PATTERNS IN OKIGBO'S POETRY

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief Review of Okigbo's Life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Influences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: ANALYSIS AND READING OF OKIGBO'S POEMS</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The linguistic-Poetic Method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of <em>Heavensgate</em>, <em>Siren Limits</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Distances</em> and &quot;Fragments out of the Deluge.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of Okigbo's poetry: Unity of his poetry; His Traditionalism;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Influence&quot; and &quot;Originality.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX I: List of Okigbo's Published Poems</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX II: Okigbo's Pictorial Representation of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanza Two of <em>Distances IV</em></td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX III: Okigbo's Pictorial Representation of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanza Four of <em>Distances IV</em></td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

An examination of the poetry of Christopher Okigbo reveals a remarkable fusion of elements of Igbo traditional oral poetry with those of the tradition of modern English poetry as found in the works of T.S. Eliot and the Symbolists. Partly using the method of linguistic-poetic analysis, this study attempts to show how Okigbo achieves a distinctively patterned poetic voice by integrating elements of the two traditions.

The poems of the Heavensgate - Limits - Distances group are analysed in detail to identify the linguistic structures from which they derive their meaning and unity. These sequences are then related thematically and stylistically to the later group of poems, Silences and Paths of Thunder, to show the interrelatedness of all Okigbo's poems achieved largely by means of patterns of language, imagery and symbolism.
RESUME

L'analyse de la poésie de Christopher Okigbo permet de dégager la synthèse d'éléments issus de la tradition orale poétique Igbo et de la tradition poétique moderne, telle qu'elle se manifeste dans l'œuvre de T.S. Eliot et des Symbolistes. En partie à la lumière de la méthode linguistique structurelle, cette analyse a pour but de démontrer comment l'œuvre d'Okigbo accède à l'originalité par le biais de la synthèse d'éléments dérivés de deux traditions.

Les poèmes des recueils *Heavensgate*, *Limits* et *Distances* sont analysés en détail afin d'en arriver à identifier les structures linguistiques qui sont à l'origine de leur signification et de leur unité. Ces trois séquences poétiques sont ensuite mises en relations thématiques et stylistiques avec les séquences intitulées *Silences* et *Paths of Thunder*, de façon à démontrer les structures de cohésion dans l'œuvre d'Okigbo au niveau du langage, de l'imagerie et de la symbolique.
I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Irwin Gopnik and Professor Max Dorsinville, who, throughout the preparation of my thesis were available at all times for consultation. They patiently read through the drafts, offering invaluable advice and encouragement.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Christopher Okigbo has been described as "a lyric self exploration."¹ This "personal" character associated with his poetry makes it necessary in a study like this to outline some of the known facts of his brief but eventful life which may throw light on his poetic career.

Christopher Okigbo was born in 1932 of Roman Catholic parents in Ojoto, a small village near Onitsha, an Igbo-speaking area of what was then known as Eastern Nigeria. At that time in Eastern Nigeria there was very intensive proselytising and christianising activity by Irish Roman Catholic priests and their aides, the native teachers and catechists. A childhood spent in this village meant for Okigbo a very close contact with both Igbo traditional religious ritual as well as that of the Christian Church to which he belonged by birth. Reminiscences of both abound in his poetry.

Okigbo attended Government College Umuahia, Eastern Nigeria from 1945 to 1950 and University College Ibadan, Nigeria, from October 1951 to June 1956. Government College Umuahia at that time was a secondary school for boys of more than average intelligence as admission was by a highly competitive examination. It was one of the few schools

in Nigeria modelled on schools like Eton in England, which produced the bulk of Nigeria's elite, its students passing on, invariably, to the University College Ibadan. It has produced most of Nigeria's major literary figures such as Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara and Vincent Chukwuemaka Ike.²

Although Okigbo was admitted into Ibadan to study medicine, he changed courses, like Achebe before him, and ended up studying Classics. He had wide and varied interests ranging from hockey and soccer to music. At Ibadan he distinguished himself as a jazz musician, playing on the clarinet. The interest in music had a profound effect on his poetry which shows such concern for sound effects that he has been accused by some of his critics of sacrificing meaning for sounds. Dathorne has quoted Okigbo as saying that he was first and foremost "a composer of sounds" and that when he finished a poem he was himself unaware of its meaning.³

He is said to have shown preference for the poetry of Ovid, Catullus, Horace and Virgil, and for the historian Tacitus.⁴ Apart from modelling his early poetry,

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² Chinua Achebe is author of four novels. His first novel, Things Fall Apart is the most popular and has been translated into several languages including Russian. His volume of poems Beware Soul Brother won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in October 1972.


Four Canzones, on Virgil's Eclogues, his Classical studies are manifested in the large number of ancient mythologies and folk legends which form the scaffolding of his poetry. He is said also to have been "equally interested in nineteenth century English romantic poetry, relishing in particular Keats, Coleridge and Browning".  

His acquaintance with the moderns came later as a result of his friendship with J.P. Clark, another famous Nigerian poet and critic. Clark is quoted as saying that he introduced Okigbo to the moderns" ... as he spouted the Old Classics to me and I the New Greats to him. That's how he met Pound, Eliot and Yeats -- he could not stand or swallow the last of the trinity, Eliot he took immediately..."  

Anozie has suggested that Okigbo's brother, Dr. Pius Okigbo, also played a significant role in initiating his brother into the poetry of Pound and Eliot. There were also other sources of contact with modern poetry. At the University of Nigeria Nsukka where he worked as assistant librarian he met Peter Thomas, a poet of Welsh origin, who was then a lecturer in the department of English at the University. Their common interest in poetry brought them very close and they are said to have "spent endless evenings reading and discussing poetry."  

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6 Part of Clark's letter to Anozie, quoted in Anozie, p.12.
7 Anozie, p.12 (footnote).
8 Ibid., p.13.
Okigbo's life was one of continuous striving after self-fulfilment. Between 1956 and 1966 he worked variously for the Nigerian Tobacco Company, the Federal Government of Nigeria, the University of Nigeria Nsukka, the Cambridge University Press at Ibadan, and finally, he was about to establish a book-publishing company in partnership with Chinua Achebe and others when the Nigerian civil war that claimed his life broke out.

His quest for fulfilment was not without its disappointments and frustrations. The many changes of employment within so short a time is evidence of that nature which was always striving for the best.

He does not seem to have fared much better in his family life. He got married to Safinat a daughter of the eminent Attah (chief) of Igbirra, Northern Nigeria, in 1963. They had a daughter of this marriage but there are indications that they did not live happily together. It is said that "she must have taken seriously Okigbo's unilateral divorce on the telephone in 1966." 9 It is one of the paradoxes of Okigbo's personality that he should dedicate his Labyrinths to "Safinat and Ibrahimat: Mother and Child", a fact which tends to support Anozie's view that "...although he did his best not to show it, Okigbo... adored his wife." 10 Okigbo

9 Anozie, p.9.
10 Ibid., p.9.
gives an indication, in his "Introduction" to *Labyrinths*, that his poetry is informed by these struggles and their attendant disappointments and frustrations:

Every work of this kind is necessarily a cry of anguish of the root extending its branches of coral, of corals extending their roots into every living hour; the swell of the silent sea the great heaving dream at its highest, the thunder of splitting pods - the tears scatter, take root, the cotyledons broken, budger into laughter of leaf; or else rot into vital hidden roles in the nitrogen cycle. The present dream clamoured to be born a cadenced cry: silence to appease the fever of flight beyond the iron gate.11

Okigbo was a firm believer in human justice, in the freedom and survival of the individual. To him exploitation, oppression or travesty of human rights were bad, whether they came from the European colonizer of Africa or from the privileged Nigerian political leader. It was the ethical rather than the political consideration which drove him into deep involvement on the Biafran side in the Nigerian crisis of 1966-70, a crisis whose immediate causes he laments in *Silences* and the horror of which he paints in *Path of Thunder*. He joined the Biafran army as a volunteer to defend his beleaguered people, rising to the rank of Major before he was killed in action at Opi, near Nsukka, in August 1967.

The significance of Okigbo's commitment to the Biafran cause can be inferred from the following comment.

Indeed in some ways I think you might make more of this change from a Nigerian nationalist to a strong opponent of the federation. After all it was a great shock... in a short time to have to change political allegiance under the grim strains of the massacres and to feel that there was no hope or trust in the country that you had believed in all your life and that the only course was to create a new nation. And then Okigbo volunteering for the Biafran army was a more remarkable act... for it showed that among his contemporaries as an educated, cultured man, he translated his beliefs into action in a way that now appears to have been unusual... he seems to have been a lonely martyr.12

His death was a great shock to the Nigerian literary world. It was not just that they had lost one of their most promising poets, they had lost, with the death of Okigbo, a pioneering spirit and a dedicated patron. Tributes flowed in from both writers and critics. Dathorne wrote in his introduction to the article "Ritual and Ceremony in Okigbo's Poetry": "...as I mourn his death I am not only concerned with the quality of the dead but with the perversity of fate which banishes the poets in Africa today to the ...overful closets of prisons and to premature death."13 The first issue of The Conch: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Analysis which is described as deriving "its original idea or inspiration from a sense of duty to the memory of Christopher Okigbo" was dedicated to "this great poet of Africa."14

Okigbo played a leading role in the awakening of literary consciousness in Nigeria. While at Nsukka he inaugurated the short-lived African Authors' Association of Nigeria which

12 Quoted in Anozie, pp.10-11. The author of the comment is not indicated.
13 O.R. Dathorne, JCL No. 5 July 1963, p.79. — See Note 3 on p. 2
published as its organ The African Writer. While teaching at Ibadan Grammar School near Ibadan he was known to have gone regularly to the University campus in order to have his poetry readings and discussions with J.P. Clark. His first volume of poems, Debtor's Lane, was then published serially in Horn, an Ibadan University undergraduate poetry magazine. His poetry study group at Nsukka produced poets like Okogbule Wonodi and the late Polycarp Ndu. As Anozie has put it, he was to these poets "as Pound was to Eliot." He encouraged and directed their efforts and often saw to it that they were published.

Of his good will and patronage J.P. Clark has the following to say:

He had come to hear of me first through my brother who was almost his contemporary and on the same Classics course at U.C.I., and later through Horn. It was at this time that he took to me and goodness knows what I could have done to myself in those days of doubt and dejection had Chris not been around with all of himself. He protested to Ulli Beier for failing to feature my poetry in Black Orpheus and also proposed to Philip Harris of Cambridge University Press an edition of my poems.

His influence was not limited to individuals and small groups within Nigeria. He featured prominently in most literary events in English-speaking Africa. His Limits was awarded the first prize in poetry at the Negro Festival of Arts held in Dakar in 1966 although he denied entering any work for the competition and said he had written to reject the prize.

15 Anozie, p.17.
16 Underscoring mine.
17 Quoted in Anozie, pp.18-19.
18 Ibid., p.22.
His reason for this rejection was his opposition to the whole concept of "Negritude": "...I found the whole idea of a negro festival based on colour quite absurd." 19 In this, Okigbo was reflecting the attitude of most writers from English-speaking West Africa to the "Negritude" movement. The word "negritude" was invented by Aimé Césaire, the coloured poet-politician from Martinique, in his poem "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal" ("Return to my native land") (1939) but its ideology was defined mainly by the Senegalese poet-politician, Leopold Sedar Senghor. Negritude is a kind of cultural nativism, an attempt by the colonized peoples of black Africa to a re-establish and raise the status of the African culture which had been devalued by European colonizers. As an ideology it was born in French-speaking West Africa and dominated the literature of the period. It finds expression in the extolling of the virtues of African culture and a debunking of European civilization and culture, and in the idealizing of the physical beauty of the African woman. The basic tenet of negritude is that Africa has something to offer to Europe. At the First international Conference of Negro Writers and Artists, Césaire is quoted as saying:

I believe that the civilization that has given Negro Sculpture to the world of art; that the civilization that has given to the political and social world the original communal institution such as village democracy, or fraternal age groups, or family property... the civilization that, on another plane that has given to the moral world an original philosophy based on respect for life and integration within the cosmos; I refuse

19 Anozie, p.22.
I believe that this civilization, imperfect though it may be, must be annihilated or denied as a pre-condition of the renaissance of the native peoples. I believe that, once the external obstacles have been overcome, our particular cultures contain within them enough strength, enough vitality, enough generative power to adapt themselves to the conditions of the modern world and they will prove able to provide for all political, social, economic and cultural problems, valid and original solutions, that will be valid because they are original.

Probably because of the overtones of Marxist ideology in the philosophy of Negritude, and its stress on colour, it was generally suspect in English-speaking West Africa. Among the younger generation of Nigerian writers the attitude was that of open hostility and ridicule. Wole Soyinka, for instance, is credited with saying that the "tiger does not go around proclaiming its tigritude any more than the negro should go around proclaiming his negritude." In Distances III, Okigbo classes "negritude" with "vendors," "princes," and "politicians" as belonging to the lowest rung of the creative ladder and as people with highly limited vision of reality.

22 Quoted in David Nicols, "Closing Address" (Conference on African Literature and the Universities held at Fourah Bay University, Freetown, Sierra Leone in April 1963) in Gerald Moore, ed., African Literature and the Universities (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965) p.136.
23 Labyrinths p. 56. The quotation is from Anozie, p. 22.
In spite of this negative attitude to negritude, Okigbo's poetry, like that of most black African writers, has been influenced by what may be called the aesthetics of negritude. This influence is manifested in his recourse to his cultural roots for a re-discovery of himself and for poetic inspiration. It is also evident in his use of myth, symbol and image which are specifically African. When at the African Writers' Summit in Uganda in 1962 he said that an African work "must have its root deep in the African soil must take its birth from African experience must pulsate with African feeling" he was unconsciously echoing the implied aesthetic manifesto of negritude. What is different is that the approach of the English-speaking West Africans is less doctrinaire; "they create a poetic voice which is more private and inward, and less inclined to declamation."

The younger generation of Nigerian writers are those writing after independence. Writing before them were the "pioneers" of between the 'thirties and 'fifties. These pioneers fell in tune with the tempo of the new awareness of the African personality, of the evils of colonialism and of the poor opinion that the western world appeared to have of the abilities of the black man. Like the exponents of

they felt themselves committed to the task of gaining recognition for the qualities of the black man, of achieving political independence for their country, and of forming the cultural minds of their people. Two such people were Gladys Casely-Hayford of Ghana (then Gold Coast) and Denis Chukude Osadebay of Nigeria, both of them poets. They used their poetry, which was often published in newspapers, as one medium of expressing and spreading this awareness. Like Cesaire's their poetry was essentially propaganda literature that spoke to the issues of liberation from colonialism and the superiority of the black colour and culture.

This propaganda poetry was usually simple and straightforward, the emphasis being on the matter or content of the poems. The poets regarded themselves as sages, people whose duty it was to "show the light." Gladys Casely-Hayford in her poem, "Rejoice," exhorts the African to rejoice and be proud of his black colour:

Rejoice and shout with laughter
Throw all your burdens down
If God has been so gracious
As to make you black or brown.
For you are a great nation,
A people of great birth
For where would spring the flowers
If God took away the earth?

"Show the Light and People will find the Way" was the motto of the West African Pilot, a pioneering daily then published in Lagos, Nigeria, and whose founder was Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's pioneer politician. It had a column known as "Poet's Corner".
Rejoice and shout with laughter
Throw all your burdens down
Yours is a glorious heritage
If you are black, or brown.27

In "Young Africa's Plea" Osadebay says that there is something in traditional African culture which is always there to fashion and shape what the African may take from an outside culture. By assimilating and fashioning these external influences the African will be able to create a better Africa:

Don't preserve my customs
As some fine curios
To suit some white historian's taste.
There's nothing artificial
That beats the natural way
In culture and ideals of life.
Let me play with the white man's ways
Let me work with the black man's brains
Let my affairs themselves sort out.
Then in sweet rebirth
I'll rise a better man
Not ashamed to face the world.
Those who doubt my talents
In secret fear my strength
They know I am no less a man.
Let them bury their prejudice,
Let me have untrammelled growth,
My friends will never know regret
And I, I never once forget.28

The message of these poems is clear and their sentence structure simple. Except for Osadebay's "Let my affairs themselves sort out", there are no inversions. Again, except for Osadebay's "curios" both poems use simple every-day words. Both poems are dramatic in the sense that an audience

28 Ibid., p.17.
is assumed. Osadebay's poem is built on the white/black antithesis while in Casely-Hayford's the same antithesis is implied in the glorification of black/brown. This kind of poetry which is easily understood by the average literate person was seen as a part of the nationalist struggle and was therefore well received. But it is not of much interest when analysed in terms of modern poetic and critical criteria, such as allusiveness, complexity and obscurity. Even long before these pioneers were writing, English poetry had moved away from this kind of mid-nineteenth century regular rhythm, simple image and logical organization.

The younger generation of poets, including Okigbo, had come face to face with new developments and new techniques in English poetry in their studies in universities and when they started writing they experimented with these new techniques. They discarded the pioneers' tendency to confine themselves to the superficial attractions of a theme. Since independence had been achieved there was little need for the public theme of African struggle for liberation. The new poets explored other sources for poetic inspiration and some, like Okigbo, found theirs in the exploration of their own minds.

It is against the background of this historical progression that one can appreciate the reception given to Okigbo's early poetry in 1962. People who had been used to the effete
sentimentalism of Osadebay's Africa Sings\textsuperscript{29} found nothing to share in Okigbo's private mythology or in his poetry of "little pictures."\textsuperscript{30} Such people felt excluded from Okigbo's poetry. Even among his fellow poets there were those who felt that the message of a poem should be transparent, and who therefore criticized Okigbo for failing in this duty.

This study will focus on the poems in Labyrinths with Path of Thunder which, except for Path of Thunder, were selected by Okigbo himself in the volume Labyrinths, and of which he said: "The versions here preserved are...final." Path of Thunder was added posthumously and published in the present volume by Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, in 1971.\textsuperscript{31} As Silences and Path of Thunder are occasional poems and do not follow the exploratory pattern of the earlier sequences they will not be given detailed treatment but an attempt will be made to relate the two groups. Where necessary illustrations of technique will be drawn from them. The format will be as follows:

A review of the literature on Okigbo's poetry will be followed by analysis of some of Okigbo's poems using linguistic-poetic methods where necessary to justify the reading of the poems. Also where necessary Eliot and other

\begin{itemize}
  \item[31] For a list of Okigbo's published poems see Appendix 1.
\end{itemize}
twentieth century poets of the Anglo-American tradition will be cited for the explication of Okigbo's poems. The method of analysis of individual poems will vary according to the aspect of Okigbo's poetry that is being investigated. Emphasis will centre on how Okigbo achieves thematic and stylistic unity; his use of imagery, symbol and myth; the function of literary allusions in his poetry and his use of some stylistic devices.

The last part will deal with a general discussion of Okigbo's poetry followed by an assessment of his stature based on the insight achieved from the analysis of his poems.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literary merit of Okigbo's poetry has been recognised since the publication of *Heavensgate* in 1962. Anozie hailed *Heavensgate* as a "matured arrival... a new seminal growth of Nigerian lyric poetry, and a becoming farewell to Osadebay's "Africa Sings."¹

But Okigbo's poetry has not been whole-heartedly accepted as the kind of poetry suitable for an African audience. The nature of Okigbo's poetry and the main sources of objection to it are summarized in the following comment by King: "Okigbo's poetry is immediately attractive but difficult to interpret... It is perhaps best to approach him as a poet's poet, someone whose verse gives immediate pleasure in its sound and imagery before the reader can interpret its meaning."²

African critics have not, however, been as benign. Their scepticism about the social relevance of Okigbo's poetry as well as the hostility expressed by some critics is based on the prevalent notion that he was imitating Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Criticism has centred on his use of

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the technical innovations which Pound and Eliot introduced into English poetry, such as the use of "striking images which create significance by contrast and pattern rather than, as in traditional English poetry, by developing statements into arguments." Popular criticism of Okigbo's poetry centres on its "abstractness" its concern with "complex and difficult themes near the boundaries of thought" and its "apparent pursuit after the strange gods of Europe." Mazrui defines "abstract" poem as one in which words are put together to make beautiful pictures and patterns of imagery, but the arrangement of words carries no conversational meaning behind it. Quoting the following passage from Okigbo's Distances:

the only way to go through the archway to the catatonic pingpong of the evanescent halo...

