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Christopher Okigbo

(16 August 1930 - August 1967)

Donatus Ibe Nwoga
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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Do we have the
exact date of death?

BOOKS: *Heavensgate* (Ibadan: Mbari, 1962); *Limits* (Ibadan: Mbari, 1964); *Labyrinths; with Paths of Thunder* (London: Heinemann, 1971; New York: Africana, 1971); *Collected Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1986).

Should be listed as
separate entries ✓
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OTHER: "Lament of the Mask," in *W. B. Yeats 1865-1965: Centenary Essays*, edited by D. E. S. Maxwell and B. S. Bushrui (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965), pp. xiii-xv;

"Dance of the Painted Maidens," in *Verse & Voice: A Festival of Commonwealth Poetry*, edited by Douglas Cleverdon (London: Poetry Book Society, 1965);

"Lament of the Deer," in *How the Leopard Got His Claws*, by Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi (Enugu, Nigeria: Nwamife, 1972; New York: Third Press, 1973).

The centrality of Christopher Okigbo in the development of modern poetry in African is an acknowledged reality. Perhaps the greatest tribute to him has been that by his friend and contemporary Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 and associated Okigbo with this great honor by setting up an African poetry prize in his name. The irony of this recognition would not be missed by Okigbo himself, who, when asked by interviewer Marjory Whitelaw 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. He achieved a legendary status in Afri-

can literature within a short lifetime with publications that would all fit into a slim volume. When he died in August 1967 during the Nigerian Civil 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 and biographical works in Igbo and English but by the common people and soldiers who immortalized his name in a chant about lamented Biafran heroes. 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, Okigbo was considered important enough for his death to be announced on the national radio network. J. P. Clark revived the journal *Black Orpheus*, on which they had worked together at Ibadan, and published a full-page obituary followed by the last poems of Okigbo.

Christopher Okigbo was a controversial poet and has been generally recognized as one of the most innovative to have written in English in the middle of the twentieth century. In the discussion of African poetry his work is a significant basis of several debates: 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 of the realistic and the mythopoeic; 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?); about the role of the poet (the question of persona; 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); and about the tradition of poetry (the place of traditional African, foreign, European, and other elements; the sources of image and metaphor and myth; and the influences on poetry in terms of concept, nature, and language). In the discussions and debates on these issues Okigbo's ideas and poems have featured prominently.

Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo was born on 16 August 1930. Perhaps the 1932 date used by some biographers was introduced during Okigbo's university days, when peer competition made some people reduce their ages to indicate how young they were for their achievements. The importance he was to attribute to his role in

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traditional religion makes it necessary to go into some detail about his origins. Ojoto, ~~Nigeria~~, Okigbo's hometown, is about ten miles southeast of Onitsha, on the eastern bank of the River Niger in eastern Nigeria. Ojoto is a rural community with the River Idoto running through it, and it is the home of certain high priests and the location of the shrines of two major deities: Idoto and Ukpaka Oto. James Okoye Okigbo, Christopher's father, and Anna Onugwalobi, Okigbo, his mother, were both raised in Ojoto. The Nweze family, from which she came, held the priesthood of Idoto, and Christopher was thought to be a reincarnation from his mother's line of a former chief priest, his maternal grandfather. Indeed it was his maternal uncle Ikejiofor Nweze who held the priesthood as Christopher's surrogate. James Okigbo was a traveling teacher and headmaster in the service of the local Roman Catholic mission. His travels provided the background experiences of Christopher's childhood, which feature prominently in his early verse. Christopher's father lived in mission-school stations extending through most of Igboland. In August 1930 he was living and teaching in Onitsha, and Anna Okigbo had to go home to the village to deliver their child Christopher. He spent his first six years living alternately in Onitsha and Ojoto because most teachers spent their Christmas holidays in their villages, and 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.

When Christopher Okigbo was six, his mother died. His eldest brother, Lawrence, remembers him calling to their 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 some of Okigbo's poems. From then on he 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. James Okigbo moved with Eunice and the children to Ekwulobia in 1936. This location was important for Christopher Okigbo's later poetry, for it was the place in which the madman Jadum lived, making his witty claims to all wisdom and all woman. It was also where Christopher started primary school and encountered the comic teacher that became Kepkanly in his poems. In

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1939 to 1940 the Okigbo household moved to Asaba, on the western side of the River Niger across from Onitsha, and it was there that Christopher completed his primary-school studies. He later passed the entrance examination and went to Umuahia Government College.

The implications for his poetry of the life of Okigbo as the son of a traveling teacher are many. One relates to the general style of life of a teacher's child in those days; another is particular to the character and temperament of Okigbo himself. At the general level those who were the offspring of such headmasters in the late 1930s and early 1940s were the children of two homes, one the variable home dependent on the regular postings and transfers of their fathers, the other the village home to which they had to return either with their mothers during school term, if they 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 teachers' children and other children. Such an atmosphere could engender a feeling of isolation, but the life-style also had its rewards. The multifarious experiences of the teachers' children would encompass the religious and educational activities of the mission station, as well as the village activities—work, leisure, festivals, and song and dance, watched from a distance or perhaps engaged in as a participant observer.

Umuahia Government College, in 1945 when Okigbo began his studies there, was an elitist institution to which a few of the best students from the eastern region of Nigeria were admitted via a competitive entrance examination. In the tradition of the colonialists, only a few were supposed to go to secondary school or university, and those were supposed to be trained to be English-type gentlemen, eventually to be admitted into the colonial civil service. Eastern Nigeria was provided for educationally by the religious groups who had set up some high-quality secondary schools and teacher-training institutions. Government College 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—including cricket, hockey, football, tennis, and boxing—were played, and the piano and other forms of artistic activity were introduced.

