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Intertextual Resonance in Christopher Okigbo's Poetry

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Abstract

Artistic creativity can be demonstrated in several ways, one of which is in the area of intertextuality as a literary endeavour. Intertextuality is the by-product of wide scholarship, which Christopher Okigbo exemplifies in his poetry. No work of art exists in a vacuum, as every writer is said to operate within a given literary tradition that has preceded him. This being the case, the issue of virginal purity in works of art is ruled out completely, if not partially. And rather than being a vice, this artistic device is a virtue. If anything, it is a demonstration of literary creativity; how a writer is able to re-echo the theme, structure and style of other writers before him. That is to say, no text is totally independent of the influence of other texts. Accordingly, Christopher Okigbo in his *Labyrinth With Path of Thunder* re-echoes the themes and style of other texts such as the Bible, classical literary sources of ancient Babylonian, Greek, Roman and some nineteenth and twentieth century literary traditions of Hopkin's *The Wreck of the Deutschland,* Debussy's *Nocturne,* Melville's *Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Eliot's *Waste Land*, etc.

Introduction

Every work of art is said to operate within a given literary tradition that preceded it. In other words, no work of art can claim originality, particularly in its thematic structure. And in so far as writers are in one way or the other influenced by other texts they have read, or other writers whose style they are trying to adopt, the issue of virginal purity in works of art is ruled out. This feature of artistic endeavour is no vice; rather, it is indicative of artistic creativity as a writer is able to employ either the themes of other works or their structure in order to develop his work.

Christopher Okigbo has been able to employ literary adaptations and thematic echoes of earlier works in a bid to exploring various themes in his collection of poems – *Labyrinths With Path of Thunder*. Accordingly, literary influences on Christopher Okigbo's poetry are both ancient and modern. We would find influences from the Bible, classical literary sources of ancient Babylonian, Greek, Roman and near contemporary literary traditions of Hopkin's *The Wreck of the Deutschland,* Debussy's *Nocturne*, Melville's *Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Eliot's *Waste Land*, etc. The development of Okigbo's poetic motif is reflective of diverse features from

such sources as Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratman, Stephane Mallarmé, Rabindranath Tagore, Garcia Lorca, Alberto Quintero Alvarez, etc.

What is intertextuality?

Intertextuality deals with how one literary work echoes another, language wise, content wise and otherwise. This means that the theme of a literary text has relationship to the theme of other texts before it. It also implies that one literary text echoes other texts. Thus, it deals with how one work of art resonates another. Montgomery *et al*(1992) in *Ways of Reading* argue that intertextuality is used in some literary criticism to describe the variety of ways that "texts interact with other texts, and in particular to focus on the interdependence between texts rather than their discreteness or uniqueness". Allusion, they claim, is a form of intertextuality that works largely through verbal echoes between texts, even though texts may also interact with one another through formal and thematic echoes (162).

In furthering the above argument, Montgomery *et al* quote Roland Barthes as saying that "a text is not an utterly unique artefact emerging through a kind of immaculate conception from a writer's brain; instead, the conventions and language which make up the text (any text) are available to the writer precisely because they have been used before" (237). They conclude by claiming that for Barthes, then, a text "is a tissue of quotations", "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (237).

Intertextuality operates along the obverse maxim that claims that as unique originator of his text, the writer is the only source of its form and meaning. Claudia Hoffer Gosselin (1978) remarks that "in contrast to these generally accepted ideas of the writer and the text, more recent literary theories posit a writer always operating within an already constituted literary system and thus never completely 'original', as well as a text that is no longer purely passive reflection of pre-existent thought but an active, generative mechanism in its own right". The writer, in Gosselin's view, is seen as always producing his text within the framework of the texts that have preceded his and that he is always "realizing, transforming or transgressing" (24).

