

## DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

NIYI OSUNDARE

(12 March 1947- )

Don Burness

Franklin Pierce College

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A Nib in the Pond (Ile-Ife: Ife University Monograph Series, 1986);  
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Organize  
Chronologically

Oluwaniyi Osundare is the first anglophone poet to be awarded the Noma Prize, Africa's most prestigious Book Award. Winner also of the Cadbury Poetry Prize, the Association of Nigerian Authors Poetry Prize and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, he is the outstanding figure among the poets in Nigeria who have come to be known as the new poets of an "alter-native" tradition. Along with Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimuna, Obiora Udechukwu, Harry Garuba, Uche Nduka, Keme Atanda-Ilori, Olu Oguibe, and Afam Akeh, Osundare has chosen to sing in a language accessible to ordinary people. Inspired by the oral performances in his native village of Ikerri and by the resonant rhythms of Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth, he has come to be regarded as a lyric poet devoted to celebrating the earth and man while attacking those forces, both individual and societal, that pollute, ravage, rape the various landscapes of Nigeria and indeed the entire planet. This includes politicians and businessmen who are only out for themselves.

Niyi Osundare was born on March 12, 1947 in Ikerri in Western Nigeria. "Farmer-born, peasant-bred" he has said of himself. His paternal grandfather was a diviner-physician. As a child, Osundare would accompany him into the forest to gather roots and herbs to cure all kinds of ailments. Incantations were needed to stir them to life. Thus at an early age Niyi Osundare became friends with two very important aspects of life — nature and words. His father, a farmer, was a noted conversationalist as well as a highly

regarded singer and drummer and composer. His father told him that education was to give man wings. These influences on a boy growing up in a Yoruba village would play a central part in his development as a poet.

Osundare attended local Christian schools. <sup>g</sup> He celebrates one of his teachers, Chief Samuel Fal Adeniran, the foundation principal of Amoye Grammar School in Ikere, as "The great teacher, father, founder," <sup>who</sup> <sup>him</sup> took Osundare on a journey from <sup>the</sup> smouldering Troy of Virgil to the oracular echoes of Cicero. ~~He was another whose influence is seminal~~

~~in the harvestings of a poet.~~ In 1972 Osundare graduated with honors in English from the University of Ibadan. Two years later he earned his M.A. in Modern English from the University of Leeds. He received his Ph.D. in English from York University in Toronto in 1979. <sup>and</sup> ~~This glorious son of~~ ~~York~~ then began an academic career in Nigeria. In 1982 he returned to the University of Ibadan, this time as a lecturer. The University of Ibadan is still his academic home, although he journeyed to the University of Wisconsin and the University of New Orleans <sup>during</sup> ~~from~~ 1990-1992 on two Fulbright scholar-in-residence fellowships.

Songs of the Marketplace, Osundare's first published collection, are essentially the expression in clear lyrical language of the social realities that plague modern Nigeria. The very first poem announces the poet's commitment to communicate:

<sup>g</sup>  
Poetry is

not the esoteric whisper  
 on an excluding tongue  
 not a claptrap  
 for a wondering audience  
 not a learned quiz  
 entombed in GrecoRoman lore...

Poetry

is

man

meaning

to

man. 

This doctrine of simplicity in poetic diction for the purpose of communion between poet and audience will be maintained throughout Osundare's career. These are "songs" and they are sung "of the marketplace," where Africans gather to buy, to sell, to talk, to laugh, to inform, to learn. For Osundare, poetry is not for the academic warren but rather for the world, where man comes together in the marketplace of sound and ideas. In Songs of the Marketplace satire dances side by side with odes. The poet in "Excursions" parades before us an army of the poor: "babies with chronic hydrocephalus," "village boys' kwashiorkor bellies," "pregnant women rummage garbage heaps," "women delouse each other in busy reciprocity." Meanwhile

Several government people  
 have passed through these streets  
 several Mercedes tyres have drenched  
 gaunt road liners in sewer water.

For these, the well-to-do, "poverty is an invisible thing."

Osundare announces also in his first volume of poems his involvement with the world beyond his country's frontiers. He has learned that education ~~was to~~ <sup>gave</sup> ~~give~~ him wings. "Soweto," "Namibia Talks," "Zimbabwe," "For Hiroshima" - these titles of poems illustrate that the poet will sing of marketplaces of man wherever they may be. He will sing "of a world reshaped," of a world without slaves, without blind curtains, without iron walls, a world without prisons of hate and fear. Like a prophet of the Old Testament Niyi Osundare warns the world but sings of a new day. Hope is never an exile from the marketplace.

