.)

And when, in 1965, he completed work on the final edition of his poem sequences for Labyrinths, his dedication of the book was to "Sefi and Ibrahimat: Mother and Child". Ibrahimat ^{was another} ~~is better~~ known by ~~the~~ ^{name he gave to} ~~Okigbo and his family~~ as Obiageli, and ~~is now doing~~ very well as a student of languages.

Ibadan was the centre of a very vibrant literary and artistic culture and Okigbo participated fully in this. Ronald Dathorne has written of the interminable discussion that used to feature from house to house.

When everybody did meet in Clark's flat just under mine, J.P. talked J.P., Okigbo talked Okigbo; Soyinka refrained, saying that it was a mutual admiration society. But everybody wrote. Okigbo always introduced himself by proclaiming "I am Okigbo" and his volatile temperament seemed curiously crystallized in those words.

J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo were then all living in Ibadan with a large body expatriate art and literature scholars like Ulli Beier, Gerald Moore and Denis Williams. There was also a growing body of young Nigerian artists and scholars like Demas Nwoko who did the illustrations for Heavensgate, Abiola Irele, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotosho, etc.

The Mbari centre in Ibadan provided a focus for these literary and cultural activities, and Okigbo's presence regularly there was an inspiration to many young artists and budding creative writers.

The tribute ^{by} ~~of~~ Kole Omotoso in the essay "Christopher Okigbo: A Personal Portrait", ~~published in New Horn in 1974,~~ gives a vivid picture of a man who was a "vibrant personality", who took an interest in young talents, and was ready to spend a great amount of time with them, encourage them with his conversation, lend them books that he thought would sharpen their imaginations, and be generally available. These attributes remind one of the descriptions ^{by} ~~of~~ Sunday Anozie of his ^{own} contacts earlier with Okigbo at Nsukka. ~~Though Omotoso's portrait was written with the sorrow of mourning the poet, it still showed how full of pranks he was - recounting an occasion when Okigbo repaired his typewriter with the cleverness of a agile athlete, re-spoilt it with the air of a shylock, and repaired it again, having taught the young man how expensive ignorance about practical matters could be.~~ ^{none the less} The last telephone conversation between Omotoso at the Mbari club at Ibadan, and Okigbo ~~now at Enugu~~ after the mass exodus of Eastern Nigerians from other parts of Nigeria epitomized the physical, emotional and psychological break in communication that was the prelude to the Nigerian civil war.

Okigbo's work with Cambridge University Press also put him in contact with many writers and made international travel routine. This gave him access also to attending cultural activities at the international level, and some of his later poems were first read in such contexts.

During the period 1962 to 1965 Okigbo was often interviewed

both in Ibadan and London. These interviews give us good insights into his ideas on life, art and criticism.

He spoke to Lewis Nkosi in 1962 of the kind of audience which he wished for his poetry. He was aware that not many Nigerians read poetry, and even among these there were few who would be naturally attracted to the kind of poetry he wrote which they would consider difficult. For his audience, therefore, he ^{wanted kindred spirits,} ~~these~~ "other poets all over the world to read and see whether they can share in my experience". Applause was nothing he hankered after since quite often the applause would be for the wrong reasons. "I don't think I have any ambition to become a very popular poet. I think I am just satisfied if a good deal of friends come by my work and get something out of it."

From various interviews we learn of the influences that entered his work, ranging from musicians and poets of the impressionist and symbolist movements, to writers of the modern world, including the Beat poets of the San Francisco movement, to classical Roman and Greek literatures and Babylonian mythologies, to the traditions of Igboland and Africa.

Many of the biographical details about the dates of Okigbo's working on his poem sequences are derived from the interviews. Also it is in these interviews that he described his style of work, especially the need he felt to work steadily at the ~~CRAFT~~ of poetry, ~~so that when he felt he had nothing new to say, he did translations and reworked them, sharpening his craft towards the kind of refined musical and imagistic lines that he produced.~~

About the need for craft he said this to Nkosi:

A poem can come by accident and a lot of it does come by accident, but it has to be molded into the form in which you

want it preserved and this means a ^glost of - this embraces the question of craftsmanship. I believe that there is craft apart from the art - if there is craft alone, then you can easily see through the thing and see that there isn't any feeling but art isn't enough, there must be craft also.