Okigbo learned and became proficient in several games—soccer, cricket, hockey, track events, boxing, and chess. As Bernth Lindfors has further established through study of the *Umuahia Government College Magazine* of 1949-1950 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 Hitler.’ 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.” Lindfors also gives specific information on the games in which Okigbo excelled, the prizes he won, and his style of play.

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

Okigbo’s academic performance was not outstanding and was complicated by personal habits that were not best suited for scholarly achievement. Though he had won a Latin prize in secondary school, classical studies involved Greek, which he had never studied before. But Okigbo could have achieved better than his third-class honors degree at the end of his classics studies if he had put his full energies to the assignment. He did not. Athletic and sporting activities featured prominently in Okigbo’s student career in Ibadan. In the 1950-1951 session he was the best batsman on the cricket team. He also devoted vigorous energies to trying to help build a strong soccer team.

Okigbo also broadened his artistic and social horizons. He read vast amounts of all kinds of literature, he engaged in musical activities, and he enjoyed female company. With regard to music, Okigbo said he composed seriously up to the end of his undergraduate days. The intensity of his interest in music was to show later when he described its influences on his imagination at

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the time he wrote his poem sequence *Heavensgate* (1962). In addition Okigbo tried to run a student newspaper, the *University Weekly*, but gave up when he realized he did not have enough money to continue publishing it.

When he graduated with his B.A. in 1956 Okigbo went to Lagos, where he ran through a gamut of different jobs. He worked with private business companies, such as 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 until, in 1958, he was sent to Fiditi, near Ibadan, to teach in Fiditi Grammar School. He taught there from 1958 to 1960.

This period is marked by four important aspects: his literary and other leadership activities in the school, his interaction with the University of Ibadan, his involvement in other Ibadan cultural activities, and the blossoming of his poetic talents. 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 Okigbo was an "energetic and virtuous leader," and the secretary 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 the poet, and important names from the University of Ibadan. The topics, in addition to some general ones, included classical and poetic subjects. Christopher Okigbo proposed a series of six lectures as an "Introduction to Poetry" and delivered at least one of them himself. Before the end of his teaching career at Fiditi Grammar School, Okigbo had also participated in founding a Prose and Poetry Society, which, according to the annual, was "inaugurated on amount [sic] of the burning enthusiasm of boys to study prose and poetry."

Okigbo was a young man dedicated to sports, to the uplifting of youth, and to wide intel-

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lectual 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 who had similar interests. Some of the lecturers Okigbo attracted to his school—including Professor John Ferguson, who gave a series of lectures, the last one of which was “The Love of Aeneas and Dido”—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. He met Clark, who was then a student in the English department at the university. Okigbo's eldest brother, Pius, and Clark's eldest brother were friends and prepared their brothers for the meeting. Clark, in writing of this acquaintance, spoke of Okigbo not being associated with the *Horn*, the university literary magazine, “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. . . .” It might be more valid to say that Clark intensified Okigbo's awareness of and interest in the poetry of the moderns since Okigbo had an earlier interaction with modern poetry of various types introduced to him by Pius.

One of the consequences of Okigbo's involvement with this literary environment and his interaction with the students was the first publications of his poetry, in the *Horn* in 1959 and 1960. “Debtor's Lane,” the first Okigbo poem to be published, was later to be republished with “Song of the Forest,” the oldest of his poems, dated 1957; “Lament of the Flutes” (1960); and “Lament of the Lavender Mist” (1961) in the journal *Black Orpheus* (1962). “On the New Year” was published in the *Horn* in 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* that same year. (All these works are in *Collected Poems*, 1986). These poems constitute the early poetry of Okigbo and mark his entry into the career that would make him one of the great African poets of his time.

A perception of the themes of Okigbo's poetry depends on whether one is considering individ-

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ual poems, poem sequences, or the total framework of Okigbo's work. For example, one of the earliest debates on his 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 piece 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* (1971), others have taken an overall look at the progression of the sequences in the Okigbo canon. From the combination of these, a preliminary summary may be made of his topics and themes.

The bulk of the poetry of Okigbo is aimed inward, 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 government in Nigeria, the subsequent pogrom against eastern Nigerians, and the civil war that took Okigbo's life. However, he subsumes most of these events into a series of poems that form what he describes as a "fable of man's perennial quest for fulfillment." Okigbo's mythopoeic imagination led him to 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 that is not merely a comment on or a description of the event or memory but a distillation of what he considered to be the eternal essence of that experience. The nature of this quest and how each poem sequence contributes to the total exploration, and Okigbo's development as a poet and how influences of various traditions contributed to the content and manner of each presentation continue to interest readers and critics of his work.

"Song of the Forest," though it was not to be published until 1962 as one of the "Four Canzones" (in *Black Orpheus*), was written even before Okigbo came to teach at Fiditi Grammar School. It is dated "Lagos 1957" and is thus known as Okigbo's oldest extant poem. "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 his home village and see and project the life of ease in the open air of his 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 a "runaway," a term that, in the form of "prodigal," was to feature centrally in his poetry. But here he emphasizes the element of compulsion—"[we] 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, but it was already there in the Virgil model. What Okigbo did add to the pastoral form 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.

Though "Song of the Forest" was written in Lagos, the Fiditi environment produced the first published poems of Okigbo, "Debtor's Lane" and "On the New Year." "Debtor's Lane," written in 1959, was republished in *Black Orpheus* as the second poem of the "Four Canzones." "On the New Year," written earlier, in 1958, was not republished until it was included in Robert Fraser, in his *West African Poetry* (1986), after explaining how "the experimental poetry of the Modernist source had a deleterious effect upon early West African poetry in English," make one exception, Okigbo. He attributes Okigbo's success in this mode to the fact that "the allusions and echoes Okigbo found in those [modernist] poets 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." Fraser illustrates the "unforced cosmopolitanism" of Okigbo's early poetry by referring to "On the New Year."