Okigbo's poems are replete with intertextual resonance featuring themes from classical literature of ancient Greece, Babylon, Egypt, Israel and of course, nineteenth and twentieth century European literary influences. Thus in analysing images and symbols in Okigbo's poetry, one would discover that the poet came under strong romantic and pastoral influence of the Roman poet Virgil or by logical extension the larger influence of the Greek poet, Theocrius of Syracuse, whose work in the same pastoral genre, Anozie (1972) reasons, cannot have been unfamiliar to Okigbo (33). Mention must also be made of the presence of traditional

elements in Okigb's poetry borrowed from his Igbo background and elsewhere, for instance, *The Passage* and *Initiation.*

The Passage

The Passage opens with an invocation to the water spirit of Idoto, the village stream in Ojoto where Okigbo was born and was familiar with as he grew up. The oil bean, the tortoise and python are used as the totems for the worship of the water goddess. What is important here is how the poets has been able to convert innocent childhood experiences into a poetic theme of absolute surrender to the water goddess that represents the poet's traditional religion:

> Before you, Mother Idoto,
> naked I stand;
> before your watery presence,
> a prodigal
>
> leaning on an oilbean,
> lost in your legend.
>
> Under your power wait I
> on barefoot,
> watchman for the watchword
> at *Heavengate*,
>
> Out of the depths my cry:
> give ear and hearken … (*The Passage* 3)

The above lines contain both elements from the poet's traditional background and the Christian religion. Donatus Nwoga (2001) avers that Okigbo's poetry contain strong element of religious ritual that is neither purely of traditional nor of Christian background. From the above poem we have a mixture of the Idoto cult at the beginning and an echo of the theme of Psalm 130 at the end: "Out of the depths have I cried to thee, O Lord: Lord hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication" (172).

Initiation

Also, in *Initiation* just as in *The Passage*, the poet employs religious symbolism, the implication of which is the idea of rejection of the Christian form of ritual practice in favour of the pagan. But apart from that, the mention of "Rockland" in the lines: "Singeth Jadum from Rckland/after the lights" is reminiscent of the theme in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Sunday Anozie argues that Jadum's claim to come from 'Rockland' suggests

immediate kinship with the prisoner of the madhouse "Rockland" in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl.* Of particular attraction to Okigbo are the rebellious tone of contempt and frustration, the exile and bohemian posture of the speaker of the poem that were later to bring Lawrence Ferlinghetti (the publisher of *Howl*) to court for trial. Hence Ginsberg's poetry to a considerable extent also influenced Okigbo's writing, "if only because of the unconventionality of tone and moral attitude that is typical of his work, as well as the use of apostrophes". Anozie also observes that the echo of Ginsberg is heard not only in a later poem *Distances* where Okigbo speaks of a 'catatonic pingpong', no doubt taken from *Howl*, but also in the reference to Jadum in connection with 'Rockland' in *Heavengate*. In this allusion to the third section of Ginsberg's poem, the poet (Okigbo) invokes the name of another mad friend:

> Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland
> where you're madder than I am
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you must feel very strange

Reference to Jadum therefore is an initiation into madness, but as Anozie explains, it is the kind of madness that only poets and minstrels know. "It is above all madness fraught not with irresponsibility but with prophecy and warning":

> Do not wander in spear grass
> after the lights,
> probing liars, in stockings,
> to roast the viper alive,
> with dog lying up side down
> in the crooked passage … (55).

Watermaid

Watermaid is remarkable for its beautiful synthesis of lyrical mood, poetic vision, a sense of tragedy and the prodigal's vision of the maid of the sea that strongly echoes the vision described by T. S. Eliot in *Ash-Wednesday IV*:

> Bright
> With the armpit-dazzle of a lioness,
> she answers,
> wearing white light about her;
> and the waves escort her;
> my lioness,

> crowned with moonlight .. (*Watermaid* Okigbo*)*
>
> One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing
> White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.
> (*Ash-Wednesday IV* Eliot*)*

There are echoes of the dual pagan and Christian element characteristic of Okigbo's poetic vision. Dathorne (1974) agrees with this claim when he remarks that in *Watermaid* we find the intercessor – a mixture between a classical muse, the Virgin Mary, and a local priestess (27).

