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British journals, magazines and newspapers while relatively few are from Nigerian, Canadian and Australian sources. The book is generally well written in lucid and flowing prose, which is illuminated by flashes of rhetorical brilliance. My favorite excerpt of this is in p.280: "This is not to say that everything he touches turned to gold but if it turned out to be tin then he didn't throw it away, he retooled it."

It is interesting to learn that Anyaoku, the classicist, coined a new word, *intermestic*, to define issues that are essentially domestic but have international repercussions (P292).

Most readers, outside Commonwealth diplomatic and academic circles, will not be looking for "a comparative study of the degree of impact on each Commonwealth country since (1992)" which Johnson regrets not doing. However most readers would like to see "critical analysis... that dig (s) out the contents of his closets and reveal(s) his warts", which the author agrees she has not done (P280). Johnson preempts criticisms that the book is not a critical or academic analysis, that it is too positive a presentation, by asserting, defiantly, idealistically and naively that, "the trouble with his closets is that they are open to scrutiny, and contain no

skeletons, no dirty laundry, no drugs, mistresses, political skullduggery or whiff of corruption. If that (an honest person, happily married and devoted to his family) is considered odd in the human condition at the beginning of a new millennium, then perhaps we should take a good look at our judgement responses."

The way Johnson has thus staked out the moral high ground for herself and her subject is more reminiscent of 18th century English biographers than those of the 21st century when most readers do not appreciate moral didacticism. While one may sympathize with Johnson's implied aversion for some contemporary 'kiss and tell' biographies (nick named *scullioographies*), she seems to be over defensive about her work and over-protective of her subject.

There is no need: *Eye of Fire* is a comprehensive study of Anyaoku's diplomatic career and of the Commonwealth which he served, although the approach is more anecdotal than analytic. There is more than enough material for the reader to recognize Anyaoku's achievements and strength of character without the author's intrusive presence. **GBS**

Re-Imagining *Genesis*

BY WOLE OGUNDELE

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H. AUDEN once said that his response would be lukewarm to a young man who came to him for advice on how to be a poet because he had something to say. But if the young man wanted to be a poet because he loved words, he (Auden) would give him all the encouragement he was capable of. Poetry, in this Audenesque formulation, is first and last about words. Somewhere in-between comes the 'subject', which stands or falls not on its own merit but on that of the words embodying it. 'Embody', because certain cultures held — and still hold, even in this age of universal literacy and cyberspace — that words are not just the sounds our vocal chords produce, but are autonomous, concrete objects that we human beings borrow for invoking reality and its objects, for communicating our thoughts, and for expressing our emotions.

Certainly, this combination of the primacy and concreteness of words has been at the heart of Niyi Osundare's poetry from the beginning of his writing career. He has always been primarily a lover of words, be they in his native Yoruba or English. And

though one would not ordinarily link Osundare with the English Romantic poets, the combination reminds us of his earlier definition of poetry as "man meaning to man" which is a reformulation of Wordsworth's wonderfully simple and valid definition of the poet as "a man speaking to all men." The emphasis here is on *speaking* because, though a literary poet, Osundare belongs to a predominantly oral culture where the poet still literally sings or chants, and where the conditions of orality have strengthened the aural imagination. Thus, he has been able to transfer much of that aural imagination into his literary poetry, which is written in a language long shaped by the literary process and imagination. He has also been able to transform the idioms, tropes and techniques of his Yoruba oral poetic background creatively, and also to adapt successfully its mythology and metaphysics as the informing vision of his own poetry. *The Word is an Egg*, his latest volume under review, might be considered an extended and

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THE WORLD IS AN
EGG: POEMS, Ibadan,
Krafbooks Limited,
1999, 92 pp.**

multi-layered re-articulation of the Yoruba metaphysics of the Word, all, of course, going through the crucible of the poet's own unique combination of the aural and literary imaginations, and of a bold readiness to press English Language into expressing a basically Yoruba worldview. A fresh vision inseparable from an inventive use of English Language has almost always been the result.

All the poems in *The World Is An Egg* turn on the Yoruba belief that the Word preceded Man, and even the World itself. As enunciated mysteriously in the Yoruba Ifa oracular poetry, the Word not only preceded creation, but in fact enacted it. One can be almost certain that Osundare had the relevant Ifa verses for this radical view of the Word in mind when he composed both the prologue poem, "Invocations of the word" and the epilogue, "Omileti." He opens the first with the declaration,

"In the

Beginning was not the Word/In the Word was the Beginning" (p.10; emphasis in the original). The entire poem is an exposition on this bold challenge, followed by reversal, of the Biblical myth. The poet sees the Word as omnipotent and omnipresent: it is creation and creativity itself. It is the beginning and the end: "The word is life/The Word is death." The word incorporates the two great markers of human experience but also transcends them because it is "abuubutan" (inexhaustible). And in truth, who can ever exhaust the word?