The poem is not as tight and firm as Okigbo's later poetry, but it is important in two ways. It carries a theme central to Okigbo's poetry, and it is an early manifestation of his approach to poetic style, both in terms of picking up echoes from other poetry and juxtaposing them to make his points, and in the use of private and

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public symbols and images whose meanings are ultimately cumulative. "On the New Year" presents a reflection, provoked by the transition from the old year to the new, on the cyclic pattern of human hope and frustration. At this stage of Okigbo's writing, the concept is manifested as romantic despair, shown by events, situations, fragments of memories, and half-forgotten statements. The active elements are "the midnight funeral," a warder, a wagtail singing over lost souls, a church bell, a pilgrimage, a cross, and, above all, time—in its hourly, seasonal, and eternal 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. . . .

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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 structures came to him almost fully formed at the start of his career, before his readers knew that there were such structures there, within which to seek meaning in Okigbo's poetry. While readers were looking for the usual type of meaning in 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 their exploration 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" (an *ogene* being a type of gong). The instruction with "Song of the Forest" was that it should be accompanied with an *ubo*, a local "hand piano." This idea helped create for the reader a picture of the "child of the forest," in his hands the *ubo*, with which he is "plucking" a song of the forest under a village umbrella tree. Later Okigbo poems not only request accompaniment with musical instruments but some of them are named after musical instruments: "Lament of the Flutes," "Lament of the Drums," "Elegy for Alto," and soon.

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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 hideout is there in the statement of the

speaker who contrasts a putative past of hectic social activity with the present:

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

But "Debtor's Lane" is heavily dependent for its sounds and images on Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925).

"Love Apart," written in 1960, is a translation and reworking of an extract from the Spanish poet Miguel Hernández's "El amor ascendia entre nosotros" (Love Has Risen Between Us). "Love Apart" became the final coda of the long sequence "Lament of the Lavender Mist," the fourth of the "Four Canzones." "Moonglow," also written in Ibadan, 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 the punishment of forever 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.

"Lament of the Flutes" was written in Ojoto in 1960 and represents a homecoming both at the physical and the emotional levels, what Sunday O. Anozie calls "a feeling of *reconciliation* in the poet (*Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric*, 1972). It recalls, with some imagistic adaptation, memories of childhood activities and environments:

Day breathes,
panting like torn horse—
We follow the wind to the fields
Bruising grass leafblade and corn
.....
Night falls
smearing sore bruises. . .
boring new holes in old sheets. . . [.]

The central questions concern what future to pursue—the religious service of Idoto or the sacrifice to Idoto through poetic activity:

Shall I offer to *Idoto*
my sandhouse and bones
then write no more on snow-patch?

The flavor of imagery from old English is there in the 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 suggesting the empty sheet of paper on which one writes. He 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 once described to Lewis Nkosi his style of work: "As much as possible, I keep practising—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." Clearly most of the early published poems of Okigbo are reworkings of poems—some translated, some reconstructed, from other poets—that he has given a local setting and flavor.

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

Okigbo's sojourn in the Nsukka environment was brief but centrally significant to his growth and achievement, and his death in Biafra. He told 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 1960 was two rooms in the Faculty of Education building. He was responsible for organizing the collection of books and other documents and the management of the staff. Perhaps the largest single collection was the twelve thousand books, journals, and pamphlets donated by the founder of the university, the Right Honorable Dr. Nnamdi

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Azikiwe. In October 1961 Okigbo was posted to the Enugu campus of the university, where, again, he had to take charge of the campus library, acquired as part of the merger process that made the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology at Enugu part of the University of Nigeria. By the middle of 1962 Okigbo had resigned his library job at the university and taken on the challenge of representing Cambridge University Press in West Africa.

During his time with the university, Okigbo had continued his interest in sports. He coached and captained the Nsukka community soccer team, which was successful in some of the inter-city competitions in eastern Nigeria. Chess was another game that held much interest for him, and he was an aggressive, enthusiastic player who spent long hours at the game. Clearly games played a large part in his life, and he showed proficiency and dedication to playing and coaching several of them. The strategies he adopted in his gamesmanship are evident, too, in his poetry. As Lindfors notes, "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 effectively drew to a close, though, at Nsukka. The main opportunity his position in 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 members from England and America, particularly Peter Thomas, who was to offer the opportunity for intense communication among Okigbo, himself, and his students.

Thomas has described how one evening, 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 Obo, with close-cropped hair, and a quizzical, slightly brooding look, appeared" and asked for permission to sit in on the seminar. This man was Okigbo, who was then, as Thomas noted, "a very efficient" librarian. The relationship blossomed into an association of minds that

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Thomas has written about in memorials and which Okigbo recognized in his poem "For Peter Thomas," published in *Heavensgate*. The poem 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.

Thomas has a copy of "Lament of the Flutes" in which Okigbo inscribed "I could never have written this if I did not meet you." Thomas's summary of these meetings in Nsukka and later in other places 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 Thomas was Anozie, now a critic and publisher. Anozie has given a description of the impression Okigbo made on the students, especially himself, and how Okigbo was regarded on campus. In *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* Anozie reports that Okigbo struck him as "very individualistic, impressive and learned," a first impression that was to be "borne out by later experiences." This relationship also grew. Okigbo was inclined toward 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 unconventionally, which appeared especially in his mode of dress. In a university campus that was formal enough to demand that the staff give lectures in academic gowns and the students not be admitted into the august presence of the vice-chancellor unless also clad in such an outfit, it was exciting and liberating for the young students to see their 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." His style of dress 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. Michael J. C. Echeruo, than a young colleague, says, "He had a passionate involvement in poetry and an eccentric manner which made that involvement all

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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 neighbors and friends with unconventionality and mischievousness. For example, when he lived in Nsukka, one of his neighbors was the expatriate British head of the English department, whose wife was very inquisitive about the comings and goings in Okigbo's house and would constantly peep out through her curtains. Okigbo decided to shock her. One afternoon he brought out his 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. Such a provocation accords with Okigbo's personality. He 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 noncampus life of the Nsukka environment. He developed an interest in village people and activities and, given his talent for absorbing creative influences, derived new inspiration from village rituals, festivals, masquerade performances, and poetry.