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3 King, p.7.


5 Sunday Anozie, p.1.


7 Mazrui, p.51.

8 Distances IV, p.57.
he asks how any one can translate it into Swahili "and still retain whatever beauty it may have in the original English." Then he concludes: "Any... attempt at translating Okigbo is futile and perhaps basically dishonest. Meaning can be translated, but imagery can only be imitated at best." 9

Imagery and meaning cannot be separated in a poem. Clear visual images are a poet's most potent method of conveying meaning. A reader may not know what the meaning is, but in his awareness of the image he must be aware that the meaning is there too. Contrary to what Professor Mazrui believes, even "meaning" cannot be translated. Only a part of the meaning of a poem worth the name can be conveyed by paraphrase, because, as Eliot put it, "the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail though meanings still exist." 10

Again, no poem can be paraphrased in the same language, let alone translated into another language, without its losing the unique arrangement of the linguistic elements which gives it beauty and vitality.

Mazrui's final assessment of Okigbo's poetry is quoted in full:

...This is not to suggest that African poetry is the poorer for having had Christopher Okigbo. On the contrary he remains one of the most gifted poets modern Africa has produced. But to put it bluntly Africa cannot afford too many Okigbos. She cannot afford too

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9 Mazrui, p.51.

many versifiers the bulk of whose genius lies in imagery and music rather than conversational meaning... Christopher Okigbo has served African literature well. But one can only hope he does not produce too many imitators after him. His was a genius which must remain fundamentally a luxury. A limited amount of it is deeply satisfying and is a great adornment to culture. A massive out-pouring of this particular kind of genius could, however, destroy a literary civilization.\^1

This criticism of Okigbo's poetry does not take into consideration Okigbo's conception of poetry and the tradition or traditions in which he was writing.

Okigbo, as King has rightly pointed out, learnt the technique of his poetry from Pound and Eliot. But, like any other African writing in an adopted tongue, he is not completely outside the influence of the technique of African traditional oral poetry. The effect of the fusion of these two influences is important in his poetry.

Eliot who influenced him significantly wrote in a tradition which dates back to the seventeenth century English Metaphysical poets, although the more usual association is with the nineteenth century French Symbolists, Laforgue and Baudelaire.

The poetry written by both the Metaphysicals and the Symbolists was characterized by"...compression of statement, centering on the revealing detail and eliminating all inessentials, the effect of comprehensiveness being achieved by

\^1 Mazrui, p.51.
packing a great deal of experience "onto a single moment of expression." 12 Like the primitive myth-makers the Symbolists did not analyse or describe in terms of logical discourse. An idea is given life through the sensuous embodiment of it in an image.

Eliot as well as his immediate followers saw this technique of poetry as an attempt by verbal art to reflect the psycho-social complexities of twentieth century society. He defends it in the Preface to his translation of Perse's Anabase where he points out that the French poet's "suppression of explanatory and connecting matter" is not at all owing to "incoherence or to love of cryptogram" but to the deliberate belief that he can secure his most concentrated effect by the ordered compression of his sequence of images. 13

What a reader has to bring to this kind of poetry is the logic of the imagination to be able to follow the rapid association of ideas and images.

It is not surprising that Okigbo should be attracted to this kind of poetry. First, it was natural to him. Nwoga who knew him personally says that in conversation he


had "a capacity for shifting quickly from topic to topic." 14

The technique is also similar to the technique of African traditional oral poetry. As Nwoga has pointed out, "the tendency in Igbo "adult poetry - religious incantation, praise songs and dirges ... is to catch a moment or a whole experience once and for all in an expression of intense sharpness, ... to recreate an idea or an experience by representing it in a diversity of such expressions rather than to state the reality or to analyse it." 15

If Okigbo's poetry is examined against the background of these two traditions it will be seen that he was not merely copying Eliot and that he was, in fact, adroitly fusing the two traditions which have influenced him. He was aware, before Lindfors, that "the African writer's best way to a new and genuine mode of expression... lies in a reliance upon the inner resources of language... the images, figures of meaning and speech which with expert handling can achieve for his art a kind of blood transfusion, reviving the English language by the living adaptable properties of some African language..." 16


Every poem of Okigbo possesses an internal coherence which unites not only the images and thought within it but also projects ideas and images from it into other poems giving a thematic unity and overall meaning to his poetry. Such coherence and unity cannot be achieved by imitation.

In the light of Pound's definition of images as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" Okigbo's "beautiful pictures and patterns of imagery" rather than giving the effect of abstractness as Mazrui says, make Okigbo's poetry concrete. The images are to him the immediate visual reaction of sensibility to any event or experience which strikes him with felt force. This is probably what a critic referred to when he said that Okigbo's technique seems to be first to catch the essence of an experience, then to cast around for sounds, images and symbols to evoke that experience in the reader. This is what Okigbo himself says he wants his poetry to do - to "elicit a response from the reader." But a close examination will also reveal a basic narrative element which

18 Mazrui, p.49.
clothes these archetypes of his experience. The first line or the first unit of each poem will answer the basic questions generally asked of a story-teller: Who? How? When? Where? The answers to these questions would convey the "conversational" meaning that Mazrui refers to.

Mazrui also remarks that the bulk of Okigbo's genius "lies in...music." This criticism does not seem to recognise the fact that the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from its meaning. As Gerald Moore has pointed out, Okigbo "was an accomplished musician before he began to write poetry." It is not surprising that he should bring his knowledge of music to his poetry, the connection between the two arts in both traditional African and English culture being an established fact. Eliot recommends the study of music to poets because of what he calls the common properties which music and poetry share, such as: "the use of recurrent themes:...the possibilities of verse which bears some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; the possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; the possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject matter..." Of the part of rhythm in poetic creation Eliot said: "I know that a poem

21 African Literature and the Universities, p.102.
22 The Music of Poetry, p.102.
may tend to realise itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea or the image. This means that rhythm can become an essential tool in poetic communication. By working on the ear it can begin to stir the sensibility of the reader by its movement before his mind can say what it is that he feels. This is what Eliot refers to when he says that "poetry can communicate before it is understood."  

Music is also important in traditional African poetry. As Senghor has pointed out, "the poem is not complete unless it is given rhythmical musical accompaniment." In Igbo traditional poetry most poems occur in the context of dance and the effect of such poems is enhanced by the rhythm of the drums. Okigbo wanted in his poetry to achieve the same kind of effect on his readers. He knew that a poem that produces feeling in the reader must have meaning. As Eliot remarked, "If we are moved by a poem it has meant something, perhaps something important to us, if we are not moved, then it is, as poetry, meaningless...." 

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23 *The Music of Poetry*, p. 28


26 *The Music of Poetry*, p. 15.
Intellectual analysis is not a necessity for this kind of affective response to poetry and Okigbo stressed the point when he was interviewed at the Transcription Centre in London. 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 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 in either physical or emotional terms from an audience, the poem has succeeded. I don't think that I have ever set out to communicate a meaning. It is enough that I try to communicate experiences which I consider significant.

Two important features of Okigbo's poetry are implied in this kind of attitude to meaning. "Physical" and "emotional" define the generalised, non-intellectual response which Eliot claims that the reader makes before the intellectual exercise of finding out what it is that gives the feeling. It is the kind of response Okigbo himself credited to students in a secondary school in Northern Nigeria who "burst into tears" when he read some of his poems to them - though they could not say why. The second defines the kind of poetry Okigbo was writing. Writing about Eliot, whose technique Okigbo adopts, Elizabeth Drew said:

"Eliot wanted to recapture all the concentration which the symbol brings as a result of a perception

27 Underscoring mine.


29 Majory Whitelaw, "Interview with Christopher Okigbo," JCL No. 9, July 1970, p. 36.
in which object and meaning synchronize and are recognized simultaneously... And not a single "meaning" since no symbol can be pinned down to that. As it embodies both thought and sensation so all the potential proliferation of physical life itself, and all the relating qualities of thinking live in it together. It is body and mind in one: it both means and is. It has shape and significance, a sensuous body, and a 'meaning' which points beyond body. It is complete in itself and yet life, inward and outward life, are not only contained in it, but flow from it in every direction.30

It is against this background that one may interpret Okigbo's assertion that he never "set out to communicate meaning."31 He does not imply that his poetry does not convey meaning. It does communicate meaning, though not so much by logical structure as by emotional suggestion achieved largely by his patterns of imagery and the musical flow of his lines. Poetry which is musical does not necessarily sacrifice its core of meaning "so long as it has a definite emotion behind it."32 Okigbo's "music" is an aid to an understanding of his poetry. It makes up for the inadequacy of words to transmit his complex poetic experience. This is probably what he referred to when he described his "Silent Sisters" as an exploration of the possibility of poetic metaphor in an attempt to elicit the music to which all imperishable cries must aspire."33

31 JCL No. 5, p.89.
33 Labyrinths, p.XII.
Here he is echoing Debussy, one of the impressionistic composers whose influence on the composition of his *Heavensgate* he acknowledges, and who is said to have claimed that "music begins where words are powerless to express." 

The second popular criticism of Okigbo's poetry is that it is obscure. It is claimed that this obscurity is caused by his use of private symbols as well as the abstruseness of his themes and the allusiveness of his poetry. These characteristics which are traced to the influence of Pound and Eliot are said to be unsuitable for African poetry. As Jones put it: "Pound is a very recondite poet... inaccessible to most people... unless our audience is to be outside Africa, African poetry is not yet ready to use a person like Pound as a model with great profit."  

Jones is not commenting on the quality of Okigbo's poetry, but on its suitability for an African audience at a point in time. This is not a very profound criticism, as was pointed out by Dunn, another participant at the Conference. While agreeing that "Okigbo's poetry is always 'recherché' with the influence of Eliot and Pound" Dunn remarked: "It is preferable perhaps to have Eliot as master than... to take Alfred Tennyson or somebody like that as a model. There

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34 Quoted in Izuvbaye, CEAL, p.126.
is also possibly the function of acting as interpreter between Pound and Eliot and the African audience. The first point about this remark has to do with the quality of Okigbo's chosen models, and by implication, the quality of his own poetry. The second deals with the function of literary texts serving as explicatory agents of others with whom they share certain characteristics. In this case, the thematic and stylistic similarities implied in the comparison suggests the possibility of using Okigbo's poems to clarify those of Eliot and Pound for the African reader.

A close examination of the poetry of Okigbo shows, however, that the charge of obscurity is exaggerated owing, in most cases, to the critic's inability to understand what the poet is trying to say. Although his technique was influenced by Pound and Eliot his poetry is African in its themes, imagery and form. Writing about Heavensgate and Zealots, Povey says that Okigbo "makes a reconciliation between Africa and the West...not by borrowing elements of African traditional techniques but by assimilating African philosophical ideas...joins African ideas with European technique..."

36 African Literature and the Universities, p.83.
King has also pointed out that Okigbo's "oblique allusions, choral-like responses and open-endedness utilize the conventions of tribal songs...within the more economical boundaries of European verse." The African elements in Okigbo's poetry would normally be familiar to an African reader and should make it accessible.

It is true, however, that Okigbo's poetry is essentially meditative. His search for the integration of being, his exploration of his individual sensibilities in his journey to poetic maturity, and the existentialist 'angst' imposed by his spiritual and physical worlds belong to the realm of metaphysics, and are not easily communicable in words. It is such notions which, Eliot says, make "words strain/crack and sometimes break under the burden/ Under the tension skip, slide, perish/Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place...."

Like Eliot, Okigbo overcomes the difficulty by giving significance to his patterns of imagery. Like Eliot, he chooses certain key words and symbols and by repetition and juxtaposition, establishes an inter-relation between them which conjures up images that evoke a psychic response, through reacting with one another. These images are correlative for the experience of the poem which Okigbo wants the

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38 Introduction to Nigerian Literature, p. 7.
reader to achieve and are therefore his important tool for delivering up meaning.

Okigbo draws his images and symbols from very wide and varied sources. Like Eliot also he makes consistent efforts in his poetry to recapture the traditional past in the events of the present by describing and interpreting present sensibility in terms of the events of the past. For him as for Eliot, this past was extensive. It includes distant civilizations, a variety of literary sources and his native Igbo myths, legends and traditional ritual. Every sensibility Okigbo experiences finds parallels in one or more of these myths or legends and he marshals all of them to give body to his complex thought. As Serumaga put it: "...in his poetry...traditional African ritual, the Babylonian gods, heroes of Roman mythology and twentieth century scientific mythology are all commandeered to form the cavalcade of vehicles for the poet's feelings."40

The effect is to increase the opacity of his poetry and thus inhibit all readers who draw on more limited experiences and who therefore feel, as they read his poetry, like outsiders eavesdropping on a private conversation or intruding into a secret ritual."41

40 "Okigbo interviewed by Robert Serumaga" Quoted in Izevbaye, CEAL, p.127.
41 Ibid p.127.
An understanding of Okigbo's poetry demands of the reader an equal degree of acquaintance with these sources of his imagery and symbols. It demands, in addition, the ability to grasp the pattern which emerges from the fusion of the apparently disparate experiences. In that way they will be seen for what they are: Okigbo's way of seeing his experiences as archetypal and of eliciting a spontaneous emotional response from the reader.

It is probably Okigbo's method of amalgamating images from disparate experiences that Soyinka cynically referred to as "regrouping images of Ezra Pound around the oilbean and the nude spear."42 This criticism seems to suggest imitativeness on the part of Okigbo and in this regard, may be examined along with Dathorne's accusation of "blatant lifttings from Eliot."43

Imitation in literary art is neither unique with Okigbo nor is it in itself a mark of lack of originality. Every writer, consciously or unconsciously, is always imitating somebody. It is a psychological law that people imitate anything which they sincerely and habitually admire.


Therefore it is natural to find words, images or ideas of one writer in the work of another. The wider a writer's reading, the more he is likely to assimilate for his own work. This is what Eliot refers to when he says that a poem is "a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written." The use that a writer makes of such borrowings is another matter. In Eliot's essay on Philip Massinger he differentiates poets according to the use they make of their borrowed material: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion."  

Evaluated according to this scale Okigbo would belong to Eliot's category of good poets. Although echoes of Eliot and Pound and even of other poets such as Hopkins, Wordsworth and Yeats can be recognised in his verse, one does not get the impression that there is a lack of artistic unity. Commenting on the influence of Pound and Eliot on Okigbo, Moore has said: "Of course he has learnt something from Pound,  


45 Selected Essays, p. 182
but at the same time I don't see how any poem of Okigbo's is remotely like Ezra Pound's; even less is it like a poem of Eliot." 46 Dathorne, in spite of his accusation of "blatant lifttings," says that Okigbo "converts the imagery...into terms that are both startling and fresh." 47

To be able to assess Okigbo's merit as a poet, there is need for criticism to concentrate on the verbal context of his poems as the basis for exploring his exploitation of the possibilities of poetry. The analysis of the poems of Okigbo in this study will attempt to do this and to show how he achieves thematic unity and thematic continuity, and how his images and symbols function to yield meaning in his poetry.


ANALYSIS AND READING OF OKIGBO'S POEMS.

An examination of Okigbo's poetry shows a marked degree of interrelatedness which justifies Dathorne's assertion that "all his poetry is, in fact, one long, elaborate poem." But although there is this interrelatedness, the poems fall into two distinguishable groups. The first group, the Heavensgate - "Siren Limits" - Distances sequence, deals with the poet's projection of his imaginative world. It is an account of his discovery of himself, his achievement of a unity of being and his growth to poetic maturity. The other group shows the poet's awareness of his social responsibility; his awareness of the tensions within his outer world and of his function as poet/prophet to cry out against the evils in his society and warn against impending disaster. Since he alone as poet/prophet can see these hidden dangers he also as messiah can save his society. In this group are "Fragments out of the Deluge" Silences and Path of Thunder.

The most obvious link between the two groups is the personality of the poet/protagonist. The tensions within him are mirrored in the tensions within his society and what he as poet/prophet/messiah does is to try to reconcile, as he says, "the universal opposites of life and death in a live-die proposition..."  

1 JCL No. 5, July 1968, p.79.  
2 Labyrinths, p xi
The analysis of the poems which follows will derive its methods partly from the theories of Linguistic-Poetics, but the main approach will be literary. It is hoped that this analytical approach will clear some of the misconceptions which some critics have had about Okigbo's poetry.³

³ It must be pointed out, however, that it is not claimed that linguistic techniques will necessarily yield results at odds with those achieved by critics. Nor is there any denial of the part of intuition in literary criticism. There is an assumption that intuition is right. What the linguistic-poetic method does, according to Seymour Chatman, Theory of Meter (The Hague: Mouton, 1965, p.9), is "to discover empirical proof for the judgements of intuition." According to A.A. Hill, Constituent and Pattern in Poetry (University of Texas Press, 1976, p.18), a linguistic analysis of literature "consists in a tentative identification of units of meaning within a literary utterance, and then the testing of this identification by the structuralized statement that results from it." It is the function of this method to show which structural qualities form the bases for definite poetic effects.
When it is necessary for the purpose of clarification a poem will be broken down into a number of the grammatically simplest sentences\(^4\) of which it is composed. From these sentences a paraphrase of the poem will be developed. This procedure is based on the theory of paraphrase as a "method of meaning analysis." According to this theory, every poetic utterance is a member of "a set of utterances which mean about the same thing," the poetic utterance being that utterance which achieves the optimal possible ordering of the linguistic devices.\(^5\) The purpose of the paraphrase is to supply a non-poetic alternative to the poem, in which the premise of meaning is only the grammatical organization of the poem. It will also bring into relief the complex network of linguistic-poetic devices such as metaphors, images and symbols which must be accounted for in an adequate description of the poem.

As one of the major characteristics of Okigbo's poetry is its allusiveness, the next stage in the analysis will be concerned with expanding the meaning of the poem by relating the images and symbols to contexts outside the poem. Okigbo's areas of reference include the literature of past and present ages,

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4 The idea of these simple component sentences is derived from Chomsky's theory of "surface" and "deep" syntactic structures in Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton 1957).

5 For an exhaustive treatment of this theory the reader is referred to Irwin Gopnik and Myrna Gopnik, "The Law of Maximal Form", *Style*, vol. 1, No 3, Fall 1967, pp.197-214.
the Bible, social anthropology, Classical and folk mythology, history, Igbo traditional religion, mathematics, music and fine art, and in some cases poems from his own canon.

Finally an attempt will be made to show how the linguistic-poetic devices interrelate. As Okigbo's poetry is strictly free verse, this study will not be concerned with his metrics. The emphasis will be on his use of images and symbols and how the syntagmatic ordering of these devices give pattern and meaning to his poetry. This part of the analysis will incorporate ideas from the theory of "foregrounding" and "cohesion", and from Jakobson's and Levin's theory of "equivalences."

6 The idea of foregrounding goes back to Shklovsky of the Russian Formalist School. As a theory it was first enunciated by Jan Mukarovsky of the Prague Linguistic Circle. It was thereafter expanded by Geoffrey Leech. According to this theory a foregrounded feature calls attention to itself either because of its position in a sentence or because of its oddity, arising from its violation of lexical or syntactic rules; or because of its regularity of occurrence. When features identified in isolation can be related to one another, there is said to be cohesion.


The poems will be discussed in the order in which they are printed in the text. As they are not numbered separately they will be identified by their page numbers. At the close of the analysis of each poem or group of poems a brief summary of the ideas embodied will be given and when necessary its relationship with the next poem will be discussed.

A discussion of the poems follows beginning with the first group of the Heavensgate sequence, "The Passage."

**THE PASSAGE (p. 3).**

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 Heavensgate;

out of the depths my cry:
give ear and hearken...

This poem serves as an introduction and provides a setting for the rest of the poems in the sequence. It introduces the penitent "prodigal" and the goddess, "Idoto," the two figures whose relationship and interaction play an important role in the thematic development of the sequence. The "prodigal" is making a return to his native deity from whom
he has been alienated. He submits to her authority and asks for her blessing. In acknowledgement of his utter dependence he leans "barefoot" on the "oilbean" waiting, literally, to be admitted.

From the sentences of this poem the following simple sentences can be abstracted.