The themes introduced in Song of the Marketplace will be sung time and again as the poet-troubadour refines the quality of his language. The first collection is powerful in its commitment, but the music lacks ~~an~~ ~~orotund~~ voice; the cadence <sup>and</sup> lacks the natural ease of the song of the bulbul. ~~Metaphors, are not as natural to the poet as is breathing.~~

natural

In time this will change.

Village Voices is dedicated to Osundare's father and other African peasants, long victims of exploitative neglect, struggling to live rather than merely subsist.

~~Niyi~~ Osundare was by instinct a socialist before he had even heard the term "socialism." In Village Voices, the poet thrusts himself into the center of his society's arena. Here he, one villager, joins village voices, to challenge those who have created social inequality and social suffering. He challenges the liars who claim to farm more than they actually do, ~~he challenges the liars in banter and in anger.~~ He teases a friend: In "Sleeping, at Five and Twenty" ~~one~~ who prefers the solitude of sleep to the rewards of work.

At five and twenty  
 there you are  
 still sleeping and snoring  
 snoring and sleeping  
 while the sun burns your youth away.

But laziness alone is not the enemy. It is not even the primal enemy. It is politicians who have planted seeds of thievery and self-interest. In "A Villager's Protest" we hear,

They come more times  
 than the eye bats its lid  
 when they need your vote

With sweet words and inflated promises, with a chest <sup>full</sup> of



bribes, they promise to build schools and hospitals and bring water to every backyard. Once in office, they trade promises for ~~promises~~ "juicy damsels," ~~and~~ fat salaries and fast cars. Mercedes, of course, are the politicians' harvest. These "men of deep unwisdom" are marring the national landscape. And in the process they are getting rich.

One must remember that the oil ~~game~~<sup>industry</sup> produced massive wealth in Nigeria in the late 1970<sup>s</sup> and early 1980<sup>s</sup>. As in Venezuela, most of the oil revenue did not go to benefit the lives of the nation's people. Most of it went into the pockets of the crooked politicians and businessmen. ~~Bribery~~<sup>led</sup> ~~became the first commandment.~~ Bribery ~~offered promises~~<sup>led</sup> to a heaven of millionaire joy. ~~Of course~~<sup>But</sup> massive skyscrapers were one product of the oil magic. "A Farmer on Seeing Cocoa House, Ibadan" and "The Eun<sup>u</sup>ch's Child" are angry songs of indictment. In the former the poet asks,

3  
 If we cannot get back  
 our stolen wealth  
 must the shallow trick  
 of a name convince us  
 that it is still ours?

9  
 Here ~~Niyi~~ Osundare is the prophet-teacher, decrying the subsistence living of farmers while the politicians and businessmen know unlimited greed:

They want more yam  
 for the city stomach  
 more maize for the bottomless boot  
 of the glittering Mercedes.

Meanwhile the politicians, two-mouthed masters of tergiversation, continue to visit the villages, prostrating for a vote.

Osundare has been praised for his combination of lyrical grace and passionate solidarity with the downtrodden, the defeated, the wretched of the earth.

Surely Village Voices gives ample evidence that such an evaluation is valid. Social commitment is at the heart of this volume of poems. In this sense, Osundare is continuing a tradition in Nigerian poetry <sup>that focuses</sup> ~~Nigerian poets, be they obscurantists or partisans of simplicity, have been center stage in focusing~~ on social reality, <sup>on</sup> ~~problems~~ the pains of national growth and development. Okigbo himself had sung of paths of thunder that threatened on the horizon as seeds of Civil War were sown in the 1960's. Consciousness-raising has continued to be the duty of the poet in Nigeria.

In his readings Osundare felt an intimacy with writers who see the failings of the world and by pointing them out, strive to make the world a better place. Defoe's Moll Flanders and Journal of the Plague Year depict the dirt and squalor of 18th century London. Walking through London one time, he remembered Defoe at West Gate Prison that figured so prominently in Moll Flanders.

In 1986 Ife Monographs on Literature and Criticism published two works of Osundare. One is a long essay The Writer as Righter; the other is his third collection of poems A Nib in the Pond. The Writer as Righter is subtitled "The African literary artist and his social obligations." This could well be the subtitle for A Nib in the Pond, which continues the exploration through poetry, <sup>of</sup> ~~for~~ social change that is at the heart of Village Voices.

The poems in A Nib in the Pond were written as early as 1983. There are two dominant themes that come together, ~~and~~ social injustice rooted in capitalism (Keep-i-allism) and the poet's responsibility to face directly this social evil. There is youthful anger in these poems as well as a rejection of the comfortable alternative of writing art for art's sake. For Osundare, <sup>as for</sup> ~~like~~ so many <sup>other</sup> African writers, art is for society's sake.

