

just realised it, this truth, lurking in some dark corner inside me, has made my life intolerable. It is useless to ask forgiveness ; I know. Forgiveness is how we cope with tomorrow ". He paused and looked tenderly at his daughter.

" Poor Tundé has fallen asleep. But she too should know the truth. Will you tell it to her for me, dear Eva ? "

" Yes John. I'll tell her. But John.. "

" Yes Eva ? "

" Do try to be happy " she said.

" I shan't need to try, Eva. Life itself is happiness. Do you know, since I faced up to it, that chap God who brought me here has stopped nagging. It is as if I have His power "

" Goodbye, dear John " and the vision faded.

He walked back stonily along the breezy and familiar avenue, not frightened by the raging of wild animals or the cries of pain around him.

On the jetty, John slept on awhile. A point of light, reflected off a distant window-pane, stung him behind the ear. He struck at the insect, savagely rolling it between finger and mastoid, but the sting persisted. He woke, astonished at himself ; wondered what he was doing there. He stood up sprightly, looking round to see if he had been observed. Noticing his pockets hanging out, he quickly pushed them back and breathed an elated bundle of air.

The waters rocked alone. The mainland in the distance and the island on which he stood were each alone. He found strength in the idea. He would fight for life to the death.

He pressed his hair close with his palms. A smile puckered his face. Age seeped through his toes as he turned and walked away. Life seemed sweet and alive ; miraculously alive.

" The next move is mine " he said, and went laughing on his way.

LENRIE PETERS : *A Gambian physicist and poet.*

## THE BLACK WRITER'S BURDEN

CHINUA ACHEBE

Without subscribing to the view that Africa gained nothing at all in her long encounter with Europe, one could still say, in all fairness, that she suffered many terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black races. It has warped the mental attitudes of both black and white. In giving expression to the plight of their people, black writers have shown again and again how strongly this traumatic experience can possess the sensibility. They have found themselves drawn irresistibly to writing about the fate of black people in a world progressively re-created by white men in their own image, to their glory and for their profit, in which the Negro became the poor motherless child of the spirituals and of so many Nigerian folk tales. The writers' treatment of the subject has varied according to the peculiar circumstance of each particular person — his strength and his mood, to say nothing of the mood of his times. We have seen pathetic pleading, tactical acceptance, strident protest, bitter irony, assertion of non-white " values ", sometimes tentative, sometimes aggressive.

The first " Nigerian " writer I know — Olauda Equiano — was a slave who had been taken out of Africa at the age of twelve. After many adventures in the New World he finally bought his freedom and settled down in London where he published his autobiography in 1789. Equiano's gentle, nostalgic treatment of his early life in a happy, orderly Nigerian village, was clearly intended to counter the current European fallacies about Africa largely inspired by the powerful slave-trade lobby.

Perhaps some of Equiano's arguments may sound a little weak and apologetic to our modern ear, as when he says of the black skin :

" ... In regard to complexion ideas of beauty are wholly relative ". Or about African women : " ... our women too

If Equiano thought he was putting up a strong defence when he wrote that "we are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets", or Senghor when he wrote that "... we are men of the dance", the famous British explorer, R. F. Burton, had the perfect lion-answer: "the removal of the Negro from Africa is like sending a boy to school; it is his only chance of learning that there is something more in life than drumming and dancing".

So why do we waste our breath? But more is involved in this than the mere saving of our breath, a lot more. It is the ultimate impertinence of any man asking another to say why he deserves decent treatment. Self-respect demands that he say nothing and, if he is strong enough, kick the impudent fellow in the pants.

For the black writer, there is an additional reason why he must not enter any plea, why he must now set down the burden he has had to carry since Equiano's time. Most of Africa is today politically free; there are thirty-six independent African States managing their own affairs — sometimes very badly. A new situation has thus arisen. One of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (sore as it still is) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not. For just as it was appropriate in pre-independence days for Mabel Segun to write about the white man's "bull-dozers trampling on virgin ground in blatant violation", even so is it urgent today for another Nigerian, John Ekwere, to add a *Rejoinder*:

*Now no more the palefaced strangers  
With unhallowed feet  
The heritage of our fathers profane;  
Now no missioned benevolent despots  
Bull-doze an unwilling race;  
No more now the foreign hawks  
On alien chickens prey —  
But we on us!*

The black writer in independent Africa is thus facing his first real challenge. Will he accept it? He will be told many good reasons why he should not: it would be treacherous to the African revolution; it would supply ammunition to the enemies of his race; it would give the Verwoerds and Ian Smiths the opportunity to rub their hands gleefully and say "haven't we always told you so?".