Lustra

Lustra is laced with both Christian and local pagan imagery. Dathorne on a similar note opines that *Lustra* suggests with appropriate Christian and African pagan imagery that there is hope which comes through a redeemer who is neither Christian nor pagan:

> The flower weeps, unbruised,
> for him who was silenced
> whose advent dumb-bells celebrate
> in dim light with wine song:
>
> Messiah will come again
> After the argument in heaven
> Messiah will come again …
>
> Fingers of penitence bring
> to a palm grove
> vegetable offering with five
> fingers of chalk ... (32)

Anozie similarly holds that Okigbo introduces for the first time the symbolism of the 'dum-bells' with its corollary theme of messianism. There is a subtle analogy between the Messianists' ethics of systematized debauchery (they "celebrate/with wine song" the Messiah's second coming), between the existentialist paradox and contradiction of their state ("in the dim light" they await the advent of the '*Lumen Mundi*' and that will be "after the argument in heaven") and the hollow, funny antics of an imperfect priest. Anozie also notes that Okigbo's phrase "after the argument in heaven" is no doubt a reference to the Third Book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which further confirms the Christian religious element in this

part of the poem. Here Okigbo compares two modes of religious experience similar in primitive mythology to the rites of passage. (117)

Limits V – XII: Fragments Out of the Deluge
The title of the second part of *Limits – Fragments out of the Deluge* echoes Eliot's piece in:

> These fragments I have shored against my ruins
> (T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land)*

Consider the following lines of Okigbo's *Fragments Out of the Deluge:*

> On an empty sarcophagus
> hewn out of alabaster,
> A branch of fennel on an
> empty sarcophagus …
> Smoke of ultramarine and amber
> Floats above the fields after
>
> Moonlit rains, from tree unto tree
> Distils the radiance of a king …
>
> You might as well see the new branch of Enkidu;
> And that is no new thing either …
> (*Fragments)*

The above poem resonates with classical imagery from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Reference to 'sarcophagus' is about the myth of the body of one of the Egyptian Pharaohs who is said to have metamorphosed into a fennel branch. On the other hand, reference to 'the radiance of a king' and 'the new branch of Enkidu' is about Gilgamesh the hero king and the legendary king of Uruk in Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh is believed to be the first human hero in literature. Kerry Wood and others claim that these and other tales about Gilgamesh formed the basis for *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* the greatest surviving work of Mesopotamian literature. According to them, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has been described as "a protest against death". Like other epics, the poem contains stories of heroic adventures, but the central episode is the quest of Gilgamesh to unravel the secret of everlasting life (8).

In Dathorne's view, *Fragments out of the Deluge* describes the inner ruin that is symptomatic of a revolution of the spirit, from which the cleansing comes about. The renewal of life clarifies the mystery of the meaning of living. Christ or Buddha or an *abiku*, anyone who has been

reborn from the dead, knows the truth about self and matter, a truth that might elude others. (186)

Anozie's views do not differ from the above viewpoints as he remarks that a sense of religious piety and the principle of ritual death and rebirth constitute the dynamics of *Fragments Out of the Deluge*. He also points out that the mention twice in *Limits v* of the death symbol ("empty sarcophagus") is a calculated poetic device to transport the reader's imagination back in time and space to the ancient world of the Egyptian Pharaohs at the time when this religious practice of embalming and preserving the dead in a sarcophagus was in vogue. The symbol of 'a branch of giant fennel' growing 'out of solid alabaster' captures the connotation of ritual rebirth. Thus, by means of two suggestive symbols the poet established for us both an historic perspective and an archetypal reference point – and all within the religious context of Christianity versus paganism. (87)

The last poem of *Fragments Out of the Deluge* contains the theme of Guernica, which is no doubt, derived from the famous painting 'Guernica' by the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. Okigbo was fascinated with Picasso's remarkable capacity for trapping the structure of the world war crisis within bold geometrical lines. Anozie reports that what Okigbo particularly admired in Picasso was his "genius for isolating particular aesthetic qualities with an unequalled ruthlessness and brilliance, and for doing it to an unequalled range and diversity of qualities". Besides, Anozie believes that it is the art behind and not the tragedy that is 'Guernica' that Okibo's 'sunbird, an embodiment of the creative conscience, sings of". (95)