In this prologue poem, Osundare also introduces another aspect of the Yoruba metaphysics of the Word by his repetitive insistence that it is all of nature:

The Word, the Word
is rocks and roots
sand and stone
rust and dust
love— and lust (p.11)

Fundamental to the metaphysics is the notion that words are not just the transient sounds that come out of the human mouth, but sacred, sovereign objects. The eponymous poem, which appropriately begins section II, is a brief elaboration of a Yoruba proverb: the word is a raw egg which, once it breaks, can never be gathered together. It is at once a cautionary proverb against reckless utterances, and also a hinting at the belief that once uttered, words take on a life of their own, breeding other words. The proverb thus relates the religious awe in which the Yoruba hold the power of the Word. The next poem, "Divining words", articulates that conception of words as physical objects — as brutally physical as a sword: "I long for / The horizontal thrust of words"; or an army "Marching flank to flank." But words are also heuristic entities, for they "cut a path/On the divination tray." "Can-do" continues on the mysterious power of words. Words make: "I have seen rain-clouds gather/At the instance of a word"; and unmake: "I have sent well-aimed songs/Uncrown the emperor." Without the Word, even love is impossible. To revert to another fundamental Yoruba concept, Words have the mysterious power of *ase*: the word is *ase*, the creative or vital force of the universe.

The poet pursues the same corporeality and autonomy of the Word in "Did you see the word?" We normally think of the poet as a user of words, but in this poem Osundare makes us think again — of the poet as someone used by words for their own purpose. The poem (an idea or a feeling?) is



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<< an empty shell until words walk in to occupy it: "Did you see the Word/When it walked into my poem/..." (p.47). Indeed, the poet is not so much a maker (in its original Western sense) as the one *made* by the Word! The same conceit obtains, albeit with variation, in "Ear food" (p. 49). At the risk of being pedantic, this poem is based on a basic Yoruba idea that 'words are food for the ear'. But the poet goes beyond its Yoruba base by deliberately echoing the biblical stories of Moses' turning his rod into a snake as a sign that he is Yahweh's messenger, and one of Christ's more famous miracles of walking on water, as sign of his supernaturalism and total command over nature. He (the poet) then circles back to the source by underpinning these explanations with the Yoruba phenomenological idea of *ase*, which at the magico- social level is also the spoken command that makes things be or happen, be they mundane or miraculous. In other words, both Moses and Jesus Christ could perform their miracles because they had this affective force called *ase*!

It is to be expected, in a collection of poems about words, that some will be on the subject of the creative process itself, especially as it relates to the poet's long and laborious struggle with language. In "The words which choose us" (p.18), the poet briefly uses the conventional metaphor of writing poetry as giving birth ("I sit expectant"), but his basic concern is with the Word:

Adjectives dodge their nouns
a million I-deas flutter the roof
Of the Mind, seeking anchor
in happy images...

Does the poet choose his words or do they choose him? Osundare hints ever so slightly, in this poem, that the latter is more the case. In "The future is a word" (p.20), the Word is visualized as a ship sailing to port, a bird flying to its tree — not something that wells up from inside us but an elemental thing out there. All the poet can do is make himself ready to receive the Word.

Erotic love poetry is not common in contemporary African poetry (for whatever reasons), and the poet's effort in "Water Image" is a refreshing departure. It is such a wonderful erotic poem (there are also the last two pages of section vii of "Words catch fire"). This section ends with "I want to touch the world" (p.38), a poem on the subjects of universal brotherhood and the poet's reaching out to establish empathetic connection with all of creation. Through thematic echoes and line similarities, it evokes other poets as diverse as Walt Whitman, Christopher Okigbo, and Okot

p'Bitek. The structure of the poem is particularly interesting: it starts with the poet's persona, radiates out and ranges through all the great, blooming complexity of the universe, only to circle back and end on a small, quiet note and point: "I am .../An adjective waiting for a noun."

The next section has the general title 'Silence' and is concerned with elemental silence as well as that imposed by tyrants and dictators. Out of both can be born the creative noise that poets make. Thus, in "Trapped words" (p.40), an unnamed tyrant holds the Word/Poet prisoner, and the prison itself is Silence. But silence, be it forced or elemental, is also the womb of dreams, creativity and truth. In "Serpent of silence" (p.41), it is a serpent, and the poem that results from the encounter between this "serpent" and the poet's pen is "a forest of singing trees." The serpent and "singing trees" symbols here inevitably remind one of the Garden of Eden. But again, Osundare revises the myth rather than affirm it: the encounter with the serpent in the Garden led to the discovery of the Word, not to the fall. The surprise caused by the reversal of expectations, together with the profuse images, turn the short poem into one grand conceit in the manner of the English Metaphysical poets.