Mihajlo Mihajlov, the Yugoslav writer who was imprisoned for criticizing the Soviet Union, spoke in that vein last year. He said: "we in the socialist world are silent because we do not want to betray our countries or provide fuel for the forces of reaction that oppose the fighters for freedom in the West". This line of argument is suspect, implying as it does that under certain conditions we should build a wall around men's thoughts. But even if we accepted willingly the temporary curtailment of our freedom of expression, not out of fear of reprisals but as a necessary and voluntary price we pay for the survival of an unfledged political system we passionately believe in, we must never agree to bargain for the right to be treated like full members of the human family. We must seek the freedom to express our thought and feeling, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say might be taken in evidence against our race. We have stood in the dock too long pleading and protesting before ruffians and frauds masquerading as disinterested judges.

The new freedom I seek for the black writer is symbolized for me (whatever meaning it may hold for others) by the poem, *The Mystic Drum*, by the Nigerian poet, Gabriel Okara:

*The mystic drum beat in my inside  
and fishes danced in the rivers  
and men and women danced on land  
to the rhythm of my drum  
But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.*

*Still my drum continued to beat,  
rippling the air with quickened  
tempo compelling the quick  
and the dead to dance and sing  
with their shadows —  
But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.*

*Then the drum beat with the rhythm  
of the things of the ground  
and invoked the eye of the sky  
and sun and the moon and the river gods —*

and the trees began to dance,  
the fishes turned men  
and men turned fishes  
and things stopped to grow —

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.

And then the mystic drum  
in my inside stopped to beat —  
and men became men,  
fishes became fishes  
and trees, the sun and the moon  
found their places, and the dead  
went to the ground and things began to grow.

And behind the tree she stood  
with roots sprouting from her  
feet and leaves growing on her head  
and smoke issuing from her nose  
and her lips parted in her smile  
turned cavity belching darkness.

Then, then I packed my mystic drum  
and turned away ; never more to beat so loud.

Yes, let us turn away now, never more to beat so loud...

CHINUA ACHEBE : *The Nigerian novelist.*

## EDWARD WILMOT BLYDEN

Africa's First Ambassador to Europe

HOLLIS R. LYNCH

When in 1877 President James S. Payne of the Republic of Liberia appointed Edward Wilmot Blyden, the West Indian-born former Professor of Greek, Latin, and Arabic at Liberia College as ambassador to the Court of St. James, he became the first African diplomat to Europe \*. Blyden was then forty-five, urbane and the foremost scholar and literary figure in black Africa. His reputation derived mainly from articles on early Negro history and on Islam and Christianity in Africa published in such first-rate journals as *Fraser's Magazine* of London and the *Methodist Quarterly Review* of New York. He had visited Britain six times previously and was quite well-known in political, ecclesiastical, literary and academic circles. Among his many acquaintances and admirers were W. E. Gladstone, the British statesman ; Samuel Gurney, a wealthy Quaker and philanthropist ; Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, the affable and liberal Dean of Westminster ; R. Bosworth Smith, master at Harrow Public School and a well-known historian of Islam ; and Stopford A. Brooke, a biographer and chaplain to Queen Victoria.

Indeed, were it not that he could count on the financial and moral support of British friends, Blyden could not have accepted the appointment. For it was made under inauspicious circumstances: the Liberian legislature regarded a foreign embassy for the country as an unnecessary luxury and refused to vote money for it. But Blyden strongly felt that it was essential for the self-respect and dignity of the Negro race that Liberia, as one of only two independent African countries (the other

\* For a full study of Blyden, see my forthcoming work, *Edward Wilmot Blyden, 1832-1912, Pan-Negro Patriot* (London : Oxford University Press, 1967). Documentation for this article can be found in Chapter Eight of that work.