This issue of craft and art was to feature prominently in other interviews in which he gave his opinions on Negritude ~~Poetry~~, on the poetry of some of his contemporaries, and also gave his critical evaluation of art exhibitions and the poetic and visual arts publications of the Mbari and Black Orpheus media. He insisted on his preference for sensitive poetry as against "academic versifying"^g, he rejected the concept of the "black mystique" inherent in the Negritude movement, and found ^gdisfavour with the tendency of Ulli Beier to give prominence, and indeed pride of place, to experimental work which did not show enough evidence of originality and ~~CRAFTMANSHIP~~.

Two issues discussed by Okigbo in the interviews are important for the consideration of his life and poetry: ~~these are~~ the issues^g of poets and commitment, and that of meaning in poetry. On the first ~~issue~~ he rejected the manner of overt commitment which appeared to be demanded as a program^g for the creative writer. In his interview with Marjory Whitelaw in 1965, he was very explicit on the question. He did not see that self-exploration was an irrelevance in the crisis of change taking place in Africa:

Because the writer isn't living in isolation. He is interacting with different groups of people at different times. And any inward exploration involves the interaction of the subject with other people, and I believe that a writer who sets out to discover himself, by so doing will also discover his society. ^gI don't think that I like writing that is 'committed'. I think it is very cheap. I think it is the easy way of doing it.

As a corollary to this position, he gave no special place to

the creative writer in terms of national political or social roles. Poems were expressions of their states and they could affect readers in different ways, and it was up to the audience to do what they preferred with the poetic product. He did not think that "it is necessary for the writer to assume a particular function as The Messiah or anything like that". He made a distinction between the person as a citizen and the person as a writer and thought that though the individual may assume any role he chose, "I don't think that the fact that he's a writer should entitle him to assume a particular role". The example he chose was that of the role of teacher, which put him at the opposite end from Achebe who had spoken in 1964 of the role of the novelist as teacher. For Okigbo:

If he [the writer] wants to educate people he should write text books. If he wants to preach a gospel he should write religious tracts. If he wants to propound a certain ideology he should write political tracts.

This attitude ^{toward} ~~to~~ the role of writer/citizen was ominous and indeed prepares one to understand why, when the Nigerian crisis came to the point of war, Okigbo did not retire to the role of poet of the revolution, but took up arms physically as a Biafran citizen.

The second issue is related to this and concerns the intention of the poet in terms of meaning. Christopher's poem "Lament of the Drums" had featured at the Commonwealth Arts Festival in July 1965, and Robert Serumaga asked him how the poem came about. Okigbo's response attributed the poem to the drums. He created the drums ^{all right} ~~alright~~ but what they said in the poem was their own - "the drums spoke what they spoke". To Serumaga's further comment on the immense difficulty of intellectually

comprehending the poem, Okigbo made this often quoted statement which explains his attitude ^{toward} ~~to~~ meaning in poetry:

Well, because what we call, understanding - talking generally of the relationship between the poetry-reader and the poem itself - 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 from an audience, the poem has succeeded. Personally I don't think that I have ever set out to communicate a meaning. It is enough that I try to communicate experience which I consider significant.

This statement is very important for the formulation of strategies for finding the meaning and participating in the experience embedded in the Okigbo poetic sequences.

Okigbo's poetic creativity flourished and came to a conclusion in Ibadan. In 1962 ~~Christopher Okigbo~~ ^{he} completed "Lament of the Silent Sisters" which was immediately published in Transition 8 (1963). ~~As he explained to Robert Serumaga, in the 1965 interview,~~ 1963 produced no poem. In 1964 he completed two poems: "Lament of the Drums" and "Distances". "Lament of the Drums" was the second part of "Silences" while "Distances" concluded Okigbo's quest poetry. Though these are few in number, they represent major poem sequences. When Transition published "Distances" in ~~Vol. 4.16 (1964)~~ ¹⁹⁶⁴ it promised that

with the publication of "Lament of the Drums" in Transition 18 next year, Okigbo will have created a body of poetry that will rank him the major poet in English speaking Africa.

(p. 2)

Though "Lament of the Silent Sisters" was written in 1962 and was closer in time to Limits, it was "Distances" written and published in 1964, that Okigbo saw as the complement to Limits.