The next poem, "Apocryphal thunders" (p.42), reminds us that poets and dictators have one thing in common: words. But whereas the former's relationship with them yields "a forest of singing trees," the latter's produces "thunders", "spiked boots", and "edicts." Or, as in "The emperor's largesse" (p.67), the dictator feeds the hungry people with "100 bags of nouns/And 1000 bags of adjectives." The one ennobles them, the other debases them. It is not often that the journalist is given the same creative status and prestige as the poet, but in "Words underground" (p.53), Osundare goes beyond celebrating the heroic stand of Nigerian journalists against the tyranny of the late military despot, Sani Abacha (between 1993-1998), to accord them the same level of creative use of words as poets by using almost identical images to characterize journalist and griot.

In "I have learnt," the poet boasts of what he has been able to achieve with words. Osundare the poet has good reasons for this modest self-congratulation, for he has, over the years, learnt to coax the English Language—with the help of his Yoruba oral tradition of course — into articulating his own unique vision in his own inimitable voice.

"Words catch fire" is a sequence of six

short verses and a seventh long one. Each of the six is in a different voice and captures a different mood and emotion, ranging from the solemnity and earnestness of ritual chant in the early verses to satirical invectives (pp.63-4). The ritualistic refrain "Odara, maa gba ti won lo, Odara" gives us an idea of both the general theme and purpose of the sequence: an incantation to charm away evil from the land. If in these six verses, fire is used as a symbol for all the destructions that tyranny and poverty have wrought, it becomes the cleansing fire in the fairly long seventh verse. It is also the fire of creativity, essence of mythopoesis and memory.

Section V, the last section, contains one poem that is also the longest in the volume. Ten and a half pages long, "Omoleti" is truly a mythological poem in depth of conception and execution. It is also as proudly simple — as myths usually are. It imagines that 'time before time' when only the Word existed. By using figurative as well as rhetorical tropes in such a way as to imagine what the human mind cannot imagine or conceptualize at all, or with extreme difficulty, the poet gives proof of his myth-making project: what cannot be imagined or named does not exist, to name is to cause to exist — if not in reality, at least in the imagination. He brings such profound, cosmic matters to the folk level with the narrative of *oro* (Word) personified as the favored suitor who is at once mysterious and miraculous: "Then...from the far far land/O something and Nothing..." (pp.88-89). To the poet, the Word makes possible, and inheres in, all other forms of communication and it was not God but the Word who said, "Let there be light." The Word created all of existence: the Word is existence itself. *Oro* marries Omoleti to bear witness, to incarnate him. The marriage is of course the primal creative act, for Omoleti literally means 'the one/girl who has ears', a personification of the aural imagination. If we imagine her as a representation of the poet, then we see that Osundare is making a fundamental revision of the figure of the poet. The poet is not so much a maker as a hearer of words: one who hears creatively.

"Omoleti" is an ambitious mythical poem executed with the usual Osundare panache. There are the biblical listing of genealogy and allusions (which he reverses, in keeping with his revision of the biblical creation myth), and even echoes of T.S. Eliot's prophetic mode. All are inscribed in the mystical and archaic idioms of Ifa oracular poetry, and in the oratorical flair that we have now come to recognize as the distinctive mark of Osundare's poetic voice.

"Unspoken tears" takes up the subject of

the contemporary African literary poet as the carrier of the historical-cultural burdens of his race. But here the poet sees himself principally as merely a vehicle by which the race is now expressing itself: "Inchoate proverbs/kick in the castle of my mind/ Reaching for the door/expanding towards the door" (p.50). This poem should be read along with "Missing tongue" (p.52), which also proclaims that "Never again will our story go/ without a proper telling." Given this, it is proper that the poem about Osundare the Yoruba poet using English should be titled "Ambiguous legacy." On the one hand, if the poet is truly the voice of his race, is it not then a betrayal of that race to keep on expressing its burden in the tongue of the "clan of earless conquerors" (p.50)? And on the other, he frankly acknowledges, shall we say, the privilege and joy of borrowing "the tongue that Shakespeare spake! (p.51)."

