

## 2. Three Poems

WHEN ENGLISH IS A "SECOND LANGUAGE", those problems are acute and special; the successes perhaps even more satisfying than are those of the native English-speaker, whether British or American. Possibly because of the "exam readings" to which our students are subjected. I find that most of my neophytes reproduce the idioms and clichés of anything from Elizabethan to Romantic writers without being aware that such phrases now seem archaic or affected and are most certainly defunct. They will even "lift" or "echo" complete lines from Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth or Keats and tell me afterwards they have no recollection of ever having seen the poem quoted.

Apart from fairly obvious things, like "thee" and "thou" (with or without the verbal inflections that should follow, I don't know which is worse) and the redundant auxiliary "did", one gets such phrases as "yonder east/west/hill/hamlet" or whatever; such epithets as "lithesome", "balmy", "hapless" — even "so fair and bright" in a single line or "the sweetness of glorious morning", where obviously the writer's grasp has relaxed or attention wandered and instead of making the language work he is asking it to do the work for him. In this, I sometimes think the few girls who attend my classes are worse offenders than the men — or at least, less readily cured. It is very difficult to persuade them, either men or women, that however "inflated" the language of poetry may be it must nevertheless rise from the current diction of the age.

The cure lies partly in further reading, to increase awareness and good taste in these matters, partly in developing an instinct for the right word or phrase in a given situation — something that can only come with much practice and a growing literary experience. Only gradually does the apprentice come to see that he cannot call his dead father "dad" in a serious poem or refer to "soup" or "tubers" without offending against decorum and risking comic (at least risible) associations; that "when we were little kids" and "you gotta move fast" are as misplaced as "yonder hoary hill" and "the trembling finger of dawn", especially when they occur in the same poem!

Closely related to such solecisms as these — the result of inexperience as much as ill-judgement, I believe — is the tendency either to the 18th-century inflation of "Would the balloonic spirit rise higher/than Icarus in his flight" or the sheer prose of "Am I like the majestic but short-lived thunder/whose noisy entry is heralded by lightning/flashing with luminous fanfare". This last example is taken from the first and unsolicited submissions of a writer by no means lacking in ability. Like many of his predecessors, he needs to learn that more than half the art of language lies in "pruning" — not putting words in but taking them out, so that the remaining few work hard and work together.

Some economy may be achieved by a sparing use of qualifying words (adjectives, adverbs), thus "creating" rather than describing a person, place or situation, and those that are used must be original in their conjunction, strategic in their placing. This is the first step towards converting simile into metaphor and metaphor into single, dominating figure which is the "secret" of all successful poetry (whose thrill is conjured by the words but somehow lies beyond them).

### ritualdance

*when I gaze at the babbling crowd,  
I hear the music of all the world  
and the gurgle of children unborn*

*when I listen to the falling rain  
I see the leaves dancing  
and the wind singing*

*the wind dancing  
and the leaves singing  
and the crowd babbling*

*nodding and red-eyed,  
I sing and sing and sing with the crowd,  
a great he-goat smelling suddenly by,  
sniffing at the crowd, at me, at rain falling  
from the sky  
sniffing long at the leaves  
biting off some leaves;  
that swayed to the deep drowsy requiem of  
the rain*

*am I losing my babbling crowd  
to a great he-goat-chase?*

*my dark fertile crowd  
pursuing a great he-goat,  
like she-goats  
under heavy black rain*

# The Worshipper

*I have lain behind closed doors  
naked,  
sniffing the odours of camwood;  
for four floods,  
sighing at the fading indigo,  
counting mauled cowries  
among fish rafts  
and stools of wood;  
while the rest,  
immersed in chalk and clay  
chant:*

*Kwambelle! Kwambelle!*

*The echo resounds  
and my head is immersed  
in pitchers of ashes,  
in broken pots and waters of resurrection  
stagnant in pools of sacrificial blood:  
my face will be cleaned  
my hand will be cleansed.*

*Ojukwu!  
that is unabating, untiring,  
powerful wrathful.  
Ojukwu!  
undying . . . life-long.  
No.  
Not till these trees fall,  
till the body melts  
between birth and rebirth  
shall I cease pilgrimage  
to your court . . .*

*following the rest undress  
feeling at rest and dressed,  
chanting:*

*Kwambelle! Kwambelle!*

## II

*Who shall stop you  
Onuchi,  
reeling your voice  
at dusk and dawn,  
calling for the search  
of the palm-cutter  
lost between dusk and dawn?*

*In the rush of blood,  
in the flow of prophesy  
your nerves stiffen around your waist  
and you sit,  
while the drummers stir  
and the dancers heave  
and chant:*

*Kwambelle! Kwambelle!*

## III

*I have lain behind closed doors,  
counting mauled cowries,  
calling on the powerful, wrathful  
Ojukwu.*

*On the threshold of prophesy,  
without profanity;  
on the truth of chalk and clay  
and the immersion of the head  
await the godhead —  
in broken pots and waters  
of resurrection*

OKOGBULE WANODI

# The Lone Sentry

## I

*Where is the forest  
Woven into an opaque net  
Of interesting stems  
That shuts out sunlight?  
Where in that witch's haunt  
— a damp vault  
In which mosquitoes bite  
During the day  
And the stench of rotten leaves  
Suffocated the passers-by  
Has she gone  
To fetch firewood?*

*"We have  
No knowledge  
Which enemy's farm  
Encircled with talisman  
Dangling from a rope  
— a male monkey's sinews —  
She strayed into.  
God alone knows  
Where she can be found"*

*She slept  
Six feet  
Below the weight  
Of the cemetery slab.  
But these perfect curves,  
These lips,  
This model,  
God left the world  
Shall not rot  
Burrowed by worms.*

## II

*I stood,  
Guarding the ruined watch tower  
At the edge of the forest:  
The distant cock crowing,  
The ogilisi branches closing  
In the night dew,  
The moon fleeing,  
Left the world  
To darkness and to death.  
They nod,  
The ogilisi branches nod  
In the cold night breeze  
Shedding tears,  
Mourning the death  
Of a mother  
Who slept at my birth.*

*How long  
Will this vigil last?  
How long  
Will the midnight oil burn,  
Awaiting reunion  
With the mother  
Who would not return?*

## III

*Twenty-one years  
Of sleepless watching,  
Mounting lone sentry  
Bare feet  
Under the heat  
Of the desert sand;  
Watching,  
Exposed to the downpours  
Of the October thunderstorms  
Has bent my trunk.  
Doses of morphia,  
Pills of soneryl  
Cannot efface  
The dent engraved  
In my mind  
By the death  
Of the mother  
Of a motherless  
New-born child.*

## IV

*Mother,  
They have paid me  
In counterfeit coins  
For twenty-one years slaving,  
Toiling under the intense sun,  
With none to fetch me  
A mid-day meal  
When those  
On the nearby farm  
Have retired,  
Resting under the shade  
Of the breadfruit tree,  
Chatting,  
Feasting.*

*Yet I am left  
Mounting lone sentry  
Exposed to the chilly winds  
Awaiting reunion with  
The mother  
Who slept at my birth.*

*Will she ever return?*

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