However, poetry that carries a political message runs the risk of being stale. Some of the poems in A Nib in the Pond are merely clever or witty playing with words in the process of educating politically the reader. Poems are dedicated to ~~a hagiography of socialist figures~~ <sup>leaders</sup> Walter Rodney, Fidel Castro, Paul Robeson, Agostinho Neto, Nelson Mandela. <sup>who</sup> ~~These~~ are positive <sup>role models</sup> ~~archetypes~~, men who ~~reject the sonata of money for the symphony of brotherhood among all of~~ <sup>struggle on behalf of</sup> the oppressed.

"I am the Common Man" sings Osundare. Other titles include "Ours a Struggle of Winners," "Our Dream Will Not

Die," "Bard of the Freedom Song." But the song is sullied <sup>by political heaviness,</sup> ~~here, sullied~~ by ~~a certain~~ predictability, ~~that is the enemy~~ of art. ~~We are being lectured but we are not often being~~ entertained. The songs of the marketplace have become ~~the~~ a doxology of ideology. There are exceptions. In the war against apartheid, racism, <sup>and</sup> capitalism, the language can reach poetic heights as in "Undying Martyrs":

They murdered our flower  
 before the blossom of the season  
 They buried our sun  
 in the grave of dawn.

Osundare here gives intimations of lyrical <sup>promise that</sup> ~~immortality.~~

~~They~~ would soon be realized with the publication of The Eye of the Earth.

. It is in The Eye of the Earth that Osundare reveals his maturity as a lyric poet. Song has become natural for him. The music of his lines, the exuberance of his metaphors, the elegance of his style ~~the~~ produce a symphony of social commentary. Winner of both the 1986 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize for poetry, and the 1986 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, The Eye of the Earth is a plea for man to walk in perfect balance on and with this earth, our earth. The dedication in this collection is symbolic, "Dedicated to OUR EARTH and all who struggle to see it neither wastes nor wants." In his preface Osundare sings a praise song to the

forests and the fields and the flowers; he sings a praise song to the rain and rainbows, to the moon and the sun. He states <sup>that</sup> the poems in The Eye of the Earth constitute a journey to a last paradise where the world was a festival before the appearance of the intruder, "a cancerous god called MONEY." In this book, Osundare marches forward to join hands with Green Peace, The Women of Greenham Common, Operation Stop the Desert, Save the Amazon Committee. He marches forward with those who love birds, ~~and~~ beasts, whales and walruses and warns <sup>us</sup> ~~(he is always warning us because he loves life and he loves man)~~ to tread warily on our planet lest we trample the eye of the earth.

"Our Earth Will Not Die'" is a hymn of hope, a hope beyond elegy and lament. At the beginning of the poem, darkness reigns:


g  
Lynched

the lake

Slaughtered

the sun

Mauled

the mountain 

The acid rain on balding forests, <sup>the</sup> willows weeping their mercury tears, the nuclear sun dominating our world, this is the polluted Eden we have created. Yet towards the end of the poem the music turns festive, ~~celebrating~~, for the poet-prophet sees a new day when

The westering sun will rise again  
resplendent like a new coin.

The wind, unwound, will play its tune  
trees twittering, grasses dancing;

hillsides will rock <sup>with blooming harvests</sup> their eyes of grass and

the plains <sup>batting</sup> grace.

The sea will drink its heart's content  
when a jubilant thunder flings open the sky gate  
and a new rain tumbles down  
in drums of joy.

Here music and metaphor mesh perfectly. Nature is alive, active, dynamic. The wind, the thunder, the trees, the grasses, the hillside, the sea, have come to the marketplace to play their tune. Despite the history of lynchings, slaughters, and maulings, the raindrums will beat out a radiant song. The regenerative power of nature, known intimately to the poet, born on a farm, must triumph. One sees and ~~one~~ feels Osundare's integrity. Words are not used to show wit or cleverness; ~~words are not the instrument of~~ <sup>they</sup> ~~parades of pomposity, words are not corrupted articles for~~ ~~sale. In fact, in The Eye of the Earth, words also dance,~~ ~~words also sing, words also~~ are alive and keen. The poet has found a happy marriage between the medium and the message. Osundare in the simplicity of his song demonstrates that the craft of the poet has reached new

heights. Yet the poem does not violate his credo that "poetry is man meaning to man."

"Farmer-born," another poem in this collection, reflects ~~another tendency~~ of the poet, ~~the~~ the autobiographical instinct. Yet even here the self is not the center of the universe. The self is a player in the drama of the earth, *singing* like the wind and the mountains and the fields. ~~There is a tendency in Osundare to sing~~ a love song to the world. In "Farmer-born," the poet tells <sup>how he became</sup> ~~of the etiology of his odyssey~~ ~~to be~~ nature's champion:

*J* Farmer-born peasant-bred

I have frolicked from furrow to furrow  
sounded kicking tubers in the womb  
of quickening earth  
and fondled the melon breasts  
of succulent ridges...