(You are) mother Idoto.
You live in water.
I stand before you.
I am a prodigal.
I am naked.
I am leaning on an oilbean.
I am lost in your legend.
I am under your power.
I wait for the watchword.
I am barefoot.
I am watchman.
I am at Heavensgate.
I am in the depths.
I cry to you.
(You) give ear.
(You) hearken.

On the basis of these sentences a rough paraphrase of the poem is developed to give an idea of what the poem is about. (The words in parenthesis do not occur in the text). The paraphrase is as follows:

Before your watery presence mother Idoto I stand
(like) a prodigal, naked (and) barefoot.
(I am) leaning on an oilbean, lost in your legend,
(and) under your power, waiting (like a) watchman
for the watchword at Heavensgate. Out of the depths
(of my distress) I cry (to you); hearken (to my cry).
At once it will be seen that there are aspects of this poem which require clarification before a full understanding of it can be arrived at. For example, in what sense is the speaker a "prodigal"? What is the significance of "oilbean"? or "Heavensgate"? Who is "Idoto"?

The situation of the speaker in this poem is similar to that of the prodigal son recorded in Luke's gospel XV, 2 - 20. The younger of a man's two sons said to his father:

Father give me the portion of goods that falleth to me... And not many days after...gathered all together and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living...and began to be in want... And when he came to himself he said...I will arise and go to my father and will say into him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee. And I am no more worthy to be called thy son...And he arose went to his father.

Although the "prodigal" of the poem does not say how he came to be a prodigal it is implied in "Siren Limits" where he refers to himself as "Emigrant with air-borne nose." His situation is similar to the poet's apparent refusal to serve as the priest of the goddess, as Okigbo himself related in an interview:

I am believed to be a reincarnation of my maternal grandfather, who used to be priest of the shrine Ajani, where Idoto, the river goddess is worshipped. This goddess is the earth mother, and also the mother of the whole family... when I was born...I should carry on his duties. And although someone else had to perform these duties, this other person was only a regent. And in 1958, when I started taking poetry very seriously, it was as though I had felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions, as chief priest of Idoto.  

8 The text of the Bible used is The King James version published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society Inc. New York.

9 Majory Whitelaw, JCL No. 9, July 1970, p.36.
The nature of the prodigal's exile is also implied in his reference to the bells of the Angelus as "bells of exile" (p. 17).

He has come to show penitence, to ask for forgiveness and blessing. In the introduction to _Labyrinths_, Okigbo compares _Heavensgate_ to Catholic Mass. The 1962 version of the poem had the title "Introit" which is the part of the Mass that involves the confession and purification of the priest before he performs the rites of the Sacrament of the Eucharist: "The celebrant, a personage like Orpheus is about to begin a journey. Cleansing involves total nakedness, a complete self-surrender to the water spirit." (p. 15). The cleansing also involves penitential offering of the type described in "Lustra": "Fingers of penitence bring to a palm grove/ vegetable offering with five fingers of chalk...." (p. 15). The humility and total submission shown by the prodigal is also expressed in "Siren Limits" IV where he tells the goddess: "When you have finished/ & done up my stitches,/ Wake me near the altar..."

There is a hint in "Watermaid" that the prodigal is expecting some favour from this deity:

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eyes open of the prodigal;
upward to heaven shoot
where stars will fall from ... (p.10).
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Later in the sequence, it becomes clear that the "stars" are poetic inspiration, but although it is expected from the Watermaid the poet adopts the Christian habit of associating whatever blessing one receives... in any form whatsoever, with
God and Heaven. "Heavensgate" recalls Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29" where the poet is lifted from the mood of depression "like to the lark at the break of day arising/from sullen earth (to) sing hymns at heaven's gate." The mood of depression and the expectation of "stars" from heaven also recall the passage in Apuleius's *Golden Ass* where Lucius invokes the White Goddess from the depth of misery and spiritual degradation and she appears to answer his plea;¹⁰ as well as *Psalm* 130, where David "in distress professeth his hope in God: "Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee O Lord, Lord hear my voice; let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication... I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait...."

There are linguistic correspondences between the *psalm* and Okigbo's poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Psalm</strong></th>
<th><strong>Poem</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Out of the depths I have cried Lord hear my voice:</td>
<td>Out of the depths my cry Give ear and hearken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wait for the Lord my soul doth wait.</td>
<td>I wait I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The poet's note explains the significance of the "oil-bean" which, with the tortoise and the python, is "a totem for Idoto's worship." Its importance as a totem is stressed in its later occurrences in the sequence.

In "Fragments out of the Deluge" VIII, the invasion by the eagles which came to kill the gods and desecrate the shrines starts with their flying over the "oilbean shadows":

...The sunbird repeats
Over the oilbean shadows:

"A fleet of eagles
over the oilbean shadows
Holds the square
under curse of their breath (p.31).

Also the search for the gods described in "Fragments out of the Deluge" X is in "the forest of oilbean" which is the abode of the gods.

And they scanned the forest of oilbean
...And they entered into the forest
And they passed through the forest of oilbean
And found them, the twin-gods of the forest. (p.33).

Okigbo's technique in this poem is typical of his stylistic method. There is the dramatic situation of "You" and "I" established in the first line. The "You" is foregrounded by its position at the beginning of the line and by being capitalized, suggesting that "Idoto" to whom the pronoun refers is the superior partner in the drama. The speaker is the "prodigal" who stands "on barefoot..." at Heavensgate." These lines can be combined to generate a sentence like: Naked I stand, a prodigal on barefoot at Heavensgate. The shift in the position of "I" sandwiched between two words in "naked I stand" to a final position in "Wait I" directs attention to it. In its position at the end of the line it is stressed and the
purpose is to call attention to the state of the prodigal "on barefoot." Because of their syntactic position "barefoot" and "naked" perform a similar function which is to point to the prodigal's depressed state in the penultimate line. Running through the poem therefore is the note of humility, of supplication, and of anguished cry. Okigbo's method here, as in all his poetry, is to express a theme by using images which, although they may be different, are united by a common theme.

Having submitted himself to the power of the goddess, the poet-prodigal is now ready to begin the mystical journey that will ultimately unite him with the goddess. This goddess is variously called "Idoto," "Watermaid," "lioness," "queen", or "Death." Achieving union with her is for the poet/prodigal achieving a unity of being, a union of soul and body, or a union of man with his female half.

"THE PASSAGE" (page 4)

DARK WATERS of the beginning.

Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom, foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of.

Rainbow of far side, arched like a boa bent to kill foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of.

Me to the orangery solitude invites a wagtail, to tell the tangled-wood-tale; a sunbird, to mourn
a mother on a spray.

Rain and sun in single combat;
on one leg standing,
in silence at the passage,
the young bird at the passage.

This second poem of "The Passage" is the beginning of the quest for the poet's unity of being, and it appropriately opens with an image that recalls Genesis. The first four lines present both a visual image and the state of the mind of the poet. The tension implied in these lines, and overtly articulated in "Rain and sun in single combat" (1.12), is also the tension in the mind of the poet who at this point is desperately seeking a reunion with his ancestry from whom he has been alienated.

His poetry is "the tangled-wood-tale" of the desecrated and abandoned deity of "Fragments" XI. It gives an account of how he became a prodigal, alienated from his ancestral deity. The tension which is merely implied in this poem becomes evident in the next poem where his presence at a Church ceremony is described as placing him at the crossroads.

The following underlying simple sentences bring out the main points of the poem.
Rays are violet
Rays are short
Rays pierce the gloom
Rays foreshadow the fire
The fire is dreamed of
Rainbow is on the far side
Rainbow is arched like a boa
A boa is bent to kill
Rainbow foreshadows the rain
The rain is dreamed of.

Solitude invites me to the orangery

I am a wagtail
I tell a tangled wood tale
I am a sunbird
I mourn a mother on a spray

I am standing on one leg
I am standing in silence
I am standing at the passage
I am the young bird.

A paraphrase of the poem which is generated from these sentences helps to clarify its meaning: Rain and sun in combat (form a) rainbow (which) arched like a boa bent to kill foreshadows (both the) fire (and the) rain that (are) dreamed of. Solitude invites me, a wagtail, a sunbird, to the orangery to tell a tangled-wood-tale, to mourn a mother on a spray. I am standing on one leg in silence (like) the young bird at the passage.

The verb "foreshadow/foreshadows" has as its syntactic subjects "Rays" and "Rainbow" and its objects "fire" and "rain." Because of their identical syntactic positions, a relation of equivalence exists between "rays" and "rainbow" and on the one hand, "fire" and "rain" on the other. "Rays" and
"rainbow" have the relation of cause and effect. This is strengthened by the collocation of "rain and sun" in the first line of the last stanza. "Fire" and "rain" have a relation of opposites and provide the first image of tension which is characteristic of this poem. In the same way the "silence" of the young bird at the passage contrasts with the "speech" of the "wagtail" and the "sunbird." Because "to tell" and "to mourn" have a syntactic equivalence, the tale of the "wagtail" is also a mournful tale of a dead mother.

The position of "invites" makes "a wagtail" and "a sunbird" its syntactic and semantic objects and these are related to the "young bird" in the last line by the use of the definite article. The speaker in this poem is, therefore, the poet/prodigal/sunbird/wagtail/young bird figure.

Although some of the verbs are used in their agentive sense, suggesting human agency, attention is consistently directed to the birds and other natural objects. "Me," the only personal pronoun in the poem is placed in a position which makes it synonymous with "wagtail" and "sunbird." This suppression of the personality of the poet-protagonist makes the poem impersonal and gives the situation described a universal significance.

The sense of gloom and of foreboding as well as the tension which pervades this poem is implied in the density of images of violence, tension and gloom: "piercing the gloom" (l.2),
"bent to kill" (1.3), "solitude" (1.7), "mourn" (1.10), "single combat" (1.12).

Another significant feature of this poem is the deletion of the verb in 1.1 and 11.12-15 which tends to produce a static pictorial effect. This creates ambiguities in some cases: "Dark waters of the beginning" may refer to the deluge of Genesis. In Genesis (VII, 10) is recorded the following account: "It came to pass after seven days, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth...."

In Genesis (IX, 11 ff), God made a convenant with Noah, promising that "neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, This is the token of the convenant which I make between me and you... I do set my bow in the cloud... And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth that the bow shall be seen in the cloud...."

The "arched" of the poem is descriptive of the shape of the "bow" of the convenant. The collocation of "rain" and "sun" and of "sun" (rays) and "rainbow" puts "fire" and "rain" (their effects) in positions of equivalence, their relation being that of opposites. "Fire" therefore may suggest God's alternative way of destroying the earth. There is also a specific reference to "waters of the genesis" in "Initiations" (p. 6, 1. 8). "Dark waters" may also refer to the initial down-pour under very heavy rain cloud. It is possible
that the poet/protagonist observes from the "orangery," the emergence of the sun as such rain was tapering off. The appearance of the rainbow, which is likely in such a circumstance, would recall for him the convenant of Genesis. "Dark waters" could also be a reference to the sacred river "Idoto" which would be weedy and deep and therefore dark to look at.

Since according to Okigbo "Idoto" is the "earth mother..." she is also the beginning of the history of the earth. She is in this sense the beginning of the poet's journey to poetic maturity. This is why the journey begins with an offering to, and cleansing before "Idoto." This interpretation agrees with the presence of the bird "on one leg standing," like a heron, gazing at its own reflection in the hurrying river, awaiting passage to a new phase of being. It is further justified by the comparison that has been made between such a moment of expectancy and that "instant when the inner and outer life become one to a voodoo dancer in a trance; or to a one-legged bird which joins itself to its sleeping reflection in a pool."11 This is consistent with Okigbo's attempt to suppress the personality of the protagonist in the whole poem.

"Dark waters" also suggests the foetal image (dark waters of creation) and this would be appropriate for the beginning of new life which the protagonist is moving into.

The poem implies all three connotations of "Dark waters of the beginning" since all are connected with creation, both natural and artistic. It should be stressed, however, that the kind of ambiguity which the phrase poses is not easily resolvable as it is inherent in the words themselves. It is only syntactic ambiguity that is resolved by analysis of the underlying sentences.

Often a poet clarifies his symbols and images as he progresses in his poetic career. In this poem the poet-protagonist is identified with the "wagtail" and the "sunbird." His full significance as an inspired visionary is made clear in later poems. In "Siren Limits" it is the "sunbird" that warns of the approach of the "eagles" who have come to destroy the "twin-gods":

The sunbird repeats
Over the oilbean shadows

A fleet of eagles
Over the oilbean shadows
Holds the square
Under curse of their breath (p.31).

Also, before the eagles found out the gods they had first to silence the "sunbird":

And to us they come -
Malison, malison mair than ten -
And climbed the bombax
And killed the sunbird (p.33).

And when the "eagles" had killed the gods and thought their mission was complete the "sunbird" resurrects and
sings again
From the LIMITS of the dream
The sunbird sings again
Where the caress does not reach
& cancelling out is complete (p.35).

This shows the indestructibility of this visionary, poetic spirit. This prophetic aspect of the poet/protagonist and the presaging function of the rainbow in stanzas 1 and 2 become significant and "fire" would connote all of the fire of destruction, the fire of purification, pentecostal and inspirational fire, in the manner Eliot uses it in "Little Gidding" IV: "Consumed by either fire or fire." The purgatorial fire would be part of the cleansing resulting from the penitence which is a dominant motif in Okigbo's poetry and which is the subject of the first poem; and a necessary preparation for the mystical experience which Okigbo associates with poetic creation. The word "passage" in the last line leads on to "crossroads" of the next poem of "The Passage" (p.5). In this poem Okigbo gives the first hint of how the protagonist is a prodigal. The "festivity" here is a Christian festival because of the "bell tower" which is a feature of a Christian mission compound. "The players of loft pipe organs" are also associated with Christian church service. The "faces" at the cross roads include the poet who is also the prodigal making a return to his native deity in the first two poems of "The Passage" (p.2 and p.3). "Crossroads" therefore suggests the poet's dilemma, a dilemma brought about by his having one foot
in Christian religion and the other in traditional religion.

"THE PASSAGE" (p.5).

SILENT FACES at crossroads: 
festivity in black...

Faces of black like long black column of ants,

behind the bell tower, 
into the hot garden where all roads meet: festivity in black...

O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong, hear us at crossroads at the great hinges where the players of loft pipe organs rehearse old lovely fragments, alone -

strains of pressed orange leaves on pages, bleach of the light of years held in leather:

For we are listening in cornfields among the windplayers, listening to the wind leaning over its loveliest fragment...

The first three stanzas present a solemn, sombre, and somewhat ritualistic image of the festivity. It is probably a funeral ceremony because it is "festivity in black," black being a symbol of mourning and because they are moving "into the hot garden where all roads meet:" which is obviously a cemetery, the destination of all humanity. The use of the simple present tense makes this an expression of a general truth which is timeless and therefore supports the idea of death and funeral.
"Crossroads" is usually applied to a critical turning point in a man's life where a momentous decision has to be taken. In this sense "crossroads" is an appropriate description of the predicament of the poet-protagonist who has to take a decision either to make a full return to his native deity or to remain in exile from it as a Christian.

His choice is implied in the invocation of "Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong." A similar invocation in "Newcomer" (p.17): Anna of the panel oblongs, /protect me/from them fucking angels:/protect me/my sandhouse and bones," gives Anna the status of a personal saint or guardian spirit of the poet.

In this poem Anna is at the "knobs" of the panel oblong. "Panel oblong" may refer to the "pipe organ," or to a door because of the collocation with "great hinges." Since Anna has something to do with the "worship" in "Newcomer" (p.17), then the door has some connection with Christians. Again, "hinges" and "crossroads" are related syntactically, so Anna has some authority there at the crossroads and can help the protagonist hence the prayer "hear us...." This is consistent with the Janus/Cardea myth, and Anna is here serving as the hinge connecting the poet with Christianity.12

12 In Fasti Ovid tells the story of the White Goddess as Cardea. Janus the stout guardian of the oak door, before he married Jana or Diana of Juno was the son of Cardea and she was the white goddess and though he became the Door, the national guardian, she became the hinge which connected him with the door post. Full details of this story are contained in Robert Graves, The White Goddess (p.50 passim).
Also "where the players of loft pipe organs/rehearse old lovely fragments," is an adjunct to "the great hinges," and this puts Anna on the side of "the players of the loft pipe organs" and of Christian worship. The image is that of a lone player practising on the organ. The word "players" is probably used in the generic sense or in the sense of the players practising in turns.

The attitude of the protagonist to what the players rehearse is made clear in the next three lines. They are "old lovely fragments;" "Old" because he has been used to them. They are "lovely," but also they are "fragments," they are not complete, likely taken from different songs and, therefore, are defective in meaning. They are just "strains," that is, it is the aesthetic aspect of the song that interests him. "Strains" rhymes with "stains" and in reading the whole line "strains of pressed orange leaves on pages" an unwary reader might take "strains" for "stains." The possibility of confusion is even greater because the appeal of the whole line as well as the one that follows it: "bleach of the light of years held in leather," is visual rather than auditory. Taken as a unit these lines give the impression that the protagonist's instinctive and nostalgic admiration of the hymns of his childhood experience is subdued and he makes a conscious effort to see the songs being rehearsed as faded prints on an old tattered hymn book. "Pressed orange leaves" may also be a reference to the practice of pressing flowers between leaves.
of big books to flatten them out and get them dried so that they can be preserved for remembrance of an occasion. Such flowers would also stain the book.

In the last stanza it becomes clear that he is not really listening to the "loft pipe organs;" as he cannot be listening to two pieces of music simultaneously, for he says:

we are listening in cornfields
among the wind players
Listening to the wind leaning over/
its loveliest fragment

In the second poem of "The Passage" (p.4), the protagonist as "a wagtail" and "a sunbird" associates his song with the "wood" and with "sprays" and in "Siren Limits" he "must sing...Making harmony among the branches" (p.25.11-13). His interest in the natural players in this poem is therefore consistent with his usual association of his song with trees. "Rehearse" in line 12 now becomes "leaning over" (l.17). "Rehearse" suggests effort, practice, and is therefore artificial while "leaning over" is a more natural and much easier activity. Also the tune of the wind players is "loveliest fragment." Compared with "lovely fragments" in line 12, the superlative implies preference and "fragment" has a unity which "fragments" cannot have.

The first three stanzas of this poem paint a scene, a static picture devoid of action or motion. The only verb "meet" is used in its non-agentive sense and there is every effort to
remove the human element. The synecdoche "faces" is used instead of the people who have the faces and immediately they are compared to a "column of ants." Anna, the only personal name in the whole poem, is de-personalized. She could be a person; she could also be a saint, an angel, or a guardian spirit. 13 "Players," "us" and "we" are so general that they cannot be identified as particular individuals.

There is also the tendency to omit verbs in the whole poem. Stanzas 4 - 6 is just one sentence with only one verb "hear." This paucity of verbs combined with the absence of human agents produces a static effect as of a still-life picture.

In this poem Okigbo describes, for the first time in the sequence, a Christian ritual. It is immediately associated with grief: the "festivity" is "in black," and the "faces" of the participants are "silent." Even if the "festivity" is not specifically a funeral ceremony, it is associated with mourning. This idea recalls the protagonist's task in "The Passage" (p.4); "...to mourn/a mother on a spray." The implication is that the Christian "festivity" is for the unidentified "faces" a mourning ceremony, and, recalling "The Passage" (p.4), it becomes obvious that what is being mourned is the dead "mother," the protagonist's native deity which Christianity has killed. Participation in any Christian ritual is therefore

13 Anozie (p.50) has identified her with Okigbo's mother whose name was Anna.
painful. It is this participation that has made him a pro-
digal. As he is now making his return to his native deity and
to his native culture it is understandable that he should re-
ject Christianity although there is lurking behind the rejec-
tion some instinctive lure to the aesthetics of Christian
ritual.

The association of Christianity with grief and all that
is negative dominates the next group of poems, "Initiations."

INITIATIONS (pp. 6 - 7).

SCAR OF the crucifix
over the breast,
by red blade inflicted
by red-hot blade,
on right breast witnesseth

mystery which I, initiate,
received newly naked
upon waters of the genesis
from Kepkanly.