In the "Introduction" to Labyrinths, he wrote of them as follows:

Limits and Distances are man's outer and inner worlds projected - the phenomenal and the imaginative, not in terms of their separateness but of their relationship.

He went further to say of Distances that it is "a poem of homecoming, but of homecoming in its spiritual and psychic aspect."

There have been several studies of "Distances" and these all confirm it as the poem of fulfillment of the quest which is at the centre of Okigbo's development poetry. In many ways it is a terrifying poem and Okigbo takes full advantage of the dream, euphoric state which he presented as related to the physical state that is the correlative of the psychic experience. HE himself also said that "Distances was written after my first experience of surgery under general anesthesia."

The homecoming was "from flesh into phantom on the horizontal stone", the horizontal stone being both the operating table, and the altar of the deity. The first poem of which the quotation is the first line, has recently been illuminatingly studied from the "speech act" theory perspective by John Haynes [~~"Okigbo's Technique in 'Distances I'", RAL 17.1 (1986): 73-84]~~ to show how an awareness of the stances taken by the poet reveals the characters at work in the poem. The study helps to expose each character's field of discourse and allusion and therefore meaning. This poem declares three times, "I was the sole witness to my homecoming", and we are invited to ask where he has arrived, where he was coming from, and the context and meaning of homecoming.

Some critics have been tempted to declare that this homecoming was the final arrival at the worship of, and reunion

with Idoto, and a final rejection of Christ and Christianity. Others have seen it in terms of the achievement of a stage of aesthetic grace after a "whole cycle of spiritual and historical exploration." Still others have used the Jungian proposal of the anima and animus to posit the theme of self-fulfilling re}union of the two parts of the poet's self.

What is clear, again, is the pattern set up by this poem. Starting from the euphoric but obviously religious state of awakening, we move on to a pilgrimage motif which is endangered by the environment in poem II.

Death lay in ambush that evening in that island,
voice sought its echo that evening in the island.

Indeed this "Distance" II contains what may be called the most realized visual image in Okigbo, a terrifying transfiguration of the White Goddess, Idoto, Lioness, into the uncaring figure of Death - reminding one of Okigbo's reference to the object of his devotion as "the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative."

and beyond them all,
in smock of white cotton,
Death herself,
the chief celebrant,
in a cloud of incense
paring her fingernails ...

At her feet rolled their heads like cut fruits,
about her fell
their severed members, numerous as locust.

Like split wood left to dry, the dismembered
joints of the ministrants piled high.

She bathed her knees in the blood of attendants;
he mock in entrails of ministrants ...

The third, fourth and fifth poems of "Distances" explore the motif of pilgrimage in heavily Christian and Biblical imagery,

creating environments which identify and criticize various participants and actors in the journey of life - prophets martyrs lunatics ^{dilettanti} ~~dilettanti~~ vendors prunes negritude politicians ...

Ultimately, in the poem, the confusion clears, the unity of experience is appreciated and what Frazer^S calls "a spiritual apotheosis" is reached. In the end, the mysterious marriage of the mortal to the immortal occurs, the questing poet/protagonist makes the junction with the Goddess and this ends in glorious terms the anguished quest of life.

"Distances" completed the private quest for self-realization of the poet, but "Silences"^(S), in its two parts, marked the poet's involvement with the society in which he lived. Though he had declared that one need not set out to express meaning and that the poet's exploration of his own experiences would inevitably lead to his statement on his society, he did actually react to events of his time.

"Lament of the Silent Sisters" (1962) was provoked by the Western Nigeria crisis of 1962, "Lament of the Drums" by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo and the tragic death of Awolowo's eldest son. In another context, I have written on "Lament of the Silent Sisters" as heralding Okigbo's maturing into the poet of destiny. The agony of apprehension which had provided the internal dynamics of the poet's internal quest, yielded here a transformation of a political event into the human condition and the declaration of an attitude to that condition. As Okigbo was to say, the search in the poem was for the framework of words which could declare man's rejection of the human condition. "The problem 'How does one say NO in thunder' is then finally resolved in silence. For the ultimate answer is to be sought only in

terms of each poet's response to the medium".