Silences

Silences has two parts: (1) *Lament of the Silent Sisters* and (2) *Lament of the Drums* which have flavours from such writers and sources as Raja Ratman, Malcolm Cowley, Stephane Mallarmé, Rabindranath Tagore, T. S. Eliot, Hopkins, the Bible, etc. The second piece of poem in *Lament of the Silent Sisters* that begins with the following lines has liftings from Stephane Mallarmé and the Bible:

> This shadow of carrion incites
> and in rhythms of silence
> Urges us; gathers up our broken
> hidden feather-of-flight,
> To this anguished cry of Moloch … (Okigbo *Lament).*

Reference to *Moloch* is no doubt from classical source. The Bible describes the admonition of the apostatised nation of Israel who offered their children as sacrifice to the heathen god of the children of Ammon in the land of

Canaan (II Chron.28:3; Jer, 32: 35). But what is of paramount importance here is how Okigbo has been able to capture the tensed social atmosphere in Nigeria in the early sixties and the grim prospect of wanton waste of lives. Anozie in *African Poetics* points out that the burden of *Silences* is to present a total picture of a young African state (Nigeria) at a given crucial moment in its social and political evolution (65).

The dumb-bells of *Silent Sisters* re-echo the world of Eliot's *The Hollow Men*:

> We are the dum bells
> We are the dum bells
> Outside the gates
> In hollow landscape.

Listen to the chorus of *Silent Sisters* whose first impulse, according to Anozie is to identify themselves as being dumb, rejected, in despair and note the intertextual resonance in the above piece:

> Chorus: Dumb-bells outside the gates
> In hollow seascapes without memory, we carry
> Each of us an urn of native
> Earth, a double handful anciently gathered (*Silent Sisters,* Okigbo 41)

Meanwhile, *Lament of the Drums*, the second movement of *Silences,* also contains elements of classical references such as Palinurus, Ishthar and Tammuz, including echoes from Hopkin's *The Wreck of the Deutschland*:

> Palinurus, alone in a hot prison, you
> will keep
> The dead sea awake with nightsong …
>
> Palinurus, unloved in your empty
> catacomb.
> You will wear away through age alone …
> (*Lament III)*
>
> But the antiphony, still clamorous.
> In tremolo,
> Like an afternoon, for shadows;
> And the winds
> The distant seven cannons invite us
> To a sonorous

Ishthar's lament for Tammuz (*Lament IV).*

Okigbo himself said that *Silences* was written against the background of political crisis. That is, both parts of *Silences* were inspired by the events of the day: *Lament of the Silent Sister*, by the Western Nigerian crisis of 1962, and the tragic death of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of Congo in 1960. He became well known for his anti-imperialist revolution. On the other hand, *Lament of the Drums* was inspired by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his eldest son (Egudu, 70).

Okigbo also comments that the *Silent Sisters* are, however, sometimes like the drowning Franciscan nuns of Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland,* sometimes like the 'Sirenes' of Debussy's *Nocturne* – two dissonant dreams associated in the dominant motif *No in Thunder*.

Palinurus was the helmsman of Aeneas ship during his legendary voyage to Italy, just as Awolowo was one of the pilots of the ship of the Nigerian society. It is this event and other tragedies on the then Nigerian political scene that the poet's drums (the spirits of the ancestors, the dead) are warning about. The 'Great River' that the watchers despoil is a metonymy for Nigeria:

The wailing is for the Great River:
Her pot- bellied watchers
Despoil her… (*Lament* V)

In both Okigbo's poems and Hopkin's. *The Wreck of the Deutschland* both poets attempt to capture the theme of lament of death by shipwreck. This sense of tragedy for Okigbo is as much a personal loss as it is communal. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the poet laments in the chorus:

Chorus: We carry in our worlds that flourish
Our worlds that have failed…..(Okigbo *Lament* III)

This theme is no doubt taken form Malcolm Cowley's book, *The Exiles Return:*

We carry
In our worlds that flourish
Our world that have failed.