Farmer-born peasant-bred

I have rattled the fleshy umbrella  
of mushroom jungles  
rustled the compost carpet of fallen leaves  
and savoured the songful clatter  
of opening pods.."

~~Here we see the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.~~

Here we see a man ~~speaking to man, as man~~ endowed with a

lively sensibility, enthusiasm, tenderness. Here we see a comprehensive soul. Here, in fact, is the application of the ideal of poetry as expressed by Wordsworth in his "Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads." Singing a song, the poet rejoices in life itself. There is nothing fatuous here. There is no naivete. The poet knows of lynchings and lacerations. Nevertheless, as the Cuban songwriter Silvio Rodríguez sings "There are those who need a song of peace; there are those who need a song of love." The Eye of the Earth, rooted in reality, <sup>he</sup> and <sup>1</sup> soars to a vision of man and the earth as brothers. The poet narrates in "Farmer born" his own initiation into the society of singers of the world's natural landscapes. Unlike Wordsworth, he did not have to go to Grasmere to escape the urban world where "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Niyi Osundare grew up a friend to the winds howling at all hours and fields where frolicking was natural. The Eye of the Earth may ~~indeed~~ be Osundare's outstanding achievement to date.

The theme of hope in The Eye of the Earth is an important one for the poet. In an essay <sup>on</sup> <sup>1</sup> "The Possibilities of Hope" published in Don Burness' anthology Echoes of The Sunbird Osundare confronts those critics who find his "relentless optimism" an anomaly in these cynical times. He knows that at the global level the world is caught in a crossfire of flux and angst. He knows the New World order is neither new nor ordered. But looking at Africa Osundare



feels that history has barely started. Fully aware that the dreams that were planted at the time of independence have sprouted mostly flowers of evil, the poet will not succumb to pessimism. "Without hope, life crumbles like a clay doll in the tropical rain," affirms this son of the soil. ~~preacher of the gospel of a problematic hope, He~~ dreams a frog when he sees a tadpole; he dreams of rain when he sees a cloud. ~~There is something quite <sup>is</sup> in Osundare's enthusiastic embrace of dreams and hope, for it is born of genius and fed by a profound reality of the human spirit.~~

91 In Moonsongs, ~~presents a complex of masks. It is in this~~ volume that the artist risks going off in a new direction. Some of the poems are not written in simple understandable language. There is a bit of the hermetic here. Although the common masquerader in this collection is the moon, the ~~reader must move quickly in his imagination to catch these~~ masks of the moon that dance with such colorful sounds and restless metaphors.

Some of these poems were written after Osundare was severely beaten by thugs in Ibadan. He was seriously injured and spent time in hospital. The thugs were never caught. ~~Were they hired by some government official displeased with the poet's voice in the marketplace? We do not know. Surely such an attack must have shaken the man from Ikerri, this poet of Laakaye (wisdom) and ooto (truth).~~

The moon has many phases in Moonsongs. It is an exile in the territory of the sky; it is a merchant, a magnate

profiting from ivory and diamonds; it is a horseman and a farmer; a night of seductive smiles and a frantic apprentice poet. The moon is a myriad of metaphors, always on the move.

But we have here a more cerebral poetry than in earlier works. The language seems more studied; surely it is less joyful than the lyrical sounds of The Eye of The Earth. There are allusions here that are not accessible to the ordinary reader. He alludes to a novel by the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah. There are lines from the Afro-American writer Maya Angelou ("Now I know why the caged bird sings") and references to roman gods Mars and Jupiter. Like Okigbo when writing about his home village, Osundare mentions places<sup>names</sup> and birds like "elulu", "agbe", "aloko". He knows he must help the reader and ~~he~~ does so by providing notes at the ends of particular poems.

~~The moon is ultimately a metaphor for time's wardrobe~~  
~~in Moonsongs.~~ It is interesting to ~~note here~~<sup>observe</sup> that while the moon dances, the poet sings and in his singing punctuates his song with many Yoruba words, phrases, lines. ~~For one of the moon's~~<sup>parts</sup> ~~masks~~ is indeed Yoruba oral poetry. ~~In fact~~  
 Indeed, Moonsongs is rooted in traditional Yoruba songs. ~~Yoruba folksongs are part of the masquerade.~~ The patterns of choral responses and the sheer music of Yoruba language are beyond the ken of the moonwatcher who can only see and hear in English. It is not that Osundare is no longer ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> troubadour. He is ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> peripatetic weaver of words, but

because he has returned to ~~Herri for moonrhythms~~, the readers at times, ~~like one of the phases of the moon~~, is an exile from the communal song.