Elemental, united in vision
of present and future,
the pure line, whose innocence
denies inhibitions.

At confluence of planes, the angle:
man loses man, loses vision;

so comes John the Baptist
with bowl of salt water
preaching the gambit:
life without sin, without

life; which accepted,
way leads downward
down orthocenter
avoiding decisions.
Or forms fourth angle -
duty, obligation:
square yields the moron,
fanatics and priests and popes,
organizing secretaries and
party managers; better still,
the rhombus - brothers and deacons,
liberal politicians,
selfish selfseekers - all who are good
doing nothing at all;
the quadrangle, the rest, me and you...

Mystery, which barring
the errors of the rendering
witnesseth
red-hot blade on right breast
the scar of the crucifix.

and the hand fell with Haragin,
Kepkanly that wielded the blade;
with Haragin with God's light between them:
but the solitude within me remembers Kepkanly...

"Initiations" describes the protagonist's initiation into
Christianity. The plural form "Initiations" is used generi-
cally and does not necessarily imply that there were more than
one initiation. 14

Okigbo's use of "scar" in this poem is an example of his
method of combining aspects of Christian and traditional Igbo
religions in one word or phrase. In Catholic theology the

14 Anozie (pp.51-57)distinguishes four different initiations:
that of the "scar of cricifix" by Kepkanly; the initiation
by John the Baptist; the "initiation into madness" by Jadum;
and the initiation by Upandru.
sacrament of Baptism is believed to be one of the three that imprint an indelible mark on the soul. In the administration of Baptism the priest makes the sign of the Cross with water on the face of the person being baptized while saying "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

There is an implication in this poem that the mark of the Cross is imprinted on the soul, and also a further implication of Igbo traditional ritual of initiation into the "Afa" cult where the initiate is actually marked with hot knife or razor cuts into which potions are rubbed. The favourite places for such cuts are usually the two sides of the chest.

Like the third poem of "The Passage" (p.5.), this poem opens with a picture. The image is of a "physical" scar. By placing "scar" in an initial position the poet calls attention to it. It is the scar of the "crucifix," another word that is foregrounded. "Inflicted" is always associated with suffering or with penalty. The poet is therefore associating this initiation with pain. Another association which suggests the poet's levity towards this initiation is the personage "Kepkanly" from whom he received it. Okigbo's footnote says that Kepkanly is "a half-serious half-comical primary school teacher of the late thirties." "Kepkanly" is a nickname coined by the poet himself.  

15 Anozie (p.51) has an interesting account of the derivation of this name. The teacher was nicknamed 'Kepkanly' from the sing-song marching command: Left...Right, Left...Right... which translated into Igbo is: Aka ekpe...Aka nli...literally left hand...right hand...(although it is the legs that are meant) which the teacher in those days would say and it would be repeated by the pupils. Said quickly it sounds like Kepkanli which Okigbo anglicizes into "Kepkanly."
this ludicrous personage with the initiation, a mystery whose profundity is stressed by the dignified biblical language "witneseth" is typical of Okigbo. He learnt from Eliot the technique of mixing the serious with the banal. The adjective "elemental" describes "mystery" as do the rest of the attributes, "united in vision," "the pure line" and uninhibited "innocence.". The "pure line" is the geometric line which has no breadth. It is an appropriate image for the unified vision of "present and future" and of the perfect "innocence" which denies inhibitions. It introduces the long list of geometric figures which the poet uses to categorize the various groups of people who have gone through the Christian initiation. "So" in the next stanza follows from the effects of the initiation, "the confluence of the planes, the angle" and it introduces a reference to the ministry of John the Baptist. The stanza exhibits linguistic similarities with the account of the ministry of John the Baptist given by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Okigbo: So comes John the Baptist with a bowl of salt water preaching the gambit life without sin, without life;

Matthew 3:11, I: In those days came John the Baptist preaching* ...And saying

Mark 1, 4: John did baptize in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*

* Underscoring mine
Luke 111, 3: And he (John the Baptist) came into the country about Jordan preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*

The "bowl of water" is the water for Baptism. In Matthew 111.11, John the Baptist says: "I indeed baptize you with water into repentance but... he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."

The doctrine of John the Baptist and the Christian religion which he represents are presented as a gambit. In other words, the call on the individual to repent for salvation's sake is like asking him to pawn repentance for salvation. In the opinion of the poet/protagonist the "life without sin" is also "life without life," that is, a nonexistent life. This attitude is implied in the syntactic positioning of "sin" and "life." The whole phrase is explanatory of the "gambit" which according to the poem is "Life without sin, without/life." The placing of "sin" and "life" makes them synonymous. "Which." also refers to "gambit." If this "gambit" is accepted it leads downward to the "orthocenter" making the initiate incapable of any decisions. This repeats the paradox of life without sin and is also a reversal of the accepted way to God which is upward and not downward. It shows the poet/protagonist's scepticism about these Christian values, and he demonstrates this in the rest of the poem.

The image of "the pure line" and "orthocenter" is developed in an interesting way to categorize all who have been "initiated" into the Christian religion. A plane contains

* Underscoring mine
an infinite number of lines. It is "at confluence of planes" that an angle is formed, "the angle" where "man loses man, loses vision." "Orthocenter" introduces the image of a triangle. It is an imaginary meeting point of all the perpendicular lines from the angle-points to the bases of a triangle. Since the movement is downward, further projection of any of these lines will create another point, and connecting this point with the adjacent points of the triangle will form a fourth angle for the system. If this point is such that all four angles are right angles and all the sides are equal, the resultant figure is a square where the poet encloses "the moron,/fanatics and priests and popes,/organizing secretaries and/party managers..." A shear of the square produces a "rhombus" that yields "brothers and deacons,/liberal politicians,/selfish selfseekers - all who are good/doing nothing at all." And further shearing will produce a "quadrangle," a four-sided figure without any definite shape. In this specious figure the poet/protagonist places "the rest, me and you..." those who are furthest from conformity to any system.

It seems that the poet-protagonist is categorizing all the initiated hierarchically in descending order of their commitment to and acceptance of Christian doctrine. He places himself with the amorphous group in the shapeless figure of the quadrangle. The most committed are those in the fixed
"square" and their make-up is interesting. Placing "the moron, fanatics and priests and popes / organizing secretaries and party managers" together implies that each is equal to the other. This group is led by "the moron," an adult whose mental development is retarded. It is separated by a comma from "fanatics and priests and popes," suggesting that all these are morons. Another group is made up of organizing secretaries and party managers," top political officials who, in the Nigerian context, were noted for fraudulent and other individual activities especially at election time. The reading of "organizing secretaries and party managers" as political office-holders is suggested by the inclusion of "liberal politicians" in the next stanza. All in this group share the attributes of stupidity, strict conformity, organized fraud, injustice, and religious obsession. In the same way the next lower rank is made up of "all who are good / doing nothing at all."

This categorizing anticipates a similar one in Distances III (p. 56), where the poet/protagonist reverses the order putting himself with the "prophets" and "martyrs" at the apex of the pilgrims bound for Shibboleth.

The main objection to Christian teaching is its nature: "the errors of the rendering." The "errors of the rendering" is a reference to the negative nature of Christian commandments implied in "life without sin" and the avoidance of "decisions." It is elaborated in the next two "Initiations" poems.
INITIATIONS (p.8)

And This from Jadum,
(Stay if thou knowest
from smell of the incense
a village where liveth
in heart of the grassland
a minstrel who singeth)

to shepherds, with a lute on his lip:

Do not wander in speargrass,
After the lights,
Probing lairs in stockings,
To roast
The viper alive, with dog lying
Upsidedown in the crooked passage...

Do not listen at keyholes,
After the lights,
To smell from other rooms,
After the lights -

Singeth Jadum from Rockland,
after the lights.

And there are here
the errors of the rendering...

AND THIS from Upandru

Screen your bedchamber thoughts
with sun-glasses,
who could jump your eye,
your mind-window,

And I said:
The prophet only the poet.
And he said: Logistics.
(Which is what poetry is)...

And he said to the ram: Disarm.
And I said:
Except by rooting,
who could pluck yam tubers from their base?

And there are here
the errors of the rendering...
Jadum, according to Okigbo's footnote, is a "half demented village minstrel." This minstrel is to be known "from smell of incense," an allusion to the incense used for Catholic religious ritual. This implies that he belongs to the category of "priests and popes." He lives "in heart of the grassland" and is also "from Rockland." "Rockland" may have been suggested by "grassland" as both are geographical features, especially as the grasslands of Northern Nigeria, which Okigbo would know very well, are rocky plateaux. But there is also the association of the "half demented minstrel" with the madhouse "Rockland" in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Jadum is also linked with the "priests and popes" by the ironical couching of the introductory riddle in the language of the Bible: "say if thou knowest/from smell of the incense/a village where liveth in heart of the grassland/a minstrel who singeth."

This poem may be viewed as a parody of the form of Christian precepts. "Do not wander in speargrass.../Do not listen at keyholes..." These may be worthwhile precepts but they are put negatively, "the errors of the rendering," and coming from

16 O. R. Dathorne: "Ritual and Ceremony in Okigbo's Poetry." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* No. 5, July 1968, p. 82 says Jadum was a madman who went through the markets in the Aguata division in Eastern Nigeria lecturing people by singing. He got this nickname from the sound of his music: Jam - Jam - Dum - Dum.

17 Sunday Anozie (p. 54) claims that Okigbo read this work, to which he was introduced by his brother, Dr Pius Okigbo. It is also believed that he borrowed "catatonic pingpong" from it.
a madman, they are suspect. The interest in Jadum is, however, more in his singing than in his moral precepts. The poet calls attention to Jadum's music by placing "singeth" in a foregrounded position at the end of a line, and by the stress on and alliteration of "lute" and "lip".

In the same way Upandru's morality borders on hypocrisy. His advice is: "Screen your bedchamber thoughts/with sun-glasses". He seems to be explaining the common hypocritical view that a crime not revealed is no crime at all. "Screen" and "sun-glasses" combine to increase the opacity of what are already private and hidden ("bedchamber thoughts"). The hypocrisy of this kind of morality lies in the fact that it does not forbid wrong-doing; if a wrong act can be hidden then the wrong-doer is "innocent" since, as Upandru thinks, "who could jump your eye,/your mind-window." His assumption is immediately punctured by the poet/protagonist who tells him that it is possible: "The prophet only the poet" can penetrate the mask. In Distances III (p. 56), Okigbo groups "prophets," "martyrs" and "lunatics" together at the apex of the

18 Okigbo's footnote says "Upandru" is "a village explainer." His name seems to have been coined from Pa-Andrew, "Pa" being a short form of Papa and he would be a typical old, Igbo village churchman, an exegetist, expounding the Christian doctrine whose tenets he probably does not fully understand.
"pilgrims/bound for Shibboleth." Upandru's reply, "Logistics," is interesting. Logistics has to do with tactics and strategy. The poet/protagonist is apparently fascinated by this answer, for he immediately equates "logistics" with "poetry," an equation which makes poetry a matter of tactical and strategic arrangement of words. Just as successful warfare depends on efficient strategy and tactics, so does poetry depend for its effectiveness on careful verbal craftsmanship.

Upandru's command that the ram "disarm" is another version of "life without sin." To ask a ram to disarm is to ask it to change its nature and cease to be a ram. No wonder that the poet/protagonist should give him an answer which is a challenge: "Except by rooting, / who could pluck yam tubers from their base"? This is a proverbial way of saying that the only way to stop sexuality in a male is by castrating him.


20 Because yam tubers grow deep into the soil the only way to harvest them is by uprooting or digging them up with hoes or special diggers. Once the yam tuber has been dug up, the life cycle of the yam plant is terminated. The process of digging up the tuber is analogous to the process of castration, an operation which the Igbo perform on male domestic animals like he-goats, and rams to fatten them and make them yield more meat. The reference as Romanus Egudu, ("Defence of Culture in the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo," ALT No.6, 1973, p.19), has pointed out, is to the life of celibacy imposed on Catholic clergy, which, according to him, is an impossible command.
EYES OPEN on the sea,
eyes open, of the prodigal;
upward to heaven shoot
where stars will fall from.

Secret I have told into no ear,
save into a dug-hole, to hold, not to drown with -
Secret I have planted into beachsand

now breaks
salt-white surf on the stones and me,
and lobsters and shells
in iodine smell -
maid of the salt-emptiness,
sophisticreamy,

whose secret I have covered up with beachsand...

Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach,
shadow of rain over man with woman.

This is one of the poems of Okigbo whose dislocated syntax has to be ordered before they can be clearly understood. The following are the possible simple sentences from which the poem is generated.

The eye is open
The eye is looking on the sea
The prodigal owns the eyes
The eyes shoot upward to heaven
Stars will fall from heaven

I have a secret
I told a secret to no ear
I told a secret into a dug-hole
a dug-hole is to hold a secret
a dug-hole is not to drown the secret with
I have planted a secret into beachsand
A secret now breaks
A secret is like salt-white surf
A secret breaks on the stones
A secret breaks on me
A secret breaks on lobsters
A secret breaks on shells
- lobsters have iodine smell
- shells have iodine smell

The maid now breaks
The maid is like salt-white surf
The maid breaks on me
The maid breaks on lobster
The maid breaks on shells
The maid is of the salt emptiness
The maid is sophisticreamy

The maid has a secret
I have covered a secret up with beachsand.

It may be paraphrased as follows: (The bracketed words and segmentals are not in the text of the poem).

(The) eyes of the prodigal (are) open (looking) on the sea (and) shoot(ing) upward to heaven where the stars will fall from. (I have a) maid(s) secret (which) I have told into no ear save into a dughole (which) I have covered up with beachsand to hold and not to drown with. (The) maid of the salt-emptiness whose secret I have covered up with beachsand now breaks, sophisticreamy, (like) salt-white surf on me and (the) lobsters and shells.

The first stanza looks back to "Passage" (p. 3), where the "prodigal" waits for "the watchword." It is a tribute of prayer to, or invocation of the "Watermaid" who is to bring the "stars," the blessing that the prodigal is anxiously awaiting. "Upward to heaven shoot" calls to mind the image and the myth of shooting stars. There is a transference of this attribute of the shooting star to the "eye." In Igbo cosmology shooting stars are portents of great events, usually the death of
important people. In this poem this idea of a great event is implied, the great event being the expected blessing which the "maid of the salt-emptiness" is supposed to bring.

The poet protagonist breaks off in the second stanza to confide to the reader. He has a secret, the Watermaid's secret, which he dare not tell but which rather he has told into a dug hole.

This is another example of how Okigbo fuses the myths of two different cultures. The secret on the one hand recalls the story of Midas.

Midas was punished by Timolus for saying that Pan was a better musician than Apollo. Timolus did not suffer ears so dull to keep their human form, but lengthened them out and filled them with shaggy grey hair; he also made them unstable at the base and gave them power of motion. Human in all else, in this one feature he was punished, and wore the ears of a slow moving ass. Disfigured and ashamed he strove to hide his temples beneath a purple turban, but the slave who was wont to trim his long hair beheld his shame. And he, since he dared not reveal the disgraceful sight, yet eager to tell it out and utterly unable to keep it to himself went off and dug a hole in the ground and into the hole with low muttered words, he whispered of his master's ears which he had seen. Then by throwing back the earth he buried the evidence of his voice and having thus filled up the whole again, he silently stole away. But a thick growth of whispering reeds began to spring up there, and these when at the years end they came to their full size, betrayed the sower, for stirred by the gentle breeze, they repeated his buried words and exposed the story of his master's ears.21

21 Ovid: Metamorphoses Bk. XI 146 ff.
The Igbo version of this story says that the king had horns. As his servant did not want any ear to hear of his master's deformity he whispered the secret into a hole in the ground but the secret sprouted a crop of ears, imaging the human ears to which it was refused.

In this poem Okigbo leaves the idea of "breaks" ambiguous. It could have as its syntactic subject either "Secret" from the line "Secret I have planted into beachsand/now breaks," or "maid of the salt emptiness..." in which case the sentence would be: "now breaks/maid of the salt emptiness/whose secret I have covered up in beachsand." "Breaks" in each case implies sudden appearance, and has the further effect of linking "maid" and "secret" in such a way that they are thought of simultaneously. This kind of unified sensibility which is characteristic of Okigbo's poetry is illustrated further in the identification of the protagonist with "stones" "lobsters" and "shells" and the combined appeal to the senses of hearing ("secret I have told into no ear,") smell ("lobster and shells/in iodine smell") and sight ("sophisticreamy"). "Sophisticreamy" is the poet's own coinage, a portmanteau word, likely a combination of "sophisticated" and "creamy," like Eliot's "foresuffer," or Joyce's "museyroom." "Salt-emptiness" may be taken literally as a description of the sea, an idea from

Eliot's *Waste Land*, "empty and wide the sea." 23 There is also a consistent suppression of human agency in this poem as there is in all the poems of *Heavensgate*. The pronominal word "I" follows "Secret" and is placed in an unstressed position; and "me" in its lone occurrence is placed in a position of equivalence with "stones/and lobsters and shells."

The personal nouns "maid," "prodigal," "man" and "woman" are class names and do not give any concrete image of a particular human being. "Ear" which has human connotation occurs once and in a syntactic position that puts it in a relation of equivalence with "dughole" and "beachsand."

While "ear" occurs once, "dughole" is echoed by "hold" and "drown" and "beachsand" occurs twice (lines 7 and 14). In contrast with the paucity of personal nouns there is a high density of impersonal nouns especially those connected with the elements: "Sea," "heaven," "stars," "salt-emptiness," "rain," "sun," "shadow," "dughole," "beachsand," "surf," "stones," "shells," "lobsters."

The last two lines take up the theme of union with the Watermaid. The "sunbeaten beach" and "man with woman" are seen hazily as pictures superimposed one upon the other.

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23 "The Burial of the Dead", *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber&Faber) The text has it in German: "Od und leer das Meer". D.S. Izsebaye (African Literature Today No. 6. pp.9-10) thinks that this is the poet's rejection of salt water which is associated with the salt water of John the Baptist's "bowl of salt water".
"Man with woman" is placed in a position of equivalence with beach. There is therefore a union of man with woman, and of the two with the environment (nature). This poem gives an idea of the kind of union which the protagonist desires, the union of man and nature in which each is the other.

WATERMAID (p.11).

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.

So brief her presence-
match-flare in wind's breath-
so brief with mirrors around me.

Downward...
the waves distil her;
gold crop
sinking ungathered.

Watermaid of the salt-emptiness,
grown are the ears of the secret.

This is the protagonist's first glimpse of the long awaited goddess. She is beautiful and regal: "bright/with the armpit dazzle of a lioness" and she is wearing white light about her. The "lioness" image is probably suggested to the poet by Eliot's "In the juvescence of the year/came Christ the tiger."24 It implies the maid's aspect of power and

24 T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion", Selected Poems (Faber & Faber) p.31.
derives from Blake's "tyger" which has been said to symbolize "the union of the creator with his creation and the energy of the creator expressing itself in all forms of physical incarnation."25 Also, "wearing white light about her" recalls Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" IV where the poet describes another female figure as "going in white and blue, in Mary's colour... One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing/white light folded, sheated about her, folded."26

There are marked similarities between the two passages. Both of them describe visions. In each case the visioner is a humble penitent. The visions are of female figures. Eliot's figure is variously "the lady in Mary's colour," (1 4), "the silent sister" (1 22), and "the Virgin Mary herself," while Okigbo's figure is "Idoto" (Passage, p. 3), "maid of the salt emptiness" (Watermaid, p.10), "my lioness" (Watermaid, p.11), "Anna of the panel oblong" (Newcomer, p.17).

The maid is called "my lioness", an animal commonly acknowledged as the queen of beasts. This regal aspect of the maid is also implied in the lines "the waves escort her"; "crowned with moonlight," "crown" and "escort" being always associated with royalty. The "gold crop" image is a reference to her immense worth.