While he was in Nsukka and later Enugu, he completed "Lament of the Lavender Mist," published the "Four Canzones," and wrote the final drafts for *Heavensgate* and *Limits* (1964). "Lament of the Lavender Mist" is a love poem, and there is an addressee. In its style and phraseology it comes close to the *Heavensgate* poems. The opening stanza of the first of the four movements of the poem appears to present two pictures with no apparent link:

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

This passage is characteristic of early Okigbo poetry: a staccato juxtaposition of logically unrelated phrases, images, and concepts. These certainly alert the reader to an approach to meaning that is not based on the logical or even visually or imaginatively coherent elements. One is alerted to a variety of incoherent and even discordant bits of experience. The meaning one obtains may or may not be definable in an encapsulated summary but 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 ocean. 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 other 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 it, of the foam where it hits the shore, and of 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 readers away from the black dolls and the sea into the psyche and memory where the dolls are redefined and qualified:

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 again presents the compositional strategy of using phrases from just about anywhere in contexts not related to their original use. *Remembrance of Things Past* is, of course, the English title of a series of novels by Marcel Proust. Thematically one is tempted to adopt this unit of lines as a statement on the nature of the man-woman relationship, but readers are swept onto another plane when violent images of external and internal reality are juxtaposed intrusively:

Eagles in space and earth and sky
Shadows of sin in grove of orange
Of alter-penitence. . .

Echoes in the prison of the mind
Shadows of song of love's stillness. . .[.]

The section with a surprisingly vivid, humanized image of dead leaves in a garden, seen as

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“wounded by the wind.”

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

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 unsummated love. The earlier lines show the disheartening progression from the insulting offer of “love in a Feeding bottle” to the statement that the outstretched love / Dried as it reached me. . .” Those earlier lines also contain an example of Okigbo’s use of what are supposedly by some to be private symbols but are actually images taken from Igbo tradition. “Kernels of the water of the sky” is a direct translation of “*akimili igwe*,” which was what Igbo children called the hailstones that came with the stormy rains. And the children used to run around in the rain and pick these hailstones, but they quickly melted and hardly got into their mouths—an apt image for the frustrating love relationship being described in this movement.

“Lament of the Lavender Mist,” which may be taken to conclude Okigbo’s *juvenilia*, is not a meaningless poem. Yet it presents, in characteristic Okigbo fashion, a challenging code that points to a meaning outside the logic of presentation. Indeed it carries much of interest—thematically, symbolically, and stylistically—that prepares one for his major works. As Omolara Leslie wrote, “the theme of memory as an important experiential dimension to our poet’s imaginative vision . . . is now [in “Lament of the Lavender Mist”] more symbolically expressed than previously. In style, the canzone is more broken in rhythm than the earlier pieces. It is evocative of meaning commulatively through phrase juxtapositions; repetitions and rephrasings; freely collocating images from Christianity and African reli-

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gion."

Heavensgate and *Limits* were written and refined at Nsukka between 1960 and 1962. Anozie has described in his 1972 book 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 went, re-touched." *Heavensgate* was Okigbo's first major publication. It was one of the publications produced 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* was republished in *Labyrinths* and is more widely available in that 1971 publication. As usual, before the republication, Okigbo reworked sections of the poem, combined some units, and dropped some others. D. S. Izevbaye has presented these revisions in his 1973 essay "Okigbo's Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird: A Reading of *Heavensgate*." But basically the poem retains the same structure and meaning. In *Labyrinths* Okigbo added an introduction, which gives his perception of the poems, and some notes to the most-often-mistaken elements of private symbolism. In that introduction Okigbo gives this information on *Heavensgate*: "*Heavensgate* was originally conceived as a 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 the difficult work. But some key factors toward the comprehension of as much of the poem sequence as possible are to be extracted from this presentation: Easter, innocence, offering, cleansing, and celebration. The striking juxtaposition of Christianity and Idoto worship with the Orpheus myth also alerts one to strands of religious and mythical traditions that informed the imagination of Okigbo.

Heavensgate, in Okigbo's chosen final version, consists of five sections: "The Passage," "Initiations," "Watermaid," "Lustra," and "Newcomer."

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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.” They spoke of “measure, control, craft, and a refinement of utterance that at time verges on the precious” and of “honesty and rigor.” But there was hesitation in attempting to interpret the poem until 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.”

As more of Okigbo’s poems were 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 myth. Izevbaye claims that “*Heavensgate* is an account of its own uncompleted quest only,” but Nyong J. Udoeyop contends that “*Heavensgate* is the beginning of Okigbo’s journey into consciousness.”

Heavensgate is Okigbo’s presentation of the growth of his mind/personality/psyche up to and during 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 humor is most often neglected, and this neglect has led to the search for deep meaning where the play on words should be enjoyed for its own value. Indeed, friends coaxed Okigbo into revising the poem and removing some of the most witty punning and nonsense word collocations possible in the English-language usage prevalent in Africa.