Yet ~~the dancing mask of the moon~~ *there are echoes here* sings songs that Osundare has sung before. ~~It~~ *he* sings of Soweto, of Grenada, of Managua, of lands where bayonets and cannon accompany and threaten the dance of freedom. Here again the poet goes beyond his village, his Yoruba heritage, his Nigerian identity. He feels "The Soweto of our skin and the painfields so soggy with the sweat of a thousand seasons." There is also sympathy with the struggle of peasants in the Caribbean and Central America. The volume ends with ~~the~~ *avowed* ~~wanted~~ song of hope:

*g*  
"The harmattan looks back

and sees the rain

The rain looks forward

and smells the egret" *e*

A future is remembered because it echoes a past. "Everyone" is "ever green." Moonrains will water the fields and harvests will be good. The world is ever young. Time passes, life does not.

The idea of Songs of the Season was born in March 1985 when Osundare and Felix Adenaike, editor-in-chief of The Nigerian Tribune were participants in a television program in Ibadan. For a long time the poet had hoped to start an

experimental weekly poetry column in a Nigerian newspaper. The conversation with Adenaike inspired the birth of Songs of The Season.

From the outset Songs of The Season had a definite purpose: to capture the significant happenings of the age in a simple, accessible language. It is important to note that Osundare himself, like his moon, wears sundry masks. He is a teacher, ~~He is a scholar,~~ ~~He is a poet,~~ ~~He is a~~ <sup>and in times of crisis</sup> journalist, ~~As such,~~ he has commented on the passing scene in African Concord, Newswatch, and West Africa. Songs of The Season offers poetry as a means of celebration and denunciation. It is aimed at the masses and aims to teach them that poetry can and should be read for pleasure and for profit.

From the very beginning of his poetic journey Osundare has <sup>meditated</sup> ~~continued a vibrant meditation~~ on the process of poetic creation and on the purpose of such art. Titles of individual poems such as "I Sing of Change", "The Word is an Egg," and "A Dialogue of Drums" attest to the poet's concern with poetry's place in the national masquerade.

Songs of the Season are songs for all seasons. Satire, dialogues, tributes, parables - these poems written from 1983 to 1990 offer a rich repast for the Nigerian reader. The titles of the poems suggest newspaper headlines on the editorial page: "Song of the Tyrant," "Song of the Tax Collector," "Song of the jobless graduates," "Borrowing what they stole," "Slaves who adore their chains" and "The IMF".

Humor, never a stranger in Osundare's poetry, is everpresent. In "Song of the Nigerian Driver," the poet satirizes the ubiquitous gambler with death who has made Nigeria's highways among the world's most lethal. The Nigerian driver is both indifferent to the care of his vehicle ("So, flog it like a fatherless donkey") and eager to abuse its potential for speed ("The car in your hood is an aeroplane"). In "Buka banter," the poet uses pidgin English to make the reader laugh. ~~"Buka" is a chief eating place.~~ The poem begins "Wetin you go chop" (What are you going to eat?). The answers include everything but meat. As for meat the speaker says "Mba, Mba! my pocket don loss im teeth." "Mba" is an Igbo expression meaning "No!" ~~"No!"~~ The fact that Osundare, a Yoruba, chooses to use Igbo in such a poem is ample evidence of his going beyond a particular Nigerian community to identify with all of the people of his country. This too ~~his father taught him in his youth.~~ When the first road was being built to Ikerri, ~~Osundare's father housed for free workers from all over Nigeria.~~ The message was clear. All peoples are welcome to the village of man.

The tributes in Songs of the Season honor the famous and not so famous. There is an ode "for Chief Samuel Fal Adeniron," the teacher in Ikere, and there is one for Journalist "Dele Giwa," murdered by a letter bomb. Another good man killed while walking down a street thousands of miles from Nigeria is the subject of a moving tribute - for ~~the Norwegian peace activist and poet Olaf Palme - 1~~

Norwegian peace activist and politician Olaf Palme. For  
 Palme too knew truths taught the poet by his own father;  
 that the world is one. Echoes of Keats are heard in the  
 beginning of the poem:

Let no birds sing  
 in the forests of Noorland.

In the conclusion of this elegy, the imagery is Norwegian.  
 For Osundare the songs of the season are sung in many lands.

Sing now,  
 Forests of Svealand,  
 Blow your horns,  
 You bards of Gotaland  
 Shout these tidings  
 To the Scandinavian winds:

Olaf Palme is NOT dead.