"Lament of the Silent Sisters" also marked the peak of one style and a turning point in Okigbo's management of his words, images and sentences. Moving from the imitativeness dominated by the concept of objective and symbolist poetry, Okigbo achieves his own voice in this poem so that any identifiably foreign elements only add external supportive imagery to the poet's own thought and statement. In this "Lament.." the poet shares the concerns of his people and becomes their mouthpiece. The persistent images are these of drowning, of violence, of the trivialization of a rather disastrous tragedy and the anguish and "cadenced cry" of the perceiving consciousness.

"Lament of the Drums," on the other hand, was the attempt by Okigbo to create a dramatic self-exclusion and give the comments on the political situation to the funerary Drums. In the interview with Robert Serumaga, he said that all he did "was to create the drums and the drums said what they liked. Personally I don't believe that I am capable of saying what the drums have said in that first part" (CPCO, 247).

"Lament of the Drums" was a much revised poem. The first publication in Transition was quite different, especially in the first movement, from subsequent publications in Black Orpheus and Labyrinths. Okigbo has said how he wrote the third part, the section on Palinurus, some months before the other parts. The poem is a good example of how an event, already perceived in an image/symbol, grows till it far outstrips its original provocation and, by drawing together relevant parallel myths from all over the world, creates a new universal symbol. Here the

imprisonment of Awolowo and his tragedy, first seen in the Palinurus image, goes on to memorialize ~~the~~^{the} Christ's martyrdom and betrayal by Judas and ends up in the annual death ritual and renewal of the native deity Tammuz. The poem then ends with a recreation of Ishtar's lament for Tammuz. As Robert Fra^Ser has ^{noted} established in "~~Christopher Okigbo and the Flutes of Tammuz~~" (~~A Sense of Place~~, Gotenberg, 1984: 190-195) this use of ~~the~~^e Tammuz's death and resurrection myth recalls "that mysterious metamorphosis by which the authentic tragic spirit is enabled to convert devastation into matter for affirmative rejoicing".

THE LAST PHASE

By 1965, Okigbo was summarizing his poetry. "Distances" had concluded a phase of external and internal quest. He became lax both in his creativity and his publishing work. It was as if the spirit had left him after the disastrous movements in the politics of the Western Region of Nigeria where he was based. The months between early 1964 and late 1965 were not very productive poetically for Christopher. They were also months of not very efficient contribution to the publishing business of Cambridge University Press. Visitors to Okigbo over this period report much talking far into the nights, much thinking of other possible directions of exhilarating activities, and lack of interest in the mail - either his own or that of Cambridge University Press. His brother, Lawrence mentions seeing a ^{check}~~cheque~~ for a fair sum of money on Christopher's table and taking a look at it to find that it had expired after a year of not being cashed. Paul Theroux, who visited and stayed with him for some weeks in 1965, has written of Christopher's boredom with his job

at this time. He reports that by the time he met him "he was so bored by the job he had stopped opening his mail. It simply accumulated, like fallen leaves. A man came with mail-bags full of proof copies and catalogues, and Okigbo dumped these on the table without glancing at them." *e*

Two poems emerge from this period, both published in 1965: "Lament of the Masks", ~~first published in W.B. Yeats 1865-1965: Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats, edited by D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui of the University of Ibadan;~~ and "Dance of the Painted Maidens" which was Christopher's contribution to the Edinburgh Festival of that year.

"Lament of the Masks" draws practically all its ^{imagery} ~~images~~ from the Yoruba "oriki" in praise of the Timi of Ede, and I would not be surprised if the version used was the translation in Ulli Beier's Yoruba Poetry published then by Cambridge University Press. This lament contains many images referring to violence, and, even if the idea was the struggle which Yeats had to wage to establish a dignity for the Irish and their literature against British supercilious disdain, there is no doubt that the violence in politics in Nigeria ~~and~~ charged Christopher's imagination:

...
Charges to the assault;
...
For we answer the cannon
From far off -
And from throats of Iron
In bird-masks
Unlike accusing tones that issue forth javelins -

"Dance of the Painted Maidens" is pure sound. The repetitions of phrases and the choice of vowels and consonants make the poem ring with melody

After she had set sail after she had set sail
After the mother-of-the-earth had set sail

After the earth-mother on her homeward journey... etc.

This poem has inspired some excellent drawings by Obiora Udechukwu, a figure of the Nsukka School of art. The poem sets up a pattern, like most Okigbo poems, contrasting the absence of the Earth-Mother who departed from the scene with ^{what} obtains when she is present and the worship of her brings its efficacy.