The preparation for and the long period of expectation of the maid is contrasted with her actual coming which is "so brief.../ match flare in wind's breath..." It is the flash

of sunlight that creates mid-winter spring as in Eliot's "Little Gidding" (1. 1), an illusion perhaps but a vision which is apocalyptic in its intensity and brilliance. "With mirrors around me" is a scenic description of the surrounding sea and recalls Eliot's "Watery mirror" ("Little Gidding" I, 1. 7). But although her presence has been "so brief" she stays long enough for the poet/protagonist to appreciate her regal beauty and her worth which are of such import to him that he feels a sense of utter loss when "downward.../the waves distil her; /gold crop/sinking ungathered." The "salt-emptiness" of the next line although it is still a description of the sea also echoes this sense of loss, like the loss of solid salt in water already suggested by "the waves distil her." The implication is that the sea has lost, with the disappearance of the Watermaid, that which gives it savour and even worth.

The last line takes up the Igbo version of the "Secret" story in which the secret sprouts up in the form of human ears. The repetition of this legend is also thematically important. It suggests a reason for the brief presence. The protagonist has leaked the maid's secret and his loneliness and lassitude are heightened by his sense of guilt.

The poet/protagonist's dejection is emphasised in the next two sections of "Watermaid" (p. 12). For the first time in the Heavensgate sequence the personal pronoun "I" is foregrounded. It occurs twice in the third section of Watermaid.
(p.12), and twice in the fourth (p.13). In the third section the protagonist's sense of loss and his loneliness are stressed.

WATERMAID (p.12).

AND I WHO am here abandoned,

count the sand by wavelash abandoned,
count her blessing, my white queen.

But the spent sea reflects
from his mirrored visage
not my queen, a broken shadow.

So I who count in my island the moments,
count the hour which will bring

my lost queen with angels' ash in the wind.

The word "abandoned" occurs twice in the first two lines. In the first line it is the "I", that is, the protagonist, "who am here abandoned." In the second line the "I" abandoned "count the sand by wavelash abandoned," and in the third line "I" "count her blessing." By syntactic positioning, "I" and "sand" are made equivalent in terms of situation. Both are abandoned. In the next line the "sea" becomes "spent" because of the disappearance of its treasure, "my white queen." The mirror image of "broken shadow" also implies that the sea is useless now that the "white queen" is not there. All these combine to underscore the value to the protagonist of the Watermaid, and his desperate position now that she is lost to him.
There is a shift in the meaning of "count" in the next two lines. The poet is in a sense marooned on his "island", somewhat like a Robinson Crusoe; or a Ben Gunn in Stevenson's Treasure Island and he is now counting like the hands of a clock the moments "which will bring/my lost queen..." His anxiety is implied in the repetition: "I who count...the moments/count the hour..." while his sense of loss is emphasized by the use of the epithet "lost" for the "white queen" in the last line. The idea of "queen" derives from "lioness" in the previous poem. Also the idea of "queen" in this poem, combined with "eyes... upward to heaven shoot" in "Watermaid" (p.10) accounts for the association with "angels" in the last line. "Ash" which occurs again in Distances II (p.54), may mean dust, or may symbolize the tree of life and the creative wand. It is likely that "angel's ash" is a reference to creative inspiration, as the blessing which the protagonist has been expecting is poetic inspiration. The return of the "lost queen with angel's ash in the wind" would then imply both the glory of her return, as she will be accompanied by angels, and the profusion of inspiration that she will bring with her. But meanwhile the protagonist can only brood on his loss which puts him in a state of utter confusion, a state that is described in the next poem.

WATERMAID (p.13).

The stars have departed,
the sky in monocle
surveys the worldunder.

The stars have departed,
and I - where am I?

Stretch, stretch, 0 antennae,
to clutch at this hour,
fulfilling each moment in a
broken monody.

The "stars" which "have departed" may be taken literally in which case it will be assumed that the poet/protagonist recollects his position of utter dejection in the morning. But it is also a reference to the disappearance of the queen and with her, poetic inspiration; for in the first section of "Watermaid" (p.10), the protagonist looked "upward to heaven/where stars will fall from." With the departure of the "stars" the poet-protagonist loses his sense of direction, implied in the question: "and I - where am I"?

Like an insect he can only feel with his "antennae" during this moment of isolation and loss of vision, and the song (or poem) which he can now sing is only a "broken monody." It is "broken" because it is not inspired, and "monody" shows its nature - it is a mournful song, mournful because of the loss of the "queen:"

Apocalyptic vision in both Christian and Igbo traditional ritual requires a state of perfect purity. It may be
assumed that the vision of the Watermaid is not lasting because the protagonist has not undergone proper ritual cleansing. Hence his decision in "Lustra" (p.14), to go to the hills for cleansing.

**LUSTRA** (p.14).

So would I to the hills again
so would I
to where springs the fountain
there to draw from

And to hill top clamber
body and soul
whitewashed in the moondew
where to see from

So would I from my eye the mist
so would I
thro' moonmist to hilltop
there for the cleansing

Here is a new laid egg
here a white hen at midterm.

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28 D.S. Izevbaye, "Okiebo's Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird: A Reading of *Heavensgate* (1962)." *African Literature Today* ed. E.D. Jones (Heinemann's Ed. Books, 1973), pp.9-10 suggests that the secret told into a dughole is "an adapted form of Christian confession without a priest - an unsuitable ritual, for Watermaid is unambiguously presented as 'native' - in a renunciation of the Christian experience." I think that the importance of the "secret" motif lies in the betrayal, may be, the poet's impetuous disclosing of the inspiration he is expecting. The state of impurity is however, as Izevbaye has rightly pointed out, the result of the poet's exile, which makes him "technically a stranger to the goddess, requiring ritual cleansing before being readmitted into communion with his goddess."
In the three parts of "Lustra" the poet/protagonist goes through the ritual purification which is necessary before he can have a lasting vision of the maid. In the first poem the protagonist says: "So would I to the hills again" implying that he had been to the hills previously, although there is no indication in the sequence. The syntactic arrangement of the first stanza shows that "the hills" are where the fountain springs, and the purpose of his going is to "draw from," "to see from," and to be cleansed. It is schematized as follows:

So would I

to the hills
where springs the fountain

there to draw from
there to see from
there for the cleansing

The syntactic similarity between "hills" and "fountain" is strengthened by the "again/fountain" rhyme. There is a concatenation of activities which the protagonist is to undertake, put in reverse order. He should be cleansed before he can have a vision of the maid or be able to draw from the fountain. There is also an element of vagueness of intention until the last line of the stanza. The kind of
cleansing is emphasized by the nature of the sacrificial objects, "new laid egg" and "white hen at midterm" both of which are Igbo traditional symbols of sacrificial purity. This purely traditional mode of cleansing follows from "whitewashed in the moondew" which avoids the Christian terminology, "purified." Again the protagonist will "clamber body and soul" which implies a unification of his whole personality in this quest for cleansing, the body not being an impediment to his spiritual aspirations as is commonly believed by Christians. "Clamber" connotes effort, difficulty of ascent, and determination on the part of the protagonist. The image occurs again in Distances V (p. 58), when the protagonist is entering into the chamber of the goddess: "Sweat over hoof in ascending gestures-/ each step is the step of the mule in the abyss -"

"Mist" in the line "So would I from my eye the mist" is used in two senses. In the first place it could be a synonym for "dew" which would normally cause obscurcation of the atmosphere. It is also a filmy covering of the eyes caused by disorder of the body or by tears. Each would of course be covering or blinding the eyes, preventing the protagonist from the essential vision.

The sacrificial offering is completed in the next part of "Lustra" (p. 15).
LUSTRA (p.15):

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...

Although the reference to Christ is interposed
between the offering of the "new laid egg"/...white hen at
midterm," and the offering of the last items, the two offer-
rings belong to the same movement. The messiah reference
is the Christian element which the protagonist always ins-
tinctively brings into his new situation. Here it serves
to strengthen his belief that his Watermaid will return
after his ritual cleansing. In this last offering
"Fingers of penitence bring/to a palm grove/vegetable offe-
ring with five/fingers of chalk." As in "Watermaid" (pp.10-11)
the protagonist's personality is completely suppressed in this
poem. The reader is allowed to see only his humble fingers
with their gifts, and the fingers and gifts merge into one
another because there are five fingers and also five fingers
of chalk.

The expectation of the second coming of the Watermaid
calls to the poet's mind the idea of Christ's coming. "Him
who was silenced/whose advent dumb-bells celebrate/in dim
light with wine song," is a Christ-like figure, in some ways
analogous to the poet-protagonist. This analogy becomes
clearly stated in "Fragments out of the Deluge" VI and VII.
Although the Christian doctrine of the second coming strengt-
hens his confidence that his Watermaid will come again when
he has performed the necessary ritual purification, the pro-
tagonist's attitude to the doctrine is implicit in the cyni-
cal allusion to Paradise Lost Book III, ll.80-167 where God
the Father and God the Son argue as to whether fallen man
should "find grace."

The structure of the tenses of the verbs in this poem
is interesting. There is the past, "was silenced" the present,
"celebrate" and the future, "will come" and finally the present,
"bring". There could be here an implication of the timeless-
ness of the kind of religious experience the poet is descri-
bining, as in Eliot's eternal time. "Time present and time past/
are both perhaps present in time future/and time future contai-
ned in time past." (Burnt Norton* 1).

The scene of events in the last part of "Lustra" (p.16),
is also the palm grove:
THUNDERING drums and cannons
in palm grove:
the spirit is in ascent.

I have visited:
on palm beam imprinted
my pentagon —

I have visited, the prodigal...

In palm grove,
long-drums and cannons:
the spirit in the ascent.

The "thundering drums and cannons" are the normal traditional musical accompaniment of such ritual offering, which would help to stimulate the "spirit" to the uprush implied in "the spirit is in ascent." The report of the visit adopts the repetitive, incantatory tone typical of such ritual "I have visited;" on palm beam imprinted/my pentagon, I have visited, the prodigal...."

"Pentagon" is probably suggested by the "fingers of penitence" which "bring.../five fingers of chalk. But it also implies the protagonist's total break with Christian initiation. In "Initiations" (p.3), he had put himself on the periphery of commitment to Christianity, in the quadrangle; now he invents his own symbol, a five-sided, instead of the four-sided "square" or "rhombus" or "quadrangle." He is therefore asserting that he is not bound by the "fourth angle" of duty or obligation to conform to the demands of Christianity. The pentagon imprinted on the palm beam is also like his seal on an agreement. By it he has signed the final deed, and as he is now
completely cleansed, he may expect to have a lasting vision of the maid and to receive her blessings.

**NEWCOMER** *(p.17)*

**TIME for worship -**

softly sing the bells of exile, the angelus, softly sings my guardian angel.

Mask over my face -

My own mask, not ancestral I sign: remembrance of calvary, and of age of innocence, which is of...

**Time for worship:**

Anna of the panel oblongs, protect me from them fucking angels; protect me my sandhouse and bones.

"Newcomer" *(p.17)* serves as a test of the extent of the protagonist's return to his traditional ritual and deity, and therefore of the degree of his severance from Christian worship. The occasion is the ringing of the bell of the "angelus."  

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29 The angelus bell is rung three times daily, at six o'clock morning and evening, and at noon. At these times Catholics say the "Angelus Domini annunciat Marniae..." a recital commemorating the annunciation of the birth of Christ and his incarnation. According to Izevbaye *(ALT 6 p.11)* "the peals of the bell recall the poet's state of exile, and the involuntary sign of the cross which he makes on hearing the bell becomes transformed into a gesture of defiance against the usual response. It also serves him as a protective mask to insulate the new individuality from being swamped by communal values...Thus the internalized allegiance which makes it irresistible for the Christians to respond spontaneously at the sight or sound of Christian symbols is tested against the protagonist's newfound identity. The appeal to the personal saint, Anna, for succour is a desperate step which he takes because he is threatened by the danger of succumbing to the Christian call for worship."
He realises that he no longer believes in the implications of this act and this is why he says: "Mask over my face - /my own mask, not ancestral - I sign:" Signing himself is like wearing an antithetical mask; the self that signs is not his real self, the self descending from his ancestors. This is why he has to call on his personal guardian, "Anna of the panel oblongs," to protect him "from them fucking angels." This humorous-cum-satirical reference to the angels is a reversal of the common belief in the innocence which is the nature of the angels. It shows the protagonist's attempt to dissociate himself from orthodox Christian beliefs. The repetition of "protect me" shows that the protagonist takes his plea seriously. "My sandhouse and bones" may be understood to mean body and soul together, and shows that the protagonist is trying to reverse the Christian practice of praying for the protection of the soul, as the part of the human being that lives after death.

The next part of "Newcomer" (p.18), is believed to be an occasional poem.30

30 Sunday Anozie (p.61) has pointed out that the occasion was the birth of Uzo, Okigbo's niece. The poem is dedicated to Georgette, Uzo's mother, and wife of Dr. Pius Okigbo, the poet's eldest brother.

D.S. Izevbaye (ALT 6 p.11) says this poem celebrates "the final arrival of the much longed-for inspiration which gave the whole of the Heavensgate sequence its exploratory structure and the strongly expectant tone first dictated by the "Watchman for the watchword at Heavensgate."
NEWCOMER (p.18).

For Gorgette

IN THE CHILL breath of the day's waking,
comes the newcomer,

when the draper of May
has sold out fine green garments,

and the hillsides have made up their faces,
and the gardens, on their faces a painted smile:

such synthetic welcome at the cock's third siren;
when from behind the bulrushes

waking, in the teeth of the chill May mourn,
comes the newcomer.

It opens with a description of a beautiful May morning,
the morning of the birth of the "Newcomer," which reminds one
of the description which opens Eliot's poem, "A Game of Chess"
with its reminiscences of Cleopatra and Baudelaire's poem
from which Eliot derived his title. The similarity between
Eliot's "synthetic perfumes" and Okigbo's "synthetic welcome"
suggests a close relationship between the two poems. As is
usual with Okigbo the poem takes the form of a narrative.
The birth takes place in "the chill breath of the day's wa-
king," and the time of year is May when all the surrounding
is green with the bloom of spring. The imagery is of sophis-
ticated, artificial dressing: the surrounding has been draped
with "fine green garments," "the hillsides have made up their
faces," the gardens wear "a painted smile" and the welcome is
"synthetic," a word which connotes both the fact that all as-
pects of the surrounding join in giving the welcome, and the
de-natured, neutral and modern nature of this welcome.

There is also lurking behind all this beauty and welcome the theme of betrayal. "Sell-out" means betrayal and this is implied in the phrase "has sold out fine green garments." The theme of betrayal is further underscored by the reference to "the cock's third siren" which immediately recalls Peter's denial of Christ during Christ's passion. 31

Since the poet protagonist sometimes assumes the Christ figure 32 it becomes clear that the poet is not just concerned with the birth of a niece but with a "Newcomer" who comes "waking from behind the bulrushes"/in the teeth of the chill May morn." "Chill May morn" is similar to Eliot's "chill fingers of yew" in "Burnt Norton" IV which has the effect of creating a sense of foreboding. "Bulrushes" recalls the account of the birth of Moses. 33

31 John 13. 38 Verily Verily I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow till thou has denied me thrice. John 18 26, 27 One of the Servants of the high priest, being his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did I see thee in the garden with him: Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew.

32 See Limits VI and VII.

33 The account is given in Exodus 1 and 2. Briefly, the account is that Moses was born at the time when the Egyptian Pharaoh charged that "every living son that is born of the Israelites should be cast into the rivers as he feared that the Israelites were multiplying. To prevent the murder of the child Moses his mother hid him three months and when she could no longer hide him "she took for him an ark of bulrushes and daubed it with slime and with pitch and put the child therein, and laid it in the flags by the rivers brink..."
It is possible that the reference here is to the achievement of poetic inspiration after the cleansing in "Lustra."

But it is an achievement that is beset with initial difficulties and fraught with the possibilities of betrayal.

NEWCOMER (p.19):

I AM standing above the noontide,
Above the bridgehead;

Listening to the laughter of waters
that do not know why:

Listening to incense -

I am standing above the noontide
with my head above it;

Under my feet float the waters
Tide blows them under...

The last part of Newcomer is a celebration of this supposed achievement. This celebration is implied in the lines:

"I am standing above the noontide
I am standing above the bridgehead
My head is above the noontide
My feet are above the waters.

The protagonist's ecstasy is echoed in "the laughter of waters." The word "incense" brings in the idea of ritual celebration and anticipates "bowl of incense" in Distances I (p.53), and "cloud of incense " (Distances II, p.55), both of which are associated with the poet's homecoming and union with the goddess.

But there is a note of irony in all this rejoicing, introduced in the lines "Listening to the laughter of waters/that do not know why..." "Laughter of waters" is an image
called up by the splashing of tidal water either on the shores or the pillars of the bridge but it is also possible that the protagonist realises that his rejoicing is presumptuous. This would be consistent with the question he asks later in Distances I, "But what does my divine rejoicing hold?/A bowl of incense, a nest of fireflies"? The irony is continued in the last two lines: "Under my feet float the waters/Tide blows them under..." There is a collocative clash in "float the waters." Water would normally flow, and an object "floats" on water. What floats has no weight, and in the picture as the poet has created it, it is the poet or his feet that "float" and "tide blows them under..." "Noontide" is neap or low tide which results when pulls of the sun and the moon are opposed to each other. If "bridgehead" is taken as a symbol for that which joins two modes of experience, it may be understood that the reference implied in "noontide" is to the kind of experience recorded in "Siren Limits": IV, (p.27), and shows here that the protagonist has triumphed from the distractions which beset him. In this regard, the poem may be taken as another of his illusory achievements in his quest. The appearance of the Watermaid (p.11) had given him one such illusion before and he is to be subjected to it several times afterwards.

Another clash exists between "listening" and "incense." One can see the smoke of incense, but the usual association
is with the sense of smell. The only way to explain this intrusion of "listening" in the poem is that Okigbo's "auditory imagination" must have taken hold of him in the whole poem.

The whole poem appeals to the sense of hearing. The phrase "laughter of waters" in an initial, stressed position seems to invite the reader to join the protagonist to listen to the music of the splashing waves. But this is presumptuous as will be made clear in the "Siren Limits" sequence. Because of the excitement of newly found power, the protagonist appears in "Siren Limits" I as the talkative weaverbird.

SIREN LIMITS (p. 23)

SUDDENLY becoming talkative like weaverbird
Summoned at offside of dream remembered
Between sleep and waking,
I hang up my egg-shells,
To you of palm grove,
Upon whose bamboo towers
Hang, dripping with yesterupwine,
A tiger mask and nude spear...
Queen of the damp half light,
I have had my cleansing,
Emigrant with air-borne nose,
The he-goat-on-heat.

The opening is abrupt and dramatic. "The weaverbird" image recalls the "wagtail," the "sunbird," and "the young bird at the passage" of Heavensgate (p.4). It occurs again in "Siren
Limits III, (p. 25): "Then we must sing, tongue-tied/... Making
harmony among the branches." In "Fragments out of the Deluge"
it reappears as the "sunbird": the "sunbird repeats over the
oilbean shadows..." ("Fragments VII"). When the eagles come
they seek out and kill the "sunbird" and in "Fragments XII"
the "sunbird sings again/ from the LIMITS of the dream."

These occurrences of the bird image combine to explain
the protagonist's sudden talkativeness. After the "arrival" in
"Newcomer" (p. 18), the poet/protagonist (who is identified
with the singing bird throughout Okigbo's canon) assumes
that he is now able to receive the fruits of the watermaid's
blessing. This moment of sudden talkativeness follows the
moment of sudden discovery, which is like Eliot's moment of
a sudden shaft of sunlight. 34 What the poet/protagonist
discovers is suggested by the weaverbird symbol. The weaverbird
is a symbol of artistic intelligence. It is noted for the artifice
of its nest, an aspect of it which Yeats evokes in the image
of stitching and unstitching as a description of the craft
of poetry. 35 That the dream remembered is inspirational is
made clear in the next line which, although it belongs to the

Paperbacks) p. 195.

next stanza, is semantically a part of the fragment that is the first stanza. "Between sleep and waking" is a usual symbol for Yeats, Eliot and the French Symbolists and is usually applied to the moment of inspiration. Okigbo uses it in the same sense.