The above leads to the one jarring poem in the entire collection, "I write, therefore I am," which echoes the famous Cartesian rationalists project. The poem uses as epigraph a quotation from Henry Louis Gates Jr., which asserts that it is writing that separates "animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject." I do not know the context in which this statement occurs, but Osundare's poem seems to use it approvingly (if there is a note of irony in the poem, I am yet to detect it). Without belaboring the point, to agree with Gate's claim is to say that all black Africans were beasts before writing came to sub-Saharan African and that the vast majority of those who still do not have it are beasts, slaves and mere objects! It is impossible to imagine Osundare being ready to entertain this proposition, even for the sake of an argument. Yet, the poem seems to be a celebration of the power of the written word, and its superiority over the oral. It celebrates writing as a liberating and empowering weapon, which the erstwhile (imperial?) masters once withheld but is now acquired by the ex-colonials. The oral word has died, but out of its "ebony ashes" has arisen the written Word. But what is the color of the written Word that has arisen out of these ashes? Osundare's use of the statement as epigraph is more puzzling in the light of the first section of "Mark this..." (pp.31-34), in which he pictures and directly addresses the reader holding a copy of this collection in his hands. He asks such a reader to note that the "silence pulsing in your palm",

is the heart of a proverb

which lived five hundred years

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<< in the cradle of maternal lips
the sun opened Dawn's eye
and the world learned its soul
from a torrent of names;
the syllable is the cloud-bearded griot
watering Memory's garden (p.31).

In other words, the book may have succeeded in trapping sounds and converting them into black marks on paper, but the oral Word is primal while the written is secondary.

In all, *The Word Is An Egg* carries to new heights the usual technical and linguistic virtuosity that makes Osundare a distinct and major voice in contemporary Europhone African Poetry. The ideal of every poet is to achieve a perfect union of vision and language, and Osundare in this collection moves far in that direction with the characteristic style, tone and tropes he has been honing since the beginning of his career. There is the two-line (or sometimes three lines) unit that I would say corresponds to the English couplet. Sometimes epigrammatic, sometimes not, this unit has become his basic structure, which he expands and multiplies in an infinite variety of ways, as much for meaning as for the tropes and other rhetorical devices that embody them. Like the English Augustans with whom his poetry bears technical comparison in this respect, Osundare is also a poet who uses the narrative structure (inherent in the two-line unit) for his lyrical or argumentative ends. There are also the alliterations, parallelisms, repetitions, catachreses and other devices, all of which he plays upon, stretching them to the point where, when we are just beginning to fear that he is over-using them, he either varies them or veers in another direction entirely.

These devices reinforce a recurrent feature of Osundare's poetic: a combination of the two opposing and yet complementary attitudes of play and earnestness. His painstaking attention to, and original use, of language testify to how serious he is as a poet, and how seriously he takes his craft. Yet his imagination is essentially playful: he goes about it all with the conviction that poetry is after all, artifice, an activity engaged in by both cantor and auditor oftentimes less for meaning than for the felicity of phrasing, the wonder of the riddles at the heart of images and metaphors, and the mellifluousness of the chanting voice. This is eloquence, and it is a quality manifested in his poetry by his especial fondness for alliterations and assonances. They combine to constitute his way of transferring into English the innate musicality of a language like Yoruba with its

contrasting vowel sounds, strong consonants, high and low tones, and the doubling of words for emphasis. His fantastical metaphorical imagination, which enables him to create extravagant images, metaphors and transferred epithets, is another aspect of that fusion of the ludic and the serious: by their extravagancy, the tropes draw attention to themselves — as the poet obviously intends them to do.

The collection also marks a significant stage in Osundare's increasing absorption of another dimension of the poetics of his oral tradition. Starting with *The Eye of the Earth*, his poems increasingly began to approximate the genre and status of incantation.

Correspondingly, meaning in them has also tended to become more self-enclosed than overt. In other words, his poetry has tended to become less and less about something, but more and more *that* something. So, as in songs and incantations, it is the experience of reading (more properly, chanting) the poems that really constitutes meaning. Three features have contributed very strongly to this: the bold and often arresting declarative statements with which many of them open; the Yoruba refrains which many of them have; and a personal voice more identifiable with the poet himself than with any fictional persona. All three make many of his poems eminently performable, with significant participation by the audience. They also lend his poetry the energy and dynamism of *ase*, the primal, creative Word. These qualities in turn facilitate the experiencing of them more at the physical-sensuous level than at the intellectual and abstract. This is poetry incarnation, which partly derives from the poet's oral tradition with its metaphysical conception of the Word, and with its concomitant emphasis on the aural imagination and eloquence. Poetry as incarnation is as much about the phenomenology of words as about anything else. GBS