Okigbo expressed indebtedness to Ben Obumselu of the University of Ibadan English Department for criticisms which affected "the phrase and structure" of the poems he wrote from Ibadan. Ben Obumselu has claimed that many of the poems which are taken with so much seriousness were jokes being played by Christopher. Specifically, he said that the "Hurry on down -" sequence in Limits III, culminating in

To pull by the rope
the big white elephant ...,

referred to Christopher's high expectation and his failure to perform sexually on a given occasion. One is tempted to read "Dance of the Painted Maidens" in this light. "Earth-Mother" is the Earth Deity. But it is also the masquerade "Mother-of-the-earth" (nne uwa). The expression can be used to describe a woman of some weight and prominence. This would make the sequence III of this poem have vivid sexual overtones. The masquerade/lady aspect is recalled again in IV where the words are those with which one answers a masquerade.

We did not know you
Who were whom we hold
For to know you was
To know the infinite

But then, no poem of Okigbo's stops with one level of interpretation of experience. The pattern set up could recapture

the external reality of cultural/political alienation by colonialism and the renewal and reintegration that was being achieved. The deity Earth-Mother, different from but serving the same function as the river goddess Idoto, becomes the desired object and achievement of re^yunion bring protection and salvation;

Today on your homecoming
Patient Mother
With you in our palm
The life horn is our cup.

The period early 1964 to late 1965, then, was a period of low productivity for Okigbo. But the catastrophic national activities towards the end of 1965 inspired Okigbo to his best and most admired set of poems entitled "Path of Thunder: Poems Prophesying War". These poems were available to be published post^yhumously in Black Orpheus, ~~1966~~ only because some friend had retained a copy in Ibadan.

The irrationality in Nigeria's political and economic activities had led to a ~~Military~~ coup in 1966, followed by the massacre of Igbos and other Eastern Nigerians in many parts of Nigeria, especially in Northern Nigeria, and the consequent exodus of Eastern Nigerians from other parts of Nigeria into the Eastern Region. "Path of Thunder" reflected on these events. It described, ^{and} ~~it~~ reflected on what was happening and warned against what could happen.

Every critic has found these poems, except for their lack of Okigbo's characteristic revisions in some units, to be the peak of his achievement. It is these poems that reconcile many otherwise disgruntled readers to the poetry of Okigbo. For some, it signals a change in Okigbo from the esoteric to the indigenous. For others, ~~more correctly I think~~, it is the

culmination of his chosen poetic style, the use of his trained voice that had gathered its timbre from many sources, to speak like the prophets of old in a most crucial phase of his nation's existence.

The military have taken over power in Nigeria and Okigbo proclaims

Fanfare of drum, wooden bells: iron chapter;
And the dividing airs are gathered home

The divisive politics of ethnicity and religious bigotry had led to the cataclysm and Okigbo could see the disastrous conclusion. "Path of Thunder" is Okigbo's last communication with Nigeria and the world through poetry.

The rest of the story is quickly told, Okigbo came to Enugu with the other Igbos chased out of Nigeria. He and Chinua Achebe set up a publishing company aimed mainly at producing books for young readers. but it never took off. The political and military disagreement soon degenerated into a civil war. Once it was reported that a plane carrying arms to the secessionists which had crashed in the Cameroons contained Christopher's briefcase. The story was promptly denied. But when the actual fighting started, Christopher soon joined the Biafran Army and was commissioned as a Major. Two months into the war, in ~~early~~^{August} ~~September~~ 1967, he was killed at the Nsukka war front.

Much is reported of Christopher Okigbo's activities with those two months which is revelatory of his character. It would appear that as he lived, so he died.

During the rallies of mobilization, various kinds of performers contributed their quota to moral generation. M.J.C. Echeruo has told a story which shows how Christopher used to

devour and react to his perception of creativity in others. He and Christopher and others were in the stadium during one of the solidarity rallies, and suddenly Christopher struck his hands together and asked Mike to drive him fast to the hotel where they were staying. One of the marching songs had given him the inspiration and idea for a national anthem for Biafra. There ~~is~~^{was} no outcome from this.