Distances

According to Okigbo *Distances* is a poem of homecoming in its spiritual and psychic aspect. The quest broken off after *Siren Limits* is resumed in

the unconscious. Ultimately, fulfilment in a form of psychic union with the supreme spirit (both destructive and creative) is undergone by the self that suffers and experiences. Accordingly, the poem was written after the poet's first experience of surgery under general anaesthesia. The whole process, which is one of sensual anaesthesia and of total liberation from all physical and emotional tension, results in a state of aesthetic grace. Michael Echeruo (1966) quotes the poet as saying that:

> The poet-hero undergoes a total liberation from all mental, emotional and psychic tension through sensual anaesthesia, and the self that suffers, that experiences, becomes sublimated to the Supreme spirit that wounds, that nurtures all creation (149).

Thus, *Distances* started off as a record of the poet's experiences under general anaesthesia, and ended as a dream fantasy. But woven into the poem's structure is a religious theme, which is rather like a "spiritual quest after a receding symbol, and the progress towards its final apocalyptic illumination". In this poem the poet-persona imagines that he is returning home after a period of exile to an island where Death holds its bloody sway. Chinweizu considers the exile's home coming as a sort of struggle with word or logos, seen by the poet in terms of A Death/Life continuum (1):

> From flesh unto phantom on the horizontal stone
> I was the sole witness to my homecoming …
> (*Distances I)*

The poet has been able to capture this spiritual-cum-artistic quest in the imagery of pilgrims from an unnamed religion bound for Shibboleth, "from Dan to Beersheeba". Here "Shibboleth", and "Dan to Beersheeba" are derived, no doubt from the Bible (cf. 1 Sam. 3:20; Judges 12:6), or from Death to Birth:

> In the scattered line of pilgrims
> bound for Shibboleth
> in my hand the crucifix
> the torn branch the censer
>
> In the scattered line of pilgrims
> from Dan to Beersheeba
> camphor iodine chloroform
> either sting me in the bum (*Distances* III)

Besides, influences from Allen Ginsbergs *Howl* are also found in *Distance IV* where Okigbo speaks of a 'catatonic pigpong':

> The only way to go
> through the marble archway
> to the catatonic pingpong
> of the evanescent halo … (*Distance* IV)

Path of Thunder

Path of Thunder comprises the last series of six poems by Christopher Okigbo before his death in August 1967 during the Nigerian Civil War. Written in May 1966, *Path of Thunder* reflects the poet's own feeling of uncertainty about the political future of Nigeria. And here, as elsewhere, one notices echoes from other literary sources, which is a characteristic feature of Okigbo's poetry. The theme of thunder is derived, no doubt, from Herman Melville's *Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne:*

> This day belongs to a miracle of thunder;
> Iron has carried the forum
> With token gestures. Thunder has spoken,
> Left no signatures: broken (*Thunder can Break* 63).

The last verse of *Elegy for Alto* also contains thematic echoes from Alberto Quintero Alvarez's *Ante el Mar*:

> AN OLD STAR departs, leaves us here on the shore
> Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
> The new star appears, foreshadows its going
> Before a going and coming that goes on forever …
> (Okigbo *Elegy for Alto* 72)

Compare the above lines with the following:

> What departs leaves one on the shore
> gazing seawards at the star foreseen;
> What arrives announces its farewell

before a coming-and-going that goes on
forever.
(Alvarez *Ante el Mar* 436)

Conclusion

Christopher Okigbo was a man of rich literary background, which he brought to bear on his artistic sensibility and poetic endeavour. Intertextuality as a literary tradition was fully exploited by Okigbo to create aesthetic effects. These borrowed elements in Okgbo's poetry should be treated as a positive literary experimentation rather than a vice. Thus, to effectively appraise Okigbo's poetry, the reader or critic must have developed a wider taste for other literary texts that provide the basis for any intertextual relationship with the his work.

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