“The Passage” starts with a poem about obeisance to Idoto, the female deity of the River Idoto, an obeisance that involves humility, contemplation, and expectation, and the section also identifies the protagonist as one who is crying “out of the depths.” Strictly the opening poem is not an invocation in the sense of inviting the presence of the deity. It is more a prayer of acknowledgment and supplication. With this prayer, readers are introduced to the village deity of the poet’s birthplace and to the totems and legends of her worship. The two other poems that make up “The Passage” call up the experiences of childhood—not only Okigbo’s childhood but the childhood of the world, the “Dark waters of the beginnings”; and the childhood of a day: “Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom / Foreshadow the

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fire that is dreamed of." But this sunrise presages the end of the world, since the Bible says 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 prophet with a mother to lament. Readers also experience an environment, recalled by phrases, references, and echoes—the active childhood environment of Okigbo in Catholic mission compounds: "orangery," with "silent faces at crossroads," "festivity in black," and "loft pipe organs."

"Initiations" re-creates the various learning experiences through which he grew. The first poem of the sequence concerns the religious and educational elements of modernity, especially the mystery of initiation into the Christian religion. An attitude of rejection of that initiation emerges, but there is the characteristic Okigbo humor 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 by shouting, "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 on village aspects of the learning process and on encounters with spectacular wits. Jadum was a madman who got his name from his prefix to 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 that is affective but not necessarily logical and which is open to "the errors of the rendering. . . ."

"Watermaid" shows a solitary child mourning his dead mother; he has matured through a learning experience to the stage of expecting and encountering briefly the ultimate object of human desire. The poems in the "Watermaid" sequence constitute the sensitive highlights of *Heavensgate*. The four poems of the sequence recreate anticipation, brief encounter, the sense of loss, and concluding despair. These poems have been the least revised of Okigbo's poems, and this fact indicates how nearly perfect they were when

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they came to him from the beginning. The object of desire, the "Watermaid," could quite easily be whatever girl Okigbo 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/muse of the poet's quest. Thematically, therefore, "Watermaid" reflects another facet of the frustrating development of the 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 almost constant moving from place to place. But it fits into the *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 ritual is set in a clearing among the hills, and the offerings are traditional gifts. The tendency has been to see this poem in terms of Okigbo's return to traditional, Igbo religion. But he refused to be tied to any religion, for the second poem of the sequence takes 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. However, this unit is also a mixed bag of poems written for occasions such as the birth of Okigbo's niece, and, in the original version, for his friend Peter Thomas. The first poem, known as the Angelus poem, shows a violent reaction to the Angelus bells, the phrase "the bells of exile" indicating a withdrawal from the demands of Catholic devout practice of saying the Angelus prayers at the six hourly intervals. But Okigbo is careful to indicate also 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 directed 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 experiences of the

type Okigbo's poetry was to illuminate. What was strikingly evident was that there was a new, strong voice in modern African poetry. As Anozie correctly writes, "*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 'palmtree' and 'River Niger' sentimentalism of Chief Osadebay's 'Africa Sings' and its coterie." Okigbo indeed was a vibrant music maker with words, whose poems could be heard more than 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; and a cultural revivalist who, calling himself a prodigal, returns in his poems to pay obeisance to his traditional deity Idoto.

The overall meaning of *Heavensgate* emerged when the set of poems to which it belonged was complete and the mythic pattern of Okigbo's development became manifest. What was clear from the beginning was the set of concerns that was featured in the sequence: religion, both Christian and traditional; education and childhood experiences; love and desire; frustration; and, above all, the mentality of a suffering and confused protagonist confronted with these experiences—"the Orpheus figure at the beginning of his quest."

Another aspect of interest immediately generated by Okigbo's poetry was the matter of the influence that liberated his imagination into the creation of this vibrant, new poetry in Africa. Okigbo himself was to assert in reply to a *Transition* questionnaire, and in his interview with Nkosi, that he wrote under the spell of the impressionist composers. As he said to Lewis Nkosi, "when I was working on *Heavensgate*, I was working under 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." He also acknowledged the influences of Raja Ratnam, Malcolm Cowley, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Rabindranath Tagore. But it has been established that he was also intensely influenced by Pound, whom he probably deliberately neglected to mention. Clark has noted, concerning the "Watermaid" sequence, "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 (in 1971) 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*—"throwing the object (fixed or moving) onto the visual imagination"; "inducing emotional correlation by the sound and rhythm of the speech"; and "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."

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 traveler 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, in his interview with Nkosi: "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?" He also described its parts and the stages of the writing.

Limits is in two sections, first published separately, in two 1962 issues of *Transition*. These two parts are named "Siren Limits" (parts 1-4) and "Fragments Out of the Deluge" (parts 5-10). In the Nkosi 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 wrote the other parts, and that the whole work was not revised and ready until May 1962. Okigbo also spoke of the sections of *Limits* in classical-music terms, showing how much his imagination was suffused 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

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parts to the main work itself and the last one is almost an epilogue."

These statements by Okigbo introduce 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 as divided into two spheres: the private/personal and the public/national/cultural.

"Siren Limits," the first four poems of the book, operate mainly at the private level. The first poem reintroduces the *Heavensgate* protagonist at an act of sacrifice. Okigbo sets the scene in a time-space environment that is mysterious—a "palm grove . . . between sleep at waking"—and speaks of 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 the speaker's predilection, is seen in terms of a desired union with the "Queen," and this union requires an act of subjection and self-purification by him.

The second poem of the sequence gives a sedate picture, sustained through a single, consistent, growing-plant image, of achievement, but the third poem strains to convey the picture of a frustrating and frustrated pilgrimage. These two poems have formed the basis of several interpretations of "Siren Limits"—as a statement on national cultural suppression, or on artistic achievement and frustration.