There is no posturing here, Osundare looks into his heart  
 and his mind and finds ingenuousness. This is one of his  
 strengths as a poet. Language does not get in the way of  
 feeling. And yet there is no sentimentality, to mar the  
 songs of any season.

Songs of The Season illustrates that poetry goes hand  
 in hand with social discourse, <sup>especially</sup> that poetry belongs on stage

when national and international issues are to be discussed. Like Nigeria's bold journalist who refuses to be intimidated by the power of the politicians, by the gestures of the general, the poet will not be hushed. <sup>Osundare</sup> He parodies Mark Antony in "A tongue in the crypt."

*g*  
"Patriots

Thinkers

Countrymen,

Behold your tongue  
Sealed up in this iron cage  
For public safety  
And the national interest

For permission to use,  
Apply to:

The Minister of Whispering Affairs  
Dept. of Patriotic Silence,  
53 Graveyard Avenue,  
DUMBERIA. *g*

*g* The publication in 1990 of Waiting Laughters marks <sup>another</sup> a new direction for the poet. In an interview <sup>1990</sup> of <sup>with Kunle Ajibade</sup> ~~1990~~ in African Concord, <sup>Osundare</sup> the ~~poet~~ asserts that every good artist is like a bird in flight, in search of new frontiers. Those

frontiers achieved, the poet deconstructs them and the search continues. Monotony is an enemy to be avoided. Variety of subject <sup>and form</sup> matters; <sup>and</sup> ~~variety of form matters~~; and <sup>there is a</sup> ~~always the~~ need to create harmony out of discordance and <sup>as well as a</sup> ~~always the~~ need to create discordance when images of false harmony are presented. <sup>J.4</sup> ~~For this political poet~~ Waiting Laughters <sup>Osundare</sup> takes up the theme of hope and gaiety in a world where dry seasons of despair and gloom seem eternal. Stylistically this volume is an experimental orchestration around a major theme which explodes into innumerable smaller themes. The ideas of waiting and laughing are refrains in this orchestration, all in a mode and tone reminiscent of the psalm and the lyrical strategies of oral poetry. All of the poems in Waiting Laughters are <sup>meant</sup> ~~for~~ performance <sup>g</sup> with different musical instruments.

Music, which is at the heart of The Eye of the Earth, is trumpeted with renewed confidence and vigor <sup>here</sup>. It has been noticed that some of Osundare's lines echo <sup>refrains</sup> ~~lines~~ in popular music, particularly in the songs of Sunny Ade. As a boy ~~with~~ Osundare felt immediately the power of music both in the Christian church and in the oral poetry of his village. Egungun chants stirred him, <sup>as did</sup> His father's drumming. ~~stirred him. When his father's wife told him he was too old to continue drumming, he told her that nobody could be too old to stop living. He kept on beating his drums and composing songs. In fact, he was famous in the village for~~



~~his satiric songs. The music of the Church too attracted~~  
~~the young Osundare, who joined the choir for the first~~  
 baptism. ~~Soon thereafter~~ Singing and drumming <sup>were also</sup> ~~became~~ part  
 of the Church ritual.

Surely Waiting Laughters is ~~meant to be performed~~  
~~rather than recited or read by a single person in a chair.~~  
 In ~~this book~~ the poet returns to his oral roots, roots he  
 has never really abandoned, for most of his poems are songs  
 of innocence and songs of experience. The awarding of the  
 Noma Prize to Osundare for Waiting Laughters recognizes the  
 extraordinary quality of the poet's ~~songs~~ <sup>and musical</sup> rhythmic lyricism.

Repetition is a stylistic device in Waiting Laughter, <sup>giving</sup>  
~~it an~~ <sup>reverberations.</sup>  
~~There is an incantatory element to much of the poetry.~~ Some  
 stanzas suggest the link between poetry and prayer.

Teach us the patience of the sand  
 which rocks the cradle <sup>of</sup> ~~in~~ the river

Teach us the patience of the branch  
 which counts the seasons in dappled cropping

Teach us the patience of the rain  
 which eats the rock in toothless silence

Teach us the patience of the baobab  
 which tames the rage of orphaning storms

Teach us the patience of the cat

which grooms the thunder of leaping moment

Teach us, teach us, teach us....

Osundare's impulse towards personification is not new. Trees and rain and animals have inhabited his universe<sup>before.</sup> ~~The world is the world - other parts of Africa, Europe, Canada, America, Central America, the Caribbean - these geographic extremes belong in Osundare's poetic masquerade. So does nature's people.~~ The winds, the rocks, the sky are alive, ~~They are~~ players in the world's drama. Osundare is a poetic descendant of those voices of the Tang dynasty in China ~~Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Wei.~~ He is also a descendant of the English romantics - Wordsworth in particular. ~~But~~ he has more energy than <sup>many</sup> ~~these~~ other poets of nature. There is a Whitmanesque elan in the Osundare line. <sup>But</sup> There is <sup>in addition</sup> ~~also~~ a solemnity of tone in Waiting Laughter that owes its debt to the Bible and traditional oral Yoruba poetry.