Chinua Achebe also has ~~the~~^a story of how, when they were staying at the Catering Rest House in Enugu, there was a performance by a local minstrel called "Area Scatter"^{W.} Christopher was so thrilled that he shouted across to Achebe, "Come and see a real poet! We are wasting our time. This is a real poet!"

Some of the Generals of Biafra who have written their memoirs have given to Christopher an image of bravery and courage during the war. To this picture must be ^{added} the image of the romantic. V.C. Ike followed Christopher's career and tells the story of how he used to go to battle sitting on the bonnet of the jeep. This was Christopher's romantic fantasy of charging into battle, bestriding his horse. How much was making a wave, how much nostalgic romanticism, it's now difficult to disentangle. When I saw him at the front, he was just back to headquarters with his young batsmen, and he was full of stories of how he had disturbed the eating time of the Nigerian soldiers who had no right to eat in peace in Biafra after harassing our people from their homes.

But the war did not deprive him of his mischief. Chukwuma Azuonye and a young colleague, Columbus Ihekaibeya, rode in a car to the Nsukka front as war reporters. Okigbo commandeered their

car. They complained that he could not do it because they were war columnists. At that point, he turned on them and said "if you are war reporters then you must watch a battle". So he took them towards the scene of battle. There was a heavy enemy attack taking place at the time. They had just heard that a Major Okafor had been killed. So many other names were being mentioned of people who had just been killed. The reporters were praying intensely, all their previous contact with war having been gained through their ears, and through reading about Charlemagne. Still Okigbo took them forward and said they must move towards the source of the artillery fire that was being aimed at them but whose shells were falling behind them. Azuonye and his colleague escaped as Okigbo walked forward towards the source of the artillery fire. They nearly killed themselves for they were really running into the range of the explosions. What saved them was the stopping of the shelling at that moment.

Some days later, Okigbo met Azuonye in Enugu town and asked him how he had enjoyed the battle. He also showed Azuonye all the things he had let fall while he ran from the front but said that Azuonye had to come to the field camp to claim them. The day Azuonye went, Christopher was dead.

Okigbo's last moments were reported by his friend and fellow poet, Gaius Anoka. Okigbo was keeping watch at Opi junction and said that the Nigerian soldiers would pass that point over his dead body. They did. Pius Okigbo has said, ~~to crown the event~~ that the bullet that killed Christopher hit him on the neck in the same spot as the bullet that killed the maternal grandfather whose reincarnation he was.

In death as in life, Christopher Okigbo has been controversial. Some of the controversy has been about whether he should even have ventured into ^{military combat.} ~~the physical aspect of the war~~. That was his fate and destiny and he confronted it.

His reputation as an African poet, as a poet in the English language, has been of the highest. In 1985, ^{Fred Akporobaro observed that} ~~a critic summarized~~.

With the intense personal experience of the early poems - Heavensgate, Limits, Silences and Distances, and the relevance and directness of the socio-historical experience of Path of Thunder, he achieves the distinction of being the most inspired, profound, stimulating and intellectually challenging of the modern African Poets. (~~Fred Akporobaro, 1985:6~~)

In 1986, Robert Fra^sser, writing on "The Achievement of Christopher Okigbo" claimed that his slim volume of poetry "arguably represents the most revered trophy in the gallery of English language verse in Africa, and Okigbo himself the most talented of modern African poets.

Polemic continues to flourish with regard to his so-called obscurity. The issue will never be exhausted but evidence grows that his poetic strategies will be further and further clarified and, at last, his poetry will be seen for its high exploratory inspiration and for its thematic contribution to our experiencing of the nature and impact of modernity in our lives and imagination.

The context of Christopher Okigbo's major poetry was one of literary and cultural effervescence in which the creative spirit accepted no limitation as to the audience to be addressed, the sources of influence, the languages and literatures, or even the forms of art, from which one could draw inspiration. The limits of one's horizon extended beyond continents and present times. The writer wrote for the world, for anybody anywhere who could

respond to the literature. The world contributed to sharpen the poetic voice of Christopher Okigbo. He returned the favour to add new flavour to the world. He played poetic pranks on his way to maturity with humour, not with viciousness, and those who wish to ~~must~~ enjoy his early poetry must share his games. With age and with darkening events, he spoke with the voice of wisdom in the language and image of his people. Young poets complain of his difficulty but the sensitive ones end up borrowing several elements from his style. His greatest tribute will be in his poetic offspring.