The third poem is also an illustration of how an incident can be changed, 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 to Nkosi 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 journey is re-created is much broader in its use of the pilgrimage motif set in a large, nebulous world and ending in a mysterious awakening to failure. 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."

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The fourth poem reintroduces readers to the predominant female again, the subject of dedication and devotion by the poet, but 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," readers again encounter the perennial quest motif, after a presumed (momentary) fulfillment of the persona/poet and an apparent disastrous failure of action, 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*, re-creates 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." This section takes its image and allusions from various historical and literary sources, going back to the beginning of literature in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, but the references also come as close and personal as Flannagan ("a well-known Irish Priest of the 1940s") and Eunice ("my childhood nurse known for her lyricism"). Reference is made to Pablo Picasso for his painting known as *Guernica* (1939) and to William Cadenhead's *Flights of Fancy and Lays of Bon-Accord* for the curse "*Malisons, malisons, mair than ten.*"

The "Fragments" sequence is not purely external. At various points readers are again presented with images of a suffering, rejected protagonist. But the main parts of the section reflect vigorously on the destruction of the innocence and traditions of the protagonist's environment. Parts 8 and 10 are the most dramatic in presenting political activities as "a fleet of eagles" snooping "out of the solitude" over "the forest of oil bean." The destructive action is described in terms of authorities entering the grove of mystery and despoiling the twin gods of the forest. The rout, which Okigbo attributes to external

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forces as part of his strategy (or) symbolically 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 toward 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 breaks the "contractual" relationship with the people by inflicting unexplained violence on them. But Okigbo uses even that successfully in this poem to revive in dramatic imagery the history of colonial cultural contact and exploitation.

What links together the whole book is the figure of the colorful, singing Sunbird. At the beginning of "Siren Limits" readers are introduced to the noisy weaverbird. In part 8 they meet the sunbird, which warns of the impending attack and doom. Nobody listens, and a holocaust ensues. But at the end, "The sunbird sings again / From the LIMITS of the dream. . . ." An underlying theme is the validity and undying nature of the creative ideal and the fate of the community that rejects it. *Limits* therefore includes Okigbo's statement on the growth and nature of the poet and on his position in the community.

Though his first two major books were finished by the time Okigbo left the University of Nigeria, their publication belongs to a slightly later phase of his life, during which he married Sefi, daughter of the Atta of Igbira, in 1963. Not much is said about this aspect of Okigbo's life, but it was important to him. Thomas has mentioned how much Okigbo was in love with Sefi. Living near him as a close friend, Thomas was able to separate Okigbo's internal moods from his outside behavior. In his 1968 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 couple's daughter, Ibrahimat, was born in Ibadan in 1964. But Okigbo's separation from Sefi had lasted through most of his time at the University of Nigeria.

It is not clear, however, that Okigbo wanted to live permanently on a full-time basis. Anozie

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has said that Okigbo could not live happily under the same roof for a long time with a woman. How much of this reputation was bravado and how much represented Okigbo's true sentiments? Since he said 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 may have been a frustrating visit to the location where Sefi was engaged in teaching at the time.

By the time *Heavensgate* was published in 1962, Okigbo was living in Ibadan as the West African Representative of Cambridge University Press. 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 realities, this Ibadan phase was to expose Okigbo to more public events, more contact with other writers, and more international travel.

At the Kampala Conference of African Writers of English Expression in June 1962, Okigbo initiated a discussion on the thorny question of what constitutes African literature. He was later to refuse to tie any tag of "Africa" 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 special characteristics that are African. The tendency of the conference was not to be too emphatic on circumscribing and localizing literature.

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 then being edited in Kampala by Rajat Neogy. Okigbo's poems soon started to appear in *Transition*.

Okigbo set up house in Ibadan in a rather grand fashion. Marjory Whitelaw took note of his home 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, also in 1965, 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." His house and furniture reflected his attitude of eclecticism, his will-

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ingness to use whatever resources were available to him from anywhere in the world to fashion on his life, facilities, and poetry—the more striking the factors the better. Okigbo's life-style in Ibadan did not include a family. Though he married Sefi there, he did not bring his wife to live in Ibadan with him. This may have been because she was still teaching in northern Nigeria. But she had enough social connections to be released from her government-scholarship bond and transferred to Ibadan if Okigbo had so insisted. Most likely he could not have shared the same house with a wife. He said as much to his friends, and Kole Omotoso has reported the influence this statement made 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 the 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 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." However, Okigbo maintained good contact with his wife. When their child was to be born, he insisted that Sefi come to Ibadan to give birth to the baby at the University Teaching Hospital. Yet, when the period of serious labor started, he ran away from the hospital. He did not show up at home until his elder brother Lawrence had paid the bills and brought the wife and child from the hospital.

Okigbo was devoted to his daughter, and he acquired a reputation as a lover of children. The memories held by Achebe of the pranks played between Okigbo and Achebe's son of three illustrate how playful Okigbo could be. Indeed he had inspired so much affection in the boy that when Achebe 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 for Achebe's anthology of memorial poems in honor of Okigbo.

Okigbo did not, obviously, have much of a chance to play with his daughter, but there must have been some regular contact. When he came back from the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Edinburgh 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 daugh-

ter. 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." Ibadan was the center of a very vibrant literary and artistic culture, and Okigbo participated fully. O. R. Dathorne has written of the almost interminable discussions that used to continue 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." Wole Soyinka, Clark, and Okigbo were then all living in Ibadan along with a large group of expatriate art-and-literature scholars, such as Ulli Beier, Gerald Moore, and Denis Williams. There was also a growing body of young Nigerian artists and scholars, including Demas Nwoko, who did the illustrations for *Heavensgate*; Abiola Irele; Omolara Leslie; Femi Osofisan; and Omotoso. The *Mbari* Centre in Ibadan provided a focus for these literary and cultural activities, and Okigbo's regular presence there was an inspiration to many young artists and budding creative writers.