Proverbs too are pronounced in this poetry. The poet uses traditional <sup>sayings</sup> ~~proverbs~~ and also creates <sup>new</sup> proverbs: every comma has its period; the bushfowl hatches its egg far, very far, from the clever fingers of the foraging hunter; "wèrèpè (a plant) spells out its freedom in a rampart of stinging needles; the earthworm knows the route of trampling warriors; the cry is deeper than the wound; every tadpole is a frog-in-waiting; rumour is the wind which bides the echoes

of a floating truth. ~~Proverbs are common among many African peoples and this is true of the Yoruba. The Book of Proverbs in the Bible also comes to mind.~~ Like poetry, proverbs employ compactness of language to express thought. ~~Many proverbs traditionally~~ <sup>Some</sup> rhyme as well. Poetry and proverbs are by nature related.

There is also an epic quality to Waiting Laughters — a <sup>weighty</sup> disquisition on a single theme. If laughter itself is the protagonist in this work, time, place, people and events are engaged in the drama. Politicians such as Hitler, Marcos and Idi Amin lie in wait in the bunker, in Hawaii, in a sandy purgatory. History ~~too~~ <sup>too</sup> marches into the arena; ~~recurring History with the rusty anthem of the chain and the hoof of iron of the conquistador, arrival.~~ The Sphinx of Giza, ~~and the dream of Pharaoh are recalled.~~ The massacre at Sharpeville in South Africa <sup>are all</sup> ~~is~~ recalled. Time too is a player: <sup>g</sup> February's unsure showers; this March of my heated coming; an April shower; the copper sore of August. Rivers <sup>- The Nile, Limpopo, Zambezi, the Atlantic and Pacific -</sup> and seas <sup>are all</sup> run through the poetic landscape, ~~the Nile knows,~~ ~~the Limpopo lingers; the Zambesi of the lore; the Atlantic swaggers; the Pacific maims the peace.~~ There is a plentitude of imagery in Waiting Laughters, for in the celebration of laughter and patience, the whole world participates. In no other work of Osundare is the imagery so vast and so vibrant.

~~It is the willingness of Osundare to explore new poetic territory that sets him apart. It is also his prolific pen.~~

Osundare's most recent collection Midlife follows a path established <sup>in</sup> ~~with~~ Waiting Laughters - a long poem with epic dimensions. ~~An Autobiographical poem as well as a kaleidoscopic probing of a continent that is bent and needs straightening,~~ Midlife is the work of a mature poet sure of his touch and passionately committed to his calling as prophet.

~~We see the multifaceted masquerade of Niyi Osundare in~~ Midlife. He is the poet of memory ("my memory now is a tale of a thousand masks"); ~~he is~~ <sup>he is</sup> the poet-praise singer of the river Osun and the rocks of his village ("I am child of the rock, child of the river"); ~~he is~~ <sup>the</sup> writer as social righter ("I vision a world which says NO/to the dirge of coffin-makers"); ~~he is~~ <sup>the</sup> critic of <sup>Africa's</sup> ~~his continent's~~ mindless ~~of~~ aping foreign ways ("for how long will the forest grope its days/in hurricanes of alien lanterns?"). Midlife ~~is a garden of proverbs and prophecy, of riddles and ridicule, of incantation and insight.~~

- reveals that Osundare at midlife knows that for the individual as well as <sup>for</sup> the community, life is molded from memory and dreams. His continent is both ancient and infant, a traveler at mid<sup>stream,</sup> ~~life~~. So the poet and ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> land share a journey. This sense of belonging to the land, ~~of belonging to the cycles of the seasons, of belong to history's parade of generations past, present, and future~~ <sup>the pageant of history</sup> ~~this is the poet's primary message. Man must return to memory, to~~

~~characteristic of his poetry~~  
 what makes Osundare's poetry a wholehearted celebration of human existence, past and present. But it is a

vision, to rainbows of laughter and laments that constitute being alive in a full sense. When the poet echoes Whitman ("I am every thing/I am no thing" and "I am human in every sense/lover of life without regret"), we know he is not posturing. Yet this celebration of life is ~~not~~ tempered <sup>as a waterless</sup> by contemporary social realities <sup>in a married</sup> of his Africa, where the boundless appetite of hyena rulers continues to maim the landscape. Ultimately Midlife <sup>thus can be read as</sup> pulses with energy. It is a love song as well as a warning as well as a love song.