Before the poet/protagonist can make use of his newly achieved inspiration he offers a "prefatory sacrifice of submission" to the "Queen of the damp half-light" apparently the "lost queen" referred to in "Watermaid" (p.12). The sacrifice is the same kind of offering that the poet/protagonist made in "Lustra." The new laid egg of "Lustra" (p.14), is now "egg shells" which suggests that the sacrificial offering has been accepted. The scene is the same, the "palm grove" of "Lustra" (p.16), but here the description is more detailed. The "tiger mask" and "nude spear" are traditional masquerade objects symbolic of the martial prowess usually associated with traditional Igbo deities. The bamboo towers are the tall bamboos of the palms, and the "tiger mask and nude spear.../dripping with yester-upwine" are an indication that the palms are being tapped for palm wine. "Yester-upwine" is another example of Okigbo's method of compounding. It means wine that was tapped from a standing palm (as opposed to one felled) and which has stayed for a day, in other words, "Yesterday's up wine." Traditionally such wine is regarded as more mature and is usually more alcoholic and is therefore an ideal tonic for the martial image associated with it in this poem. The
protagonist makes it clear in the last stanza that this offering is not for cleansing, by using the perfect tense "I have had my cleansing." The cleansing was necessary because he had been an "emigrant with air-borne nose," a prodigal whose going away had been defiant and arrogant.

This prefatory sacrifice over, the poet now goes into the main theme of "Siren Limits." In the introduction to *Labyrinths* Okigbo says that *Limits* and *Distances* are man's outer and inner worlds projected..." (p.XI). "Siren Limits" II (p.24), is a description of the protagonist's growth from weakness to strength.

FOR HE WAS a shrub among the poplars,
Needing more roots
More sap to grow to sunlight,
Thirsting for sunlight,

A low growth among the forest.

Into the soul
The selves extended their branches,
Into the moments of each living hour,
Feeling for audience

Straining thin among the echoes;

And out of the solitude
Voice and soul with selves unite,
Riding the echoes,

Horsemen of the apocalypse;

And crowned with one self
The name displays its foliage,
Hanging low

A green cloud above the forest.

The imagery is botanical. Growth is seen in terms of forest tree growth. The choice is appropriate for one who is just
emerging from the "palm grove" home of his inspiring deity. This emergence and growth are implied in the change from the "half light" symbol of "Siren Limits" I (p.23), to the "sunlight" symbol of this poem.

There is also a second motif of the union of "voice, soul and self" expressed partly in the nature imagery of branches, and partly in metaphysical terms. The underlying sentences of the two parts of this poem are set out for a clearer grasp of the images evoked:

There were poplars.
He (the poet) was a shrub.
He was a low growth
He was needing more roots
He was needing more sap
He would grow to sunlight
He was thirsting for sunlight

There was a soul
There were selves
The selves extended their branches into the soul
The selves were feeling for audience
The selves were straining thin among the echoes

The selves were solitary: Out of the solitude
Voice and soul with selves unite
Voice and soul with selves ride the echoes
Voice and soul with selves are horsemen of the apocalypse
Voice and soul with selves are one self

One self has a name
The name displays its foliage
The foliage is hanging low
The foliage is a cloud above the forests.

From this grouping of the kernel sentences it becomes clear that at first the poet/protagonist was a weak sapling shut off from sunlight by the higher growth, "the poplars." But
the heliotropic tendency was also there, he was "thirsting for sunlight." If the sapling is taken to be the poet/protagonist then the poplars are the great poets of the tradition. The "sunlight" he is "thirsting for" appears to be enlightenment or inspiration. In the next movement "the soul" is the soul of the poet/protagonist and the selves are the "essence of experiences"\(^\text{36}\) to which he has been exposed which are literally asking to be assimilated. Their effort to be, as well as their relative weakness and inferiority to what is already in the tradition, or what is already in the soul of the poet/protagonist, or "the concomitants"\(^\text{37}\) of these experiences, is expressed in the line "Straining thin among the echoes." In such a position of inferiority "solitary" becomes an appropriate description of their state, and it is in this solitude that the "voice, soul and the selves" unite and become "crowned with one self," achieving a unity of being which makes it possible for the poet/protagonist to achieve prominence, "riding the echoes" as a ship rides the waves; manipulating the echoes into a unified voice. "Echoes" here recalls Eliot's "Other echoes/inhabit the garden" where it is also associated with experiences.\(^\text{38}\)

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37 Ibid. p.94.

The line "Horsemen of the apocalypse" derives from the imagery of "riding" in the preceding line and is a reinforcement of the idea of the mystic energy which results to the poet/protagonist when his soul is suffused with the impetus from his experiences. It is this union which changes him from the weak sapling to the tallest tree of the forest, "a green cloud above the forest." But, again he is being presumptuous as he will be made to realise in "Siren Limits" (p.25).

BANKS or reed.
Mountains of broken bottles.
& the mortar is not yet dry...

Silent the footfall,
Soft as cat's paw,
Sandalled in velvet in fur,

So we must go, eve-mist on shoulders,
Sun's dust of combat,
With brand burning out at hand-end.
& the mortar is not yet dry...

Then we must sing, tongue-tied,
Without name or audience,
Making harmony among the branches.

And this is the crisis point,
The twilight moment between sleep and waking;
And voice that is reborn transpires,
Not thro' pores in the flesh,
but the soul's back-bone.

Hurry on down -
Thro' the high-arched gate -
Hurry on down
little stream to the lake,

39 The image is taken from Revelations 6, 2 - 8.
Hurry on down -
Thro' the cinder market -
Hurry on down
in the wake of the dream;

Hurry on down -
To rockpoint of Cable,

To pull by the rope
the big white elephant...

& the mortar is not yet dry
& the mortar is not yet dry;

And the dream wakes
the voice fades
In the damp half light
like a shadow,

Not leaving a mark.

"Siren Limits" III is organized in a series of images
drawn from building, from warfare and from biology. In the
first two lines the image is of chaos. "Banks of reed/Moun-
tains of broken bottles." The refrain, "& the mortar is not
yet dry" which forms the next line introduces the image of
building which suggests that "banks of reed" refers to mate-
rial for building. The refrain is taken from The Cantos of
Ezra Pound, Canto VIII, where Pound is ostensibly quoting a
letter by Sigismund Malatesta, an Italian Renaissance soldier.
The relevant portion of the letter relates specifically to
the painting of a chapel and is therefore consistent with
the building image which Okigbo is trying to create. It
reads:

And tell the Maestro di pentore
That there can be no question of
His painting the walls for the moment,
As the mortar is not yet dry
And it would be merely work chucked away
(buttato via)
But I want it to be quite clear that until the chapels are ready I will arrange for him to paint something else.\textsuperscript{40}

These materials are, like the echoes of "Siren Limits" II, the experiences of the poet seen negatively.\textsuperscript{41} To transform the reeds into an artifact is a difficult and dangerous task. The environment is hostile. There are "mountains of broken bottles" which can harm if not carefully handled, and the time is not yet auspicious, "the mortar is not yet dry." Caution is therefore demanded and this is expressed in the next three lines which are phonologically tied up with the meaning: "Silent the footfall,/Soft as cat's paw,/Sandal-led in velvet and in fur,..."

"So" in the next line has the force of "therefore" and follows from this precarious situation; the image is that of taking up a burden and going forth: "So we must go, eve mist on shoulders,/Sun's dust of combat,/With brand burning out at hand-end." "Eve-mist" combined with "brand" suggests, metaphorically, the darkness into which the poet-protagonist is going, equipped with a naked brand vulnerable in the open like candle light.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} The Cantos of Ezra Pound (New York: A New Directions Book Vail Ballon Press, 1948), p.32.

\textsuperscript{41} Nwoga (JCL p.94) sees in the image "implications of negligence" (Banks of reed) and destruction and danger (Mountains of broken bottles).

\textsuperscript{42} In Igbo culture this would be dried raffia-palm bamboos, split and lit, which travellers may use at night when they are going short distances as it burns out fast and may burn the hand if it is not thrown away in good time.
"Sun's dust of combat" echoes Auden's line, "column by column in a cloud of dust they marched." It also recalls Greg's description of Kingsley in his criticism of Westward Ho: "He reminds us of nothing as much as of a war horse panting for battle...the dust of combat is to him the breath of life; and when once in the plenitude of grace and faith, fairly let loose upon his prey - human, moral, or material - all the red Indian within him comes to the surface, and he wields his tomahawk with an unbaptized heartiness... In both occurrences the phrase "dust of combat" is in the context of warfare, of turmoil, and of ardour. It connotes all these in this poem.

The refrain "& the mortar is not yet ready," which is repeated here, and again towards the end of the poem, adopts the pattern of Eliot's refrains which show insistence upon an idea, as the "Hurry up please it's time" of "A Game of Chess." The poet/protagonist is persistently reminded of the unsatisfactory context in which he is to operate. What makes the situation unsatisfactory is the lack of inspiration implied in the next stanza where he has to "sing tongue-tied/Without name or audience,/Making harmony among the branches." Because of lack of inspiration he is inarticulate; without the essential union of the selves there is not the "self", the "name" which "displays its foliage" and becomes "a green cloud above the forest." ("Siren Limits" II p. 21).

The highest that can be achieved is inarticulate harmony. It is this stage that the poet/protagonist calls the "crisis point" the turning point which leads to the twilight moment of illumination and inspiration.

The situation is analogous to what St. John of the Cross calls the period of the dark night of the soul, which precedes the moment of spiritual illumination. Okigbo like Eliot, sees death as an entry into life. After the crisis point the "voice" would be reborn, that is, there would be a reunification of the "soul" with the "selves," a union which would produce a new life-principle, the "soul's backbone." This new birth would produce an easy compulsion in the poet/protagonist and he would then sing articulately, not just as a physical process but from the reincarnated soul. The biological imagery of this stanza embraces the principle of life and growth in both animals and plants. "Transpires" implies emission of waste products in humans in the form of perspiration, as well as the emission of gas or water vapour through capillary tubes in plants. In both cases there is an easy compulsion. "Back-bone" is the seed of strength in a human being and is contrasted with the pores

in the flesh" implying that the transpiration is from the core of being.

Having had this sudden illumination the poet/protagonist is somehow in a hurry to join the mainstream of the tradition, to get quickly to his goal. This anxiety is expressed in the repeated "Hurry on down..." which contrasts sharply with the caution advised in the earlier section of the poem. This part of the poem can be read at two levels. At one level there is the movement of the poet/protagonist ("little stream") through the "high-arched gate" which symbolizes both the isolated enclosure in which the sapling of "Siren Limits" has so far dwelt as well as the gate which he must pass before getting into the lake.

In Distances I V (p. 59), "arched gate" becomes "archway" which leads to the chamber of the goddess, and both "arched gate" and "archway" recall "Heavensgate" of the first poem of "The Passage" (p. 3) where the journey started. The "little stream" is the poet/protagonist moving into the wider poetic tradition ("lake"). The image is also an expression of the theme of union which pervades the whole of Okigbo's poetry. The "lake" (Watermaid) is the fountain-head of inspiration and the poet as her tributary is cascading into her to achieve union with her and to partake of her inspiration.

46 It may take the form of desire for a unity of being or of union with the Watermaid or even of union with Death as in Distances IV
At another level it is possible that the poet/protagonist now identifying himself with "Idoto" the river goddess, and therefore the village stream, wishes to hurry through the "cinder market" to the "rockpoint of Cable." The hurry to the "rockpoint of Cable" is for the purpose of "pulling by the rope/the big white elephant." The "Cable Point" is an anchorage for the ferries and boats that ply the River Niger between Onitsha and Asaba. These boats may have suggested to the poet the idea of "big white elephant." To pull a boat by the rope is a big task, but it is a pointless task. Traditionally, "white elephant" is a symbol of hugeness as well as of uselessness. The latter is already suggested by "cinder." So the purpose of the journey "to rockpoint of Cable" turns out to be a huge but useless task.

47 In the Introduction to Labyrinths (p.xi) Okigbo speaks of "Idoto" as "the village stream of which I drank, in which I washed as a child...."

48 In a footnote, Okigbo identifies "the rockpoint of Cable" as the Cable Point at Asaba, a sacred waterfront with rocky promontory, and terminal point of a traditional pilgrimage. Anozie (p. 80) has pointed out that Okigbo paid a visit to this Cable Point in 1961 before he composed Limits. The market between the point of take-off in his village and the Cable Point is the Onitsha market. It is not clear why Okigbo describes it as cinder market. It is possible that the reference is to the crushed granite and, in some cases, residue of coal and charcoal spread on the flooded parts of the market.

49 This reading which shows the object of the "hurry on down" as futile is suggested in the "Introduction" where the poet says: "Siren Limits" presents a protagonist in pursuit of the "white elephant...." 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." (p.xi). Izevbaye (CEAL, p. 134), says that "white elephant" implies a common view of poetry as a useless art."
At this point the refrain "& the mortar is not yet dry" is repeated twice, reminding the poet/protagonist finally that the hurry was premature as the "surface" on which he is to work is not yet ready; and teaching him the need for the basic discipline of patience. He discovers that the sudden "shaft of sunlight" (p.23) is an illusion; he had thought that he had achieved "the voice" but now "it fades" and he is disillusioned. "Damp half-light in the next line recalls the "grove" of "Siren Limits" I (p.23), but it is also like the twilight, the half-light-half-darkness, the merging of one into the other, which is the state of illumination. In this case the voice proves to be insubstantial like a shadow. This is a situation already hinted at in "confluence of planes" "where man loses man, loses vision, "Initiations" (p.6). The lone line, "Not leaving a mark" implies total obliteration, and recalls by way of contrast the "scar of the crucifix." ("Initiations," p.6).

"Siren Limits"IV takes up the image of woman as temptress. It seems to be working on the common belief that "Women are both dangerous and necessary."50 The "image" that "insists" is the image of the "cruel rose" which is a symbol of immaculate and inviolable feminity. In Okigbo's poetry the female image plays different and sometimes opposing roles in different situations. This is an idea he must have got from Robert Graves'  

50 This theme is treated in an unrelated context in William York Tindall, A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas, p. 136
The White Goddess. 51 The image is from the flag pole of the heart", so, whoever she is, she is desired; but she is also a source of distraction. It is possible that her distraction is responsible for the waking of "the dream in "Siren Limits" III (p.26). She is also a "lioness", the lioness of "Watermaid" (p.11). In that poem the appearance is "so brief" but here the "image insists" and distracts; it is irresistible, "no shield is proof against her." The fragrance of her armpit is enough to anaesthetize the protagonist. "Patience" picks up the idea of the patience he has learnt in "Siren Limits" III but it also suggests "patient" because of the association with chloroform. The "image" is also a "sea weed/face", a description appropriate for the Watermaid whose face would be covered with curls of hair as she emerges from water. "Sea weed" could also be a death symbol, 'sea-straw' being a common symbol for death.52 This makes "blinded like a strong-room") an appropriate description also of the determined, irresistible, single-purposed maid/lioness.

The lioness is "oblong-headed" an epithet that recalls "Anna of the panel oblong" (Passage p.5). "Anna of the panel oblongs" ("Newcomer" p.17) and "everlasting fire from the

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51 Robert Graves, The White Goddess p.52. In the White goddess myth, "the Io trinity were white, red and dark blue. The white was the new moon, the goddess of birth and growth, the red was the full-moon, the goddess of love and battle and the dark was the old moon, the goddess of Death and Divination."

oblong window" (Distances II, p. 54). In three of the occurrences of this mathematical figure there is a connection with a female figure, two being with Anna who in each case is the poet's succour or guardian spirit and who may be "Idoto" or the "Watermaid." Okigbo's lioness/watermaid/queen... is therefore a composite figure like Robert Graves' "white goddess" capable of both protection and destruction, and performing different functions in different situations. In this poem her function is a destructive one.

The lines "Distances of her armpit fragrance/Turn chloroform enough for my patience" introduce another theme in this poem. "Distances," the functioning noun in the couplet apparently conflicts structurally with the operating word "fragrance." "Distances" is made a property of "armpit" whereas what is meant is the fragrance of the armpit from a certain distance. This fragrance is soothing like chloroform, an idea that introduces the image of surgery. "Patience" is linked phonologically with "patient" implied in the imagery of the last stanza, the "goddess/sea-weed/death" figure to whom

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53 Anozie (p. 50) has pointed out that the name of Okigbo's mother was Anna.

54 For a detailed treatment of the myth of this composite figure the reader is referred to Robert Graves, The White Goddess.

55 The "fragrance/patience rhyme is one of the few in Okigbo's poetry.
the poet as patient now surrenders himself for full probing. This is the kind of self abnegation which Eliot characterizes in his three-stage progression through the dark night of the soul as "dessication," "evacuation" and "inoperancy" and which is the one way to spiritual illumination. By submitting himself to the will of the goddess, the poet/protagonist is hoping to achieve completeness, a rebirth through death which is also the only way to achieve the union with the goddess, the object of his quest. This union is necessary for a lasting poetic inspiration and this is why he hopes that once he achieves it the "poem will be finished."

56 "Burnt Norton" III, 11.31-32.
Thematicallay "Siren Limits" IV leads directly to Distances although they are separated by "Fragments out of the Deluge" and Silences. In the "Introduction" Okigbo says: "The quest broken off after 'Siren Limits' is resumed, in Distances this time in the unconscious." (p.XI). The title recalls the line "Distances of her armpit-fragrance" ("Siren Limits" IV, p.27). This suggests that some relationship exists between them, especially as the 1962 version of Distances was prefaced with the last four lines of "Siren Limits" IV.

When you have finished
& done up my stitches,
Wake me near the alter
& this poem will be finished.

The first line establishes this relationship. 'Flesh into phantom' recalls the state of anaesthesia implied in 'chloroform' ("Siren Limits" IV). The horizontal stone on which the union with the goddess takes place in this poem is also the operating table on which the protagonist passed from a waking to a dreaming state, "from laughter to the dream."57 The "archway" of Distances IV recalls the "high-arched gate" which the poet as "little Stream" has to hurry through in his advance to the lake to achieve union with the goddess. The "Hurry on down" of "Siren Limits III" prefigures the movement motif of the Distances sequence.

57 Okigbo says in the introduction to Labyrinths, p.XII that Distances was written "after my first experience of surgery under anaesthesia."
The poet himself has described *Distances* as "a poem of homecoming" but of "homecoming in its spiritual and psychic aspect.... The self that suffers, that experiences, ultimately finds fulfilment in a form of psychic union with the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative. The process is one of sensual anaesthesia, of total liberation from all physical and emotional tension; the end result, a state of aesthetic grace." *(pp.XI-XII).*

**DISTANCES I** *(p.53).*

FROM FLESH into phantom on the horizontal stone
I was the sole witness to my homecoming...

Serene lights on the other balcony:
redolent fountains bristling with signs -

But what does my divine rejoicing hold?
A bowl of incense, a nest of fireflies?

I was the sole witness to my homecoming...

For in the inflorescence of the white
chamber, a voice, from very far away,
chanted; and the chamber descanted, the birthday of earth,
paddled me home through some dark
labyrinth, from laughter to the dream.

Miner into my solitude,
incarnate voice of the dream,
you will go,
with me as your chief acolyte,
again into the anti-hill...

I was the sole witness to my homecoming...

In *Distances I* the poet/protagonist announces his home-coming which is the return of the prodigal, and the consummation of his quest for union with the goddess. It is achieved "on the horizontal stone," which recalls the
surgical imagery of "Siren Limits" IV: "when you have finished/&
done up my stitches, wake me near the altar,/& this poem will
be finished..." After the surgical probing and healing the
protagonist wakes up in this poem, but paradoxically, this
waking up takes the form of moving "from flesh into phantom."

First, the scene of the homecoming is delineated. At
the centre is the horizontal stone on which the patient is
anaesthetized. Then there are the "serene lights on the other
balcony" and "redolent fountains bristling with signs." Both
"lights" and "fountains" are symbols which have appeared in
earlier poems. "Light", may be taken here to symbolize ins­
piration or illumination; and fountain, as it is used in "Lus­
tra" (p.14), is the source, the fountain-head of the inspira­
tion. 'Redolent' may be applied here in its two senses. "Foun­
tain" is water image and recalls "Lobsters and shells/in iodine
smell" of "Watermaid" I (p.10), which is a description of
the first appearance of the Watermaid, the goddess in whose
domain the protagonist now resides. "Bristling" continues
the "fountain" image. 'Bristling' is a small sardine-like
fish, and has a natural association with fountain. The pro­
tagonist is therefore describing analogically in terms of the
bristlings in a fountain, the large number of signs which he
sees.