The tribute by Omotoso in his essay "Christopher Okigbo: A Personal Portrait" gives a vivid picture of a man who was a "vibrant personality," who took an interest in young talents, and who 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 Anozie of his own contacts earlier with Okigbo at Nsukka. The last telephone conversation between Omotoso and Okigbo, 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 for him. His job also gave him access to cultural activities at the international level, and some of his later poems were first read in such contexts.

During the period from 1962 to 1965 Okigbo was interviewed both in Ibadan and London. These interviews offer insights into his ideas on life, art, and criticism. He spoke to Nkosi of

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the kind of audience he wished for his poetry. Okigbo 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, "other poets all over the world to read and see whether they can share in my experience." Applause was not what he wanted, 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." About the need for craft he said, "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 lot of—this embraces the questions 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." He insisted on his preference for sensitive poetry as against "academic versifying," he rejected the concept of the "black mystique" inherent in the negritude movement, and he found disfavor with the tendency of Beier to give prominence, and indeed pride of place, to experimental work which did not show enough evidence of originality.

Two issues discussed by Okigbo in interviews are important for the consideration of his life and poetry: the issue of poets and commitment, and that of meaning in poetry. He rejected the overt commitment that seemed to be demanded as a program for the creative writer. In his interview with Whitelaw 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. I 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 states of mind, and they could affect

readers in different ways; it was up to readers 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." Okigbo made a distinction between the person as a citizen and the person as a writer, and he 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 Okigbo chose to illustrate his point was that of the role of teacher, which put him at the opposite end of the argument 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 textbooks. 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 the role of the 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.

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The second issue is related to the first and concerns the intention of the poet in terms of meaning. Okigbo's "Lament of the Drums" was featured at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, 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, 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 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 . . . 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 formula-

tion of strategies for participating in the experience embedded in the Okigbo oeuvre.

Okigbo's poetic creativity flourished and came to a conclusion in Ibadan. In 1962 he completed "Lament of the Silent Sisters," which was immediately published in *Transition* (1963). In 1964 he completed two poems: "Lament of the Drums" and "Distances." "Lament of the Drums" was the second part of the "Silences" sequence, and "Distances" concluded Okigbo's quest poetry. These represent major poem sequences. When *Transition* published "Distances" in 1964, the editors 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."

Though "Lament of the Silence 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 complete 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 "Distance," and these all confirm it as the poem that shows the fulfillment of the quest at the center of Okigbo's poetry. In many ways it is a terrifying poem, and Okigbo takes full advantage of a dreamy, euphoric state. He also said in the *Labyrinths* introduction that "Distances" was written after my first experience of surgery under general anesthesia."

The homecoming, as he writes in the poem, was "from flesh into phantom on the horizontal stone," the horizontal stone being both the operating table and the altar of a deity. "Distances" has been illuminatingly studied from the "speech-act-theory" perspective by John Haynes (in 1986) to show how an awareness of the stances taken by the poet further reveals the characters at work in the poem. The study helps to expose each character's field of discourse and allusion and therefore the meaning of the poem. This poem declares three times, "I was the sole witness to my homecoming," and readers may ask where he has arrived, where he was coming from, and the context and meaning of *homecoming*.

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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 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 reunion of the two parts of the poet's self.

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What is clear is the pattern set up by the poem. Starting from the euphoric but obviously religious state of awakening, Okigbo moves on to a pilgrimage motif, the journey being endangered by the environment in poem 2: "Death lay in ambush that evening in that island, / voice sought its echo that evening in the island." Indeed this poem contains what may be called the most realized visual image in Okigbo, a terrifying transfiguration of the White Goddess Idoto, the 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.

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

She bathed her knees in the blood of attendants. . . .

The third, fourth, and fifth poems of "Distances" explore the motif of pilgrimage in heavily Christian and biblical imagery, creating environments that identify and criticize various participants and actors in the journey of life—prophets, martyrs, lunatics, dilettantes, vendors, politicians, and so on.

Ultimately the confusion clears, the unity of experience is appreciated, and what Fraser calls "a spiritual apotheosis" is reached. In the end the mysterious marriage of the mortal to the immortal occurs, the questing poet/protagonist makes his junction with the goddess, and this union

ends in glorious terms the anguished quest of life.

"Distances" completed Okigbo's private quest for self-realization, but "Silences," in its two parts, marked his 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," written in 1962, was provoked by the western Nigeria crisis of that year; "Lament of the Drums" by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo and the tragic death of Awolowo's elder/son. "Lament of the Silent Sisters" heralds Okigbo's maturing into the poet of destiny. The agony of apprehension that had provided the internal dynamics of his 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 that could declare a 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 his own thought and statement. He shares the concerns of his people and becomes their mouthpiece. The persistent images are of drowning violence, the trivialization of a disastrous tragedy, and the anguish and "cadenced cry" of the perceiving consciousness.

"Lament of the Drums," on the other hand, is the attempt by Okigbo to create a dramatic self-exclusion and give the comments on the political situation to the funerary drums. To 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."

"Lament of the Drums" was a much-revised poem. The first publication in *Transition* (1965) was quite different, especially in the first move-

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ment, form subsequent publications in *Black Orpheus* (later in 1965) and in *Labyrinths*. Okigbo wrote the third part, the section on Palinurus, some months before the other parts. The poem is a good example of how, in Okigbo's hands, an event, already perceived in an image/symbol, grows until it far outstrips its original provocation and, by drawing together relevant parallel myths from all over the world, becomes a new universal symbol. The imprisonment of Awolowo and his tragedy, first seen in the Palinurus image, goes on to memorialize 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 re-creation of Ishtar's lament for Tammuz. As Fraser has noted (in "Christopher Okigbo and the Flutes of Tammuz," 1984), this use of the Tammuz death-and-resurrection myth recalls "that mysterious metamorphosis by which the authentic tragic spirit is enabled to convert devastation into matter for affirmative rejoicing."