Stylistically Midlife suggests that Osundare is committed to exploring transitional links between oral and written poetry. The audience is present throughout. Not only does the poet speak and sing to his audience, but the audience <sup>also</sup> ~~as well~~ questions the poet, <sup>becoming an</sup> ~~the audience is an~~ active participant in the poetic festival. The repetition of phrases in Yoruba, <sup>phrases that are</sup> ~~phrases that are~~ <sup>not always</sup> ~~at times translated~~ and ~~at other times not~~ translated into English, reaffirms that Osundare, an African poet, is firmly rooted in <sup>an</sup> ~~his~~ Yoruba <sup>ethnic</sup> tradition. At midlife the poet seeks to bring together ~~the world's masqueraders~~ <sup>so</sup> oral poetry and written poetry, ~~like~~ the past and the future, ~~are seen as~~ fellow travelers. <sup>his own place and the larger human</sup> ~~universe~~ world.

It is the willingness of Osundare to explore new poetic territory that sets him apart. His ~~is~~ prolific pen also

~~that~~ distinguishes him from other African poets.  <sup>Apart</sup> ~~As it~~ from the regular volumes of poetry that appear every year or two, the poet writes for literary journals and magazines.

~~Whenever he travels,~~ Whenever he travels, poetry is his companion. ~~Perhaps he will publish a collection of his travel problems. These are love songs for people, for rivers, for lakes, for cities, for sounds, for life itself.~~

Osundare is the opposite of the <sup>recluse</sup> poet in his tower, ~~his~~ <sup>for he</sup> ~~is~~ a peripatetic existence, He ~~travels the world~~ bringing

the music of his poetry to students and lovers of poetry ~~in~~ <sup>wherever he finds them,</sup> general. ~~From Toronto to Rotterdam, from London to~~

~~Lancaster, from New York to Harare, the poet performs. The visibility of Niyi Osundare in many lands is testament to his active involvement in the world's dramas.~~

Niyi Osundare is also a distinguished scholar and journalist. In these arenas social responsibility and love of language come together as they do in his poetry. A modern day Marco Polo, Osundare ~~often~~ writes of his travels. From August through December in 1988 he was at the University of Iowa in the International Writing Program. Along with the Sudanese writer Taban Lo Liyong, he traveled extensively in America, from Washington D.C. to Oregon, from Jefferson's Monticello to monuments to the Civil War dead in Vicksburg, Mississippi. His long essay "Images of America" was published in Newswatch, March 6, 1989. As a traveler, Osundare by instinct and by training reaches out a warm hand to all mankind while observing the basic paradoxes that

characterize all nations. Nigeria is never out of his ken, even when he is in America. "Image of America" includes portraits of ex-patriot Nigerians living in the United States.

~~The bard of the tabloid form writes on politics, film, modern music, language,~~ As a book reviewer he sees with clarity and good will. He has reviewed books of poetry by South Africa's Dennis Brutus and America's Don Burness. He has reviewed the prose of Adewale Maya Pearce and Kole Omotoso. Always Osundare seeks understanding — words are used to get at the heart of the matter. Sometimes he plays with words as a child does with a toy, but even in play there is always depth and seriousness. Niyi Osundare takes his calling seriously. Like his father, he knows man at his best is born to fly and to welcome all strangers into the village of good will. There is a marriage of cheerfulness and a sense of horror at what we do on this planet. There is a marriage of the idealist's impulse and an intimate knowledge of all the polluted Edens everywhere. Ultimately beauty and intelligence and goodness and hope fly from his pen. Lyric poet, social critic, ambassador of brotherhood, Niyi Osundare continues to sing in a language of man meaning to man.

The publication of his Selected Poems by Heinemann in England in 1992 will undoubtedly contribute to Osundare's reputation. He is one of the very few African writers of distinction to have nearly all his works published in

Africa. Readers outside of Africa have had to discover him in bits and pieces in anthologies. With <sup>nine</sup> ~~seven~~ published collections in <sup>eleven years,</sup> ~~the last decade,~~ ~~Niyi~~ Osundare has proven to be a <sup>inexhaustible</sup> ~~prolific~~ performer. ~~He is~~ <sup>Still</sup> young, ~~and~~ he continues to explore new territories of technique. As the world changes, surely his voice, so needed in Africa in these troubled and confused times, will continue to be heard. <sup>New</sup> songs of the season will <sup>resound</sup> ~~be~~ heard in the marketplace. In the struggle for a just, decent and honorable society, ~~Niyi~~ <sup>he</sup> ~~Osundare continues to sing. Waiting laughter await.~~



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Insert  
above