Although what he sees is enchanting, the protagonist is
apparently incapable, at this stage, of saying what it is that
enchants him. This provokes the question: "But what does my divine rejoicing hold? A bowl of incense, a nest of fire flies"? The "rejoicing" is "divine" by association with the goddess, as is "bowl of incense." In Distances II (p. 53), Death the chief celebrant is surrounded by "a cloud of incense." "Nest of fireflies" on the other hand, introduces an element of doubt. Fireflies are luminous as they fly but lose their phosphorescence when they are caught and their wings shut. The question then is: what is all the excitement about? Is the nearness to the goddess, implied in "cloud of incense" not illusory, like the light from fireflies? Or like the previous illusion in "Newcomer" (p. 18), and "Siren Limits" I (p. 23).

The description continues in the next stanza, the appeal being, this time, to the sense of sight and hearing. The stanza recounts the journey through the "dark labyrinth" to the presence of the diety, the journey whose end has been announced in the second line of the poem. The white chamber is, no doubt, beautiful with beautiful flowers carefully arranged, and 'bristling with signs." The "voice" which the protagonist hears is the voice that guides him on this journey.

Anozie (p. 167) suggests that the "inflorescence" image and the musical connotation of "descanted" show "that there exists between Nature and Art a kind of primordial nativity relationship" (also implied in the "birthday of earth").
"Paddled" picks up the water image from "fountain." Apparently the journey is made on a river, probably by canoe because the protagonist is "paddled home." This suggests immediately the crossing of a Leathan river, an idea that is confirmed by the vision of "Death" in *Distances II*. The passage is described as a "dark labyrinth" and although Okigbo links it with the "tortuous" journey to the Long Juju shrine at Aro Chukwu, it is the protagonist's passage from symbolic death to the immortality of poetic creation; "from flesh into phantom;" and "from laughter to the dream." This is also consistent with the Aro Chukwu oracle association as it is this oracle that Igbo people consult for mystical revelation.

In the next stanza the poet identifies the voice which "from far away,/CHANTED . . ." as the "incarnate voice of the dream," and also "miner into my solitude." "Solitude" is probably suggested by "sole witness." But it has occurred so often before in the sequence as to acquire some significance: "Me to the orangery/solitude invites" ("Passage," p. 4); "but the solitude in me remembers Kepkanly . . ." ("Initiations," p. 7);"And out of the solitude/Voice and soul with selves unite . . ." ("Siren Limits" II, p. 24). In all these occurrences it is associated with the poet and poetic creation.

"Dream" recalls the moment of illumination described in "Siren Limits" I (p. 23), in the image of the "weaverbird/
Summoned at offside of/dream remembered." Therefore "dream" may be equated to inspiration or illumination and it is "incarnate" because the poet now hears it in the form of a human voice, an example of Okigbo's practice of objectifying his abstract thoughts and meditations. The two lines, "Miner into my solitude,/incarnate voice of the dream..." therefore refer to the poet's inspirer who may be identified with the goddess, especially as the poet requests in the next line: "you will go/with me as your chief acolyte,/again into the ant-hill..." The ant hill is where the poet will learn the mysteries of his office as chief priest of the goddess. 

The open-ended sentence "I was the sole witness to my homecoming..." is repeated three times in this poem. It emphasizes two points: the fact of the poet/protagonist's homecoming as well as the solitude which is essential for his union with the Watermaid. The use of the past tense of the verb "to be" implies a progression in time. The 'homecoming' is reported as an event in the past. At the consummation of the union in Distances VI the tense changes to the simple present making the event a fact of an eternal present.

59 D.S. Izevbaye (CEAL:p.136) compares this journey with the underground journey through an ant-hole by initiate masqueraders in search of knowledge from their ancestors. G.T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Eastern Nigeria (Frank Cass. London, 1921), p.241, says that the initiates are told that to be 'drawn down into the spirit world... they will be made to pass through the hole of an "agbisili" (a tiny insect) and thence be obliged to cross a very wide river on a thread."
The description of the scene is continued in Distances II.

DEATH LAY in ambush that evening in that island;
voice sought its echo that evening in that island.

And the eye lost its light,
the light lost its shadow.

For the wind, eternal suitor of dead leaves,
unrolled his bandages to the finest swimmer...

It was an evening without flesh or skeleton;
an evening with no silver bells to its tale;
without lanterns, an evening without buntings;
and it was an evening without age or memory—

for we are talking of such commonplaces,
and on the brink of such great events...

And in the freezing tuberoses of the white
chamber, eyes that had lost their animal
colour, havoc of eyes of incandescent rays,
pinned me, cold, to the marble stretcher,

until my eyes lost their blood
and the blood lost its odour,

and the everlasting fire from the oblong window
forgot the taste of ash in the air's marrow:

anguish and solitude...
Smothered, my scattered
cry, the dancers,
lost among their own
snares; the faces,
the hands held captive;
the interspaces
reddening with blood;

and behind 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 locusts.

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

She bathed her knees in the blood of attendants: her smock in entrails of ministrants...

The time is evening, an evening that is ominous, macabre and dead; an evening presaging "great events." The place is an island which shares the qualities of the evening. It is a deathly island where attributes disintegrate: "the voice sought its echo ... /And the eye lost its light,/ the light lost its shadow."

The situation described in the next two lines is a storm situation. On the island the wind sets the dead leaves tumbling over and on the sea it sets up huge turbulent waves described by the poet in the image of bandaging which recalls the surgical imagery with which the sequence begins. Both images of the leaves and the waves imply some inevitability. Struck by the wind their movement is as irresistible as it is inevitable; a situation which is analogous to the poet's journey to the goddess.

The next eight lines can be read at two levels. First, they may be read as a concretizing of the poet's experiences
under anaesthesia of surgery by an apparently indifferent surgeon, the "eyes" being those of the surgeon as the terrified patient sees them before losing consciousness.

At the symbolic level, and more consistent with the quest motif, the scene moves now into the "white chamber" of Distances I, and the "eyes that had lost their animal/colour, havoc of eyes of incandescent rays..." are the eyes of "Death" who, in the first line of this poem, is said to be lying in ambush. "Eyes of incandescent rays" is analogous to Eliot's "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams..." 60

Both Eliot's and Okigbo's speakers are in the "dream kingdom." Okigbo refers to this twice in Distances I in the phrases "from laughter to the dream" and "incarnate voice of the dream." In Eliot's poem the "eyes" are the eyes of those "who have crossed/With direct eyes, to death's other kingdom," 61 the reality which in Okigbo's poem is symbolized by the dazzling eyes of "Death" or the "White Queen," which petrify the protagonist, removing all the life-blood in him. But as with the "wind/leaf" symbolism the confrontation is inevitable as it is the only way of "overcoming the shadow" and achieving the union sought. The "eye" symbolism also recalls Eliot's

60 T.S. Eliot. "The Hollow Men" II Selected Poems p. 77. The "original 1924 draft of 'The Hollow Men' contained the lines "Eyes that last I saw in tears/The wind sprang up at four o'clock/This is the dead land."

61 "The Hollow Men" I. Selected Poems, p. 77.
line "human kind cannot bear much reality" ("Burnt Norton" I) which occurs in a stanza describing a "moment of potential discovery,"62 comparable to the situation of the protagonist in this poem. "The everlasting fire from the oblong window" is the fire of purgation. It is not very clear what Okigbo means in the next line, "...forgot the taste of ash in the air's marrow." "Ash" is the symbol of the tree of life and creative wand as well as of the dust to which the flesh returns at death. "Marrow" is the fatty substance in the cavities of bones which are a source of food and vitality. It would be consistent to regard both "ash" and "marrow" as referring to the paradox of this creative moment. It is both death and life and is comparable to Eliot's moment of the intersection of time with eternity, of life with death; the moment of the incarnation of the Word.

The next stanza recapitulates the protagonist's "anguish," "solitude" and "scattered cry" as he remains in this dazed state, and the horror he sees around him. The bare outline of the horrors is given, and as is usual with Okigbo, each phrase is a picture that tells a story. The horrors are graded: from "the dancers lost among their own/snares," and "the faces,/the hands held captive;/the interspaces reddening with blood." to "the

Anozie (p. 169) suggests that the message of this experience as it relates to Okigbo's poem "seems to be that an artist cannot face the ultimate illumination of the symbol (The Word) just as mankind cannot, in fact, bear the ultimate reality, (Death)."
rolling heads cut like fruits," the "severed members, numerous as locusts" and the "dismembered joints of the ministers piled high/like split woods left to dry." The horrors are perpetrated by Death herself, "the chief celebrant", who the poet/protagonist espies "behind them all/in smock of white cotton.../in a cloud of incense,/paring her fingernails...", bathing "her knees in the blood of attendants;/her smock in entrails of ministers." These horrors intensify his anguish and solitude but there is also the implication of the inevitability of and, in fact, necessity for all this since it is only through such death and purification that immortality (of art) can be achieved.

DISTANCES III (p.56).

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

On the stone steps on the marble
beyond the balcony
prophets martyrs lunatics
like the long stride of the evening

At the clearing dantini
in the garden dillettanti;
vendors princes negritude
politicians in the tall wood...

In Distances III (p.56), the pilgrims are described. Although they are pilgrims to the same shrine they belong to
different categories. The image of the confused mass of dismembered bodies is recaptured in "the scattered line of pilgrims" (l. 1). The protagonist sees himself as one of these "pilgrims/bound for Shibboleth." Shibboleth is taken from the Book of Judges, XII: 6, where it was used by the Gileads to detect the Ephraimites who denied their own nationality and wanted to cross over the Jordan where the Gileads had occupied. As they could not pronounce "Shibboleth" correctly they betrayed themselves and were slain. The quest for Shibboleth in this poem is quest for the Word, for artistic salvation. The poet/pilgrim identifies himself as carrying "the crucifix/the torn branch and the censer," all of which are religious symbols. These symbols, although essentially Christian, are not used for any Christian purpose. The censer identifies the protagonist as a "ministrant," the chief acolyte of the goddess and the crucifix denotes more his suffering than his Christian faith. This kind of appropriation of Christian symbols for secular concerns represents Okigbo's paradoxical attitude to Christianity, he accepts the ceremonial and aesthetic aspects while at the same time rejecting the theology.

The idea of the medley of pilgrims implied in "the scattered line of pilgrims is also present in the confused smell of "camphor iodine chloroform," not marked off by commas in the usual way. As all these smells are mixed it is not easy to distinguish them but all are associated with pain in the mind of the protagonist, for he says "either sting me in the
"Iodine" and "chloroform" have been mentioned before, "lobsters and shells/in iodine smell" ("Watermaid" p. 10), and "Distances of her armpit-fragrance/Turn chloroform enough for my patience..." ("Siren Limits" IV p. 27). In each case they are associated with nearness to the "watermaid/goddess."

"Camphor shares their quality by collocation. One effect of this combination is to recall the protagonist's surrender to the destructive power of the goddess; to "Death herself" who has been described as killing all her ministrants. (p. 55).

In the next movement the pilgrims are categorized in the manner in which Dante categorizes the various people in the circles that make up his "Inferno." If Okigbo's grouping is viewed vertically, the "prophets martyrs lunatics" are at the top "on the stone steps on the marble/beyond the balcony."

Although the poet/protagonist is not specifically mentioned it is clear that he belongs to this group of the select few. In "Initiations" (p. 9), "prophet" and "poet" are placed together and the association of poets with lunatics dates back to Plato. The way "prophets martyrs lunatics" are lumped together seems to suggest, as in the case of "camphor iodine chloroform," that they are synonymous. The poet/prophet is carrying a "crucifix" the symbol of the greatest martyrdom. The pilgrims in this group are a select few but they are also a suffering group.

63 This is the subject of the dialogue between Socrates and Ion in Plato's Ion. Okigbo himself makes the same kind of association in the MBARI edition of "Newcomer" where he has the line: "I am mad with the same madness as the moon and my neighbour," the neighbour referred to being Peter Thomas, his poet-friend.
Below them, "at the clearing," are the "dantini" and lower still, "in the garden," are the "dilettanti." The first striking thing about the two words is their phonological similarity. "Dantini" may have been suggested by the similarity between this journey to the vision of Okigbo's goddess and Dante's journey to the vision of Beatrice. It may be recalled that Dante's progress is from circle to circle. If a parallel is drawn between Dante's and Okigbo's groups, the "Dantini" are just outside "the wood of suicide" (Okigbo's "tall wood") and are like Dante's inhabitants of the "abominable sand" who are "violent against God, art and nature." "Dilettanti" is a plural form of dilettante which means a person with a smattering knowledge of the fine arts, an amateur. On Okigbo's scale of artists the "dantini" fall between the specialists and the amateurs. It could also be that he places Dante in this group.

At the bottom, "in the tall wood," are the "vendors princes negritude politicians." In "Initiations " (p. 7), Okigbo grouped "liberal politicians" among "all who are good doing nothing at all." The politicians in the tall wood are the same as those of "Initiations " and all the others in the group take on their attribute by collocation. It is useful to recall here Okigbo's levity towards "negritude" (p. 8, supra).

In the next poem, Distances IV (p. 57), the poet/pilgrim is at the archway which alone can lead him to the goddess.

AND AT THE archway
a triangular lintel
of solid alabaster
enclosed in a square
inscribed in a circle
with a hollow centre,
above the archway
yawning shutterless
like celestial pincers
like a vast countenance:

the only way to go
through the marble archway
to the catatonic pingpong
of the evanescent halo...

And beyond the archway
like pentecostal orbs
resplendent far distant
in the intangible void
an immense crucifix
of phosphorescent mantles:

after we had formed
then only the forms were formed
and all the forms
were formed after our forming...

In "Siren Limits" III (p.26), the "archway" symbol is the
"arched-gate" through which the little stream (the poet) must
pass to join"the lake." As in "Initiations" (p.6),
Okigbo uses a complex of geometric figures to express in
concrete terms ideas and essences which would otherwise be
difficult to convey in words. The archway is a semi-circle,
then there is the "triangular lintel of solid alabaster"
and enclosing all these is"a square" which is in turn"inscri-
ibed in a circle/with a hollow centre." Although these
figures puzzle the poet/pilgrim they contain information
relating to the quest. They carry the road sign which reads:
"the only way to go/through the marble archway/to the catatonic
pingpong/of the evanescent halo ...." This sign assures the

64 See Appendix II for Okigbo's arrangement of this sign
poet that he is on the right path because "archway" and "evanescent halo" are already connected, in his experience, with the goddess. In "Watermaid" (p. 11) she is "crowned with moonlight," she wears "white light about her;" and evanescence is the quality associated with her in the same poem: "So brief her presence/match flare in winds: breath." Again the "triangular lintel" is like a pyramid, a delta, which according to Freud is the female principle.

Having been assured of being on the right path, the poet/pilgrim moves to another riddle, this time a sign that relates to the essence of the quest. It is also inscribed on a complex of geometric symbols. It lies "beyond the archway/like pentecostal orbs" and it has the form of "an immense crucifix/of phosphorescent mantles." It has the quality of evanescence hinted at in the first sign, "the evanescent halo..." It exists in the intangible void and the inscription on it is: "after we had formed/then only the forms were formed/and all the forms/were formed after our forming..."

Anozie has pointed out that the symbol itself "is not a crucifix... but ordinary words calligraphically structured to resemble a crucifix... They are therefore words to which the poet has given a certain intensely visible form of existence - here a crucifix. Thus he formed them after they "were formed" and they are meant to express nothing but that form." 65

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65 Anozie, p. 165.
See also Appendix III for the arrangement of this sign as it was published in Transition Vol. 4, No. 16, 1964.
The tense structure is meant to show these three stages of forming: the past perfect "had formed", the past "were formed" and the present perfect, that is, the form in which they are in the present, the form they are intended to express.

The Crucifix is the Christian symbol for redemption, but the crucifix is not the physical metal or wood of which it is made but an essence more transcendental than these. It is the "scar of the kiss and of the two swords"; the intersection of the timeless with time and of man with God. It is clear that the quest in which the poet/pilgrim is engaged is not a quest for salvation in the Christian sense but for artistic salvation. The sign must therefore relate to the nature of this salvation. As in the case of the crucifix, the poet gives shape (form) to words that have already been formed and this shape (form) is not the words or the letters with which they are formed, but represents some essence.

What Okigbo is doing in this poem illustrates Eliot's claim that words are inadequate to express elusive metaphysical notions which, according to him, make words to "strain, crack and sometimes break under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place/Will not stay still." Like Eliot, Okigbo knows that the only way to convey such notions effectively is through the form or pattern of words, as it is only through these that "words or music reach/The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness." Anozie has also

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67 Ibid.
pointed out the similarity between Okigbo's passage and Eliot's passage in "Ash Wednesday V" where he is trying to express an abstract notion:

In the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent  
If the unheard, unspoken  
Word is unspoken, unheard;  
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,  
The Word without a word, the word within  
The world and for the world;  

It is interesting that both passages occur when the poets are describing moments when the protagonists "seem to breathe the air of home."  

In Distances V (p. 58) the ascent is also a descent, because "each step is the step of the mule in the abyss--"

The difficulty of movement is implied in the image of the sweating mule: "Sweat over hoof". The mule is known for its obstinacy, and the association connotes reluctance on the part of the poet/pilgrim. But now he passes "the archway the oval the panel oblong." Two of these, "the archway" and "the panel oblong" are by now familiar because of their repeated occurrence in the sequence. "The oval" placed between them shares their characteristics, a usual technique of Okigbo to place a new image in familiar context which will explain it.

The scene in the "sanctuary at the earth's molten bowel" is perplexing; every description here seems a question mark. There is for instance the paradox of "sanctuary" and "earth's

68 Other examples in Eliot's poetry are to be found in "Burnt Norton" I where Eliot is defining the relation between time; present, past and future, and in his theory of the intersection of the timeless with time in "Burnt Norton" II.

69 Helen Gardner, The Art of T.S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), p. 120.
molten bowel" and of "funerary rose."

To be able to have an idea of the state Okigbo is describing here it becomes necessary to examine his pattern of images. "Sanctuary," "grape or vine," "tabernacle's silence," "censers" and "kiss of the two swords" derive from Distances IV and suggest a tabernacle, the store house of the Blessed Sacrament, whose door is usually inscribed with a crucifix. "Censers" are also to be found around the tabernacle as the Blessed Sacrament is usually censed during High Mass or Benediction in Roman Catholic ritual. The wine of the Eucharist is made from grape, the fruit of vine. Such associations are appropriate at the conclusion of a quest for salvation suggesting as they do a discovery of the hidden symbol which is Christ. "Abyss," "earth's molten bowel," "funerary rose," "tunnel" and "molten stone" recapture the horrors of the slain pilgrims in Distances IV. Funeral is the logical sequel to death and the idea of the descent into hell is called up by "molten stone." The state being described is that of the "dark night of the soul" which precedes illumination and is a preparation for it. In the abyss "each sigh is time's stillness/mated and sealed/in proud oblation." This is analogous to Eliot's still point, the "intersection of the timeless with time" being represented here as "the kiss of the two swords" and "the stillness of the kiss..." The question which is in "the inkwell" (sea) and whose answer is on "the monocle"
(sky) is the question of the Word or Logos, the question in the tabernacle's silence, the question as to what is in the "sanctuary" where the poet/pilgrim has now arrived. It is an immense question, elemental, embracing "the inkwell" and "the monocle." "The burden of the pawn,/on the molten stone" recalls "so comes John the Baptist/with a bowl of salt water/preaching the gambit:" of "Initiations" (p.6). The pilgrims have pawned suffering "on the molten stone" for the vision of the unanswerable question in the tabernacle's silence.

It may be said that this poem is a description of the moment in the white chamber just before the poet/pilgrim is received into the presence of the goddess. The journey to this chamber has been beset with suffering, even with self-immolation. To make this state concrete Okigbo has used familiar images especially the image of Christ in the tabernacle: "the Word unable to speak a word," and all the ritual associated with the communion rite of the Catholic religion.

Distances VI marks the consummation of the quest. It opens with the repetitious incantatory language of visionaries:

DISTANCES VI (p.59).

THE SEASON the season
the tall wood the clearing
the season the season
the stone steps the dream...

Come into my cavern,
Shake the mildew from your hair;
Let your ear listen:
My mouth calls from a cavern...
Lo, it is the same blood that flows...

Shadows distances labyrinths violences,
Skeletal oblong
of my sentient being, I receive you
in my perforated
mouth of a stranger empty of meaning,
stones without juice -

the goat still knows its fodder,
the leopards on its trail -

For it is the same blood,
through the same orifices,
the same branches
trembling intertwined,
and the same faces
in the interspaces.

And it is the same breath, liquid, without acolyte,
like invisible mushrooms on stone surfaces.

And at this chaste instant of delineated anguish,
the same voice, importunate, aglow with the goddess -

unquenchable, yellow, darkening homeward
like a cry of wolf above crumbling houses -

strips the dream naked,
bares the entrails;

and in the orangery of immense corridors,
I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid,

and walk along your feverish, solitary shores,
seeking, among your variegated teeth,
the tuberose of my putrescent laughter:

I have fed out of the drum
I have drunk out of the cymbal

I have entered your bridal
chamber; and lo,

I am the sole witness to my homecoming.
A close look shows that the poet is recapitulating images already familiar to the reader. What he is saying in the repeated "the season" is that the proper time has arrived, that is, the time for the long awaited union with the goddess.

In Distances III the pilgrims were grouped in descending order from the stone step through the clearing and garden down to the tall wood. In this poem the order is reversed, this time moving from the base to the apex. Those nearest to "the dream" are the pilgrims on the "stone steps on the marble/beyond the balcony/prophets martyrs lunatics." This is the group in which, by association, the poet/protagonist put himself in "Initiations" (p.9). From his position he hears the goddess saying:

    come into my cavern,
    Shake the mildew from your hair;
    Let your ear listen:
    My mouth calls from a cavern...

If the poet/pilgrim would hesitate to accept this welcome, the encouraging revelation from the goddess: "Lo, it is the same blood that flows..." dispels all forms of doubt and he is ready to receive her embrace.

The next three stanzas continue to establish this kinship, using words, phrases and images already familiar to both the pilgrim and the reader. "Shadows" recalls "shadow of rain
over man with woman." "Watermaid" (p.10), "Distances" recalls "Distances of her arm-pit fragrance" (p.27). "Labyrinths" recalls the passage from "flesh into phantom" when the poet is paddled "home through some dark/labyrinth." (Distances I, p.53). "Violences" recapitulates the violences of Distances II (p.55) where heads of the ministrants of the goddess' "rolled like cut fruits..." "Skeletal oblong" is a variation of "panel oblong" and its association with Anna, the poet's guardian spirit. "Skeletal" is appropriate in this context of symbolic death although the goddess is still capable of sense perception ("my sentient being").

What all these correspondences have in common is their association with the goddess. The speaker of "I receive you/in my perforated/mouth of a stranger" is the goddess herself. It seems she is reminding the poet/pilgrim that she is the same object of his quest and is doing so by recalling significant experiences of the poet during the quest. The images of "the goat still knows its fodder" and "the leopards on its trail" recall the image of the he-goat-on-heat ("Siren Limits" IV, p.23), and the identification of the goddess with "lioness" in "Watermaid" II (p.11). It is the same lioness of "Siren Limits" IV "who destroyed the hero’s second self." It is the same symbolic destruction that is going to be re-enacted here in the final union with "Death herself." In the next line "For" serves as a link between "leopards" in the
preceeding stanza and the rest of the sentence: "...it is
the same blood/through the same orifices,/the same branches/
trembling intertwined,/and the same faces/in the interspas-
ces..." This moment of the goddess' familiarising gesture
is to the poet/pilgrim the "chaste instant of delineated
anguish," the moment of intense excitement when his anguish
seems to have been given physical form, as on paper or canv-
as; he recognizes the voice as "the same voice, importunate,
aglow with the goddess..." who now "strips the dream naked"
and "bare the entrails."

This is the climax of his quest, the moment of revela-
tion and of union with the goddess. The poet describes this
ecstatic moment of union in an image which is part erotic and
part ritualistic:

and in the orangery of immense corridors
I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid
and walk along your feverish, solitary shores.

seeking, among your variegated teeth,
the tuberose of my putrescent laughter:

I have fed out of the drum
I have drunk out of the cymbal

I have entered your bridal
chamber; and lo,

I am the sole witness to my homecoming...

Although "orangery" recalls "me to the orangery solitude in-
vites" ("Passage"II, p.4) it also has colour (reddish-yellow)
and bridal (orange blossom) connotations. The latter is con-
firmed by the line, "I have entered your bridal chamber" which
occurs later and by the collocation with "immense corridors."
The union is given form in the washing of the feet in the fountain-head. The "little stream" of "Siren Limits" III (p.26), has now entered the lake. "Feverish" and "solitary" are transfer-red from the poet/pilgrim to the "maid" because it is the poet/protagonist that has always been associated with solitude and his excitement at this union is equivalent to a feverish condition. "Variegated" picks up the colour imagery again and is a description of leaves with different patches of colour resulting from inadequate supply of chlorophyll. It is not clear why Okigbo says "variegated teeth" in this context. It may have been suggested to him by "perforated mouth" which the goddess has earlier used for herself. In the same way "laughter" may also have been suggested by the mouth/teeth association. If the "laughter" is "putrescent", obviously suggested by tuberose, then there is a note of irony in the union.

However, the poet/protagonist has now achieved the object of his quest, he is now at one with the goddess and with himself.

He is alone at this consummation: "I am the sole witness to my homecoming." This line is interesting in two ways. By its lone position it enacts physically on paper the meaning it is intended to portray. Also Okigbo follows here Eliot's method of showing shifts of meaning in his refrains. This refrain occurred earlier as: "I was the sole witness to my home-coming?" There it occurred after a line which describes the
process of the homecoming. It should be understood that at that point the protagonist was telling a story of what happened in the past. Here the reader is face-to-face with the protagonist united with his goddess, united in the ever-present time. He has achieved completeness which is a state which does not seek anything beyond itself.

This is his symbolic death which is the entrance to a new and revitalized life like the voice that is reborn in "Siren Limits" III (p.25).

This poem marks the end of the quest for a unity of being which started in Heavensgate. From this point Okigbo's poetry moves into the subject of the social responsibilities of the poet as a person who has deeper insight.
FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE

Although the second part of Limits, subtitled "Fragments out of the Deluge" was published before Distances it does not fit into the Heavensgate - "Siren Limits" - Distances sequence which is concerned with the protagonist's quest for a unity of being. But it is also related, thematically, to that sequence. Its theme, "the relationship between the poet/prophet/messiah figure and his community and its history" looks back to Heavensgate. In Heavensgate it is the demise of the poet/protagonist's culture symbolised in the death of the "earth mother;" and his alienation from his traditional and cultural milieu that impel him as sunbird "to mourn /a mother on a spray." This death came as a result of the invasion by Christianity and its allied Western culture. To become himself means for the poet/protagonist a return to his cultural origin as a penitent prodigal seeking animation from his traditional deity, which in the poem-sequence, means union with this deity. The union takes the form of symbolic death in Distances V1. But this death is also a passage into immortality; a union of "voice", "soul", and "selves" ("SirenLimits"II) which is necessary for him to perform his duties of poet/prophet/messiah. "Fragments" describes the protagonist in the context of his performance of these duties within his society.

The sequence begins with the theme of resurrection. The parallels drawn between the protagonist and Christ in "Fragments" V1 implies that the resurrection motif of "Fragments" V is
inspired by the Christian story of the Resurrection although there is an attempt by Okigbo to give it a non-Christian slant since the poet/protagonist has rejected Christianity. The poet/protagonist now also prophet/messiah is rejected by his people ("Fragments" VI, VII and IX). But in spite of this rejection he is their prophet ("Fragments" VIII), warning them against the coming of the missionaries described in the imagery of predatory eagles who, when they arrive, seek out and kill the protagonist as "sunbird" and then kill the "twin-gods" ("Fragments X"). Since the protagonist as "sunbird" has achieved indestructibility, his voice is heard again, "From the LIMITS of the dream... /Where the caress does not reach" (Fragments XII), "caress" being the poet's ironic way of describing the destructive blows of the invading "eagles."

Looked at this way, it can be said that Heavensgate begins where "Fragments" ends, and "Fragments" becomes an intrinsic part of the Heavensgate - "Siren Limits" - Distances - "Fragments out of the Deluge" sequence, thus giving the sequence a cyclic movement.

Thematically, "Fragments" falls into three units. "Fragments" V and XII are concerned with the resurrection motif; "Fragments" VII, X and XI describe the coming of the "eagles" and their destructive action; and "Fragments" VI, VII and XI deal with the rejection of the messiah.

The 1962 version of the "Fragments" sequence had the epigraph "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," which
is taken from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, line 430. This suggests that some affinity exists between the two poems. Thematically, both poems are concerned with the disintegration of cultures and serve the poets as succour in situations which they decry, yet are unable to do anything to improve. In technique also, they are similar. Both are fragments gleaned from the rag-bag of the poets' diverse reading. The influence of Eliot's allusiveness is nowhere illustrated in Okigbo's poetry more than in the first poem of this sequence, "Fragments" v. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Okigbo tries to explain his allusions by proliferating notes on his various sources.

**FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE**

ON AN empty sarcophagus  
  hewn out of alabaster,  
A branch of fennel on an  
  empty sarcophagus...

Nothing suggests accident  
where the beast  
Is finishing her rest...

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...

As Nwoga has pointed out this poem is "made up of four disjointed images."71 A close reading shows, however, that

71 *JCL* VII, p.96.
they are not really disjointed. As is usual with Okigbo, the various images have a common theme, the resurgence of life.

The images are like different slides to illustrate a single notion or idea. According to Okigbo's note, the image in the first stanza is a reference to the resurrection of the Egyptian Pharaoh who "is said to have metamorphosed into a fennel branch."72

The second stanza looks back, as Okigbo points out in the note, to "Siren Limits"72 where the protagonist surrendered himself to the lioness. According to the notes, "the beast" of this poem is the lioness of "Siren Limits"72 who destroyed the hero's second self." The theme of resurrection in this poem therefore follows from the destruction of the "hero" in "Siren Limits"72.

There is also a suggestion in the second stanza that the act of destruction was premeditated; "Nothing suggests an accident/where the beast/Is finishing her rest..." This recalls Thomas Becket's "A Christian martyrdom is never an accident."73

The third stanza presents another image, that of scenic beauty, of "smoke of ultramarine and amber/...above the fields after/Moonlit rains..." and of the "radiance of a king." The note says that "the hero is like Gilgamesh, legendary king of Uruk in Mesopotamia and first human hero in Literature."74

72 Labyrinths, p.28.


74 Labyrinths, p.28
The Gilgamesh story has a dominant resurrection motif and is appropriate in this context. The literature in which this "first human hero" appears is the Gilgamesh Epic, "the story of the king who did not want to die." Briefly the story is as follows:

Gilgamesh was supposed to have ruled at Uruk in the 3rd millennium B.C. He is mentioned in much later Sumerian list of Kings as reigning after the flood. The name Gilgamesh is Sumerian and is translated variously by scholars as "father hero" and "the old one, the hero". According to the epic story he was part divine and part human. In order to curb his oppressive rule the God Anu caused the creation of Enkidu, a wild man, who at first lived among animals. Soon, however he was initiated into city going ways by a courtesan, and he goes to Uruk where Gilgamesh awaits him.

There was a trial of strength between them in which Gilgamesh was the victor. Because Gilgamesh rejected the marriage proposal of Ishtar, the goddess of love she sends the divine bull to kill him, but with Enkidu's aid he killed the bull. Enkidu later dreamt that the gods, Anu, Ea and Shamsh had decided, on the instigation of Enlil that of the two friends, it is he, Enkidu who must die for slaying the bull. He later fell ill and died. After Enkidu's funeral, Gilgamesh undertook a dangerous journey in search of Utnapishtin, the survivor of the Babylonian flood, in order to learn from him how to escape death. Utnapishtin showed Gilgamesh where to find a plant which renews youth. After he had obtained this plant it was seized by a serpent, and he returns, saddened, to Uruk. Later, Enkidu returned to life and told the grim story of the ways of the underworld.

If, according to the notes, Enkidu is second self to Gilgamesh, the relationship between this stanza and the giant fen-nel of the first stanza becomes clear. Both are accounts of resurrection to life. Also the "second self" destroyed by "the beast" in the second stanza becomes meaningful within the pattern of this poem. This second self parallels Enkidu described

75 The Gilgamesh story here follows the notes on the Gilgamesh Epic in The Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 10, p.146.
by Okigbo as "companion and second self of Gilgamesh." The last line also becomes clear: resurrection whether it be of the Pharaoh, or of Enkidu, or of the protagonist, is a recurrent phenomenon, and is therefore "no new thing either..."

As in most poems of Okigbo, what may confuse a reader about this poem is the abolition of transition from one image to another, a technique reminiscent of both Pound and Eliot. In Okigbo's case as in Eliot's the images have common themes or attributes.

"Fragments" V looks forward to "Fragments X, XI and XII which describe the killing and resurrection of the "sunbird" and the killing of the "twin-gods." But the coming of the agents (invaders) of death is announced by the visionary sunbird.

FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE VIII (p. 31).

BUT THE sunbird repeats
Over the oilbean shadows:

A fleet of eagles,
over the oilbean shadows,
Holds the square
under curse of their breath.

Breaks of bronze, wings
of hard-tanned felt,
The eagles flow
over man-mountains,
Steep walls of voices,
horizons;
The eagles furrow
dazzling over the voices
With wings like
combs in the wind's hair

76 Labyrinths, p. 28.
Out of the solitude, the fleet,
Out of the solitude,
Intangible like silk thread of sunlight,
The eagles ride low,
Resplendent...resplendent;
And small birds sing in shadows,
Wobbling under their bones...

In "Fragments" VIII the sunbird, as the prophetic voice, announces the coming of the "fleet of eagles." Both the "sunbird" and the "eagles" are "over the oilbean shadows." But while the sunbird's function is that of protection; he is warning of the approach of the eagles like the birds that nested on the walls of Rome to warn the Romans of impending attack; the function of the "eagles" is destructive, they hold "the square/under curse of their breath."

Nwoga has pointed out that the qualities and attributes of these "eagles" are those "which can justify the interpretations relating the image to colonial missionary and economic exploitation." They are both awe-inspiring; "beaks of hard bronze, wings/of hard-tanned felt," and fascinating, with their easy movement implied in "flow" (1.9) and "furrow" (1.13); and their dazzling "wings like combs in the wind's hair" (11.14-16).

"Solitude" is a state which has already been associated with the sunbird in "Passage"II (p.4). It is appropriate here in a situation which is the prelude to the death of the "mother" who the poet as "sunbird" is invited to mourn in the earlier poem. From his solitary, visionary position the

77 Nwoga, JCL, p.98. Such interpretation will be found in Romanus Egudu, ALT No. 6, pp. 14-24 and Anozie, p. 96.
"sunbird" sees the fleet of eagles as "intangible like silk thread of sunlight" riding low, /Resplendent... (11.19-21) and contrasts them with the "small birds" that "sing in shadows" apparently insensible of the approach of the eagles but already in the clutches of disaster, "wobbling under their bones..."

From the point of view of history this invasion is what has made the poet/protagonist a prodigal as it led to his abandoning his native deities for an alien religion. It is also what has made "the people" of "Fragments" VI "mongrel breeds" because the coming of the white-man has made them what Nwoga has described as the "uncertain products of two cultural and political traditions."

"Fragments" X gives further details of the invasion.

FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE X (p. 33)

AND TO US they came -
Malisons, malisons, mair than ten -
And climbed the bombax
And killed the Sunbird.

And they scanned the forest of oilbean,
Its approach; surveyed its high branches...

And they entered into the forest,
And they passed through the forest of oilbean
And found them, the twin-gods of the forest...

And the beasts broke -
Malisons, malisons, mair than ten -
And dawn-gust grumbled,
Fanning the grove
Like a horse-tail-man,
Like handmaid of dancers,
Fanning their branches.
Their talons they drew out of their scabbard,  
Upon the tree trunks, as if on fire-clay,  
Their beaks they sharpened;  
And spread like eagles their felt-wings,  
And descended upon the twin gods of Irkalla.

And the ornaments of him,  
And the beads about his tail;  
And the carapace of her,  
And her shell, they divided.

It is seen as a curse: "Malisons, malisons mair than ten."  
First the invaders kill the "sunbird", the prophetic voice;  
then they scan "the forest of oilbeans" discover and kill the  
"twin gods of the forest who the poet immediately identifies  
with the twin gods of Irkalla." The gods are left to "lie unsung, veiled only with mould, Behind the shrinehouse." ("Fragments"XI). The reference to the twin gods of Irkalla links the poem with the Gilgamesh story, the twin gods of Irkalla being the Sumerian gods of the under-water. It also recalls Idoto who is a water goddess. According to Okigbo's note the twin gods of the poem are "the tortoise and the python," totems for the worship of Idoto.

After killing the gods the invaders divided...the ornaments of him, /And the beads about his tail; /And the carapace of her, /And her shell..." in a way reminiscent of the casting...

78 This line which occurs twice in this poem is taken from William Cadenhead's poem, "The Laverock's Sang", in Flights of Fancy and Lays of Bon Accord (Aberdeen, 1853), pp.114-16. "Malison", variously spelt "mailison" and Malicen" means curse. The line then means "ten-fold curse," and refers to the invaded and not, as Anozia (p.96) suggests, either the poet's or the "small birds," curses on the "eagles."
of lots for Christ's garment after his crucifixion. Izevbaye has pointed out the similarity between the phrasing of this part of the poem and the Sumerian hymn about the descent of Ishtar into the abode or Irkalla, "with its implication of a reference to "the stripping of Ishtar at the seven gates." The last stanza of "Fragments" XI shows that the fate of the emasculated gods who are abandoned by their erstwhile worshippers follows a usual pattern: "Gods grow out, /Abandoned;/and so do they..." "They" refers to the twin gods and looks back to the last line of "Fragments" VI: "And this is no new thing either..." The implication is that their situation is a recurrent pattern of events in history.

This group ends as it started, with the theme of resurrection, in "Fragments XII."

FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE XII (p.35).

BUT AT THE window, outside, a shadow:

The sunbird sings again
From the LIMITS of the dream;
The Sunbird sings again
Where the caress does not reach,

of Guernica,
On whose canvas of blood,
The slits of his tongue
cling to glue...

& the cancelling out is complete.

In this poem the "sunbird", the indestructible poetic/prophetic voice is heard again, this time from beyond the reach

of the "eagles." In a way this means a defeat for the victors. There is, after all, an area where they cannot reach. This is the point of the last line: "& the cancelling out is complete." The subject of the song of the sunbird is important. It sings of "Guernica/on whose canvas of blood/The slits of his tongue/cling to glue..." "Guernica" refers to the painting by Picasso in which he depicts the horrors of Hitler's bombing in Spain, during the War in 1937, symbolized by a dying horse, a fallen warrior and an agonized singing bird. The figure of this bird serves as a link between Okigbo's poem and the painting. The "slit of tongue" of the bird implies an attempt to silence it, which is what the invading "eagles" have done. By singing "from the Limits of the dream"/where the caress does not reach..." he shows that he has escaped the carnage and now sings of its horrors, and is here playing the role of the artist.

One of the protagonist's roles is that of a messiah, a role already implied in the theme of resurrection which begins the "Fragments" sequence. In "Fragments" VI the rejection of the poet/messiah by "the people," that is, his own people, is described in images which recall Christ's experiences with the Jews.

**FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE (p. 29)**

HE STOOD in the midst of them all and appeared in true form, He found them drunken, he found none thirsty among them.

Who would add to your statue, Or in your village accept you?
They cast him in mould of iron,
And asked him to do a rock-drill -
Man out of innocence -
He drilled with dumb-bells about him.

And they took the key off
And they hid the key of...
That none may enter.

And they took the hot spoils off the battle,
And they shared the hot spoils among them:

Estates, among them;
And they were the chosen,
    mongrel breeds,
With slogan in hand, of
    won divination