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 Okigbo. They were also months of not-very-efficient contribution by him to the publishing business of Cambridge University Press. Visitors to Okigbo over this period report much talking far into the night, much thinking of other possible directions for exhilarating activities, and a lack of interest in the mail—either his own or that of Cambridge University Press. His brother Lawrence mentions seeing a check for a fair sum of money on Okigbo's table and taking a look at it to find that it had expired after a year of not being cashed. Theroux, who visited and stayed with him for some weeks in 1965, has written of Okigbo's boredom with his job at this time. Theroux reports that, by the time he met him, Okigbo "was so bored by the job he had stopped opening his mail. It simply accumulated, like fallen leaves. A man came with mailbags full of proof copies and catalogues, and Okigbo dumped these on the table without glancing at them."

Two poems did emerge from this period, both published in 1965: "Lament of the Masks"

and "Dance of the Painted Maidens," the latter of which was Christopher's contribution to the Edinburgh Festival of that year.

"Lament of the Masks" draws practically all its imagery from the Yoruba *oriki* (celebration) in praise of the Timi of Ede. This lament contains many images referring to violence, and even if the basis was the struggle W. B. Yeats had to wage against British supercilious disdain to there is no doubt that the violence in Nigeria also fired Okigbo's imagination, which

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Charges to the assault;
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For were 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 almost 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 home-ward journey. . . ." The poem sets up a pattern, like most Okigbo poems, contrasting the absence of the Earth-Mother with what one obtains when she is present.

Okigbo expressed indebtedness to Ben Obumsele of the University of Ibadan English department for criticisms that affected "the phrase and structure" of the poems he wrote at Ibadan. Obumsele has claimed that many of the poems taken with so much seriousness were jokes being played by Okigbo. Specifically he said that the "Hurry on down" sequence in *Limits*, culminating in these lines: "To pull by the rope / the big white elephant . . .," referred to Okigbo'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 she 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 perspective would make sequence 3 of this poem have vivid sexual overtones. The masquerade aspect is recalled again in part 4, 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 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 from 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 for the achievement of reunion to bring protection and salvation:

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

The catastrophic national event toward the end of 1965 and into early 1966 inspired Okigbo to his best and most admired set of poems, "Path of Thunder: Poems Prophesying War." These poems were available to be published posthumously in *Black Orpheus* (1968) and then with *Labyrinths* only because some friend had retained a copy in Ibadan. The irrationality in Nigeria's political and economic activities 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 Nigerians, and the consequent exodus of eastern Nigerians from other parts of Nigeria into the Eastern Region. "Path of Thunder" reflects these events. It describes what was happening and warns against what could happen. Every critic has found these poems, except for the lack of Okigbo's characteristic revisions in some units, to be the peak of his achievement. "Path of Thunder" reconciled many otherwise disgruntled readers to the poetry of Okigbo. For some, it signaled a change in Okigbo from the esoteric to the indigenous. For others, it is the culmination of his chosen poetic style, the use of his trained voice, which had gathered its timbre from many sources, to speak like the prophets of old on a most crucial phase of his nation's existence. The military had taken over power in Nigeria, and Okigbo proclaimed: "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 a cataclysm, and Okigbo could see the disastrous conclusion. "Path of Thunder" is Okigbo's last communication with Nigeria and

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the world through poetry.

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

Much is reported of Okigbo's activities within those two months that is revelatory of his character. It appears that as he lived, so he died. During the rallies of mobilization, various kinds of performers contributed their quota. Echeruo has told a story that shows how Okigbo used to react to his perception of creativity in others. Echeruo, Okigbo, and others were in the Enugu stadium during one of the solidarity rallies and suddenly Okigbo struck his hands together and asked Echeruo 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. However, nothing apparently came of that idea.

Achebe also has 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." Okigbo 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 imparted to Okigbo an image of bravery and courage during the war. To this picture must be added the image of the romantic. Ike followed Okigbo's war career and tells the story of how Okigbo used to battle sitting on the hood of a jeep. His romantic fantasy was of charging into battle bestriding his horse. He told stories of how he and others had disturbed the eating time of the Nigerian soldiers, who had no right to eat in peace in Biafra after harassing people out of their homes.

Chukwuma Azuonye and a younger 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 toward 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. 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 toward 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 toward the source of the artillery fire. They nearly killed themselves for, while escaping, they were really running into the range of the explosions. What saved them was the cessation of the shelling.

Some days later Okigbo met Azuonye in Enugu and asked him how he had enjoyed the battle. He also showed Azuonye all the things the reporter had let fall while he ran from the front, but he said that Azuonye had to come to the field camp to claim them. The day that Azuonye went there Okigbo was already 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 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, but he saw that was his fate and destiny, and he confronted it.

His reputation as an African poet writing in English has been the highest. In 1985 Fred Akporobaro observed that "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." In 1986 Fraser, writing on "the Achievements of Christopher Okigbo," claimed that his slim volume of poetry (*Labyrinths*) "arguably represents the most revered tro-

phy 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 strong exploratory inspiration and for its thematic contribution to the experiencing of the nature and impact of modernity in human lives and imagination.

The context of 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 sharpening the poetic voice of Christopher Okigbo. In return he added new flavor to the world. He played poetic pranks with humor, not with viciousness, and those who wish to enjoy his early poetry must share his games. With age and with the darkening events surrounding him, he spoke with the voice of wisdom in the language and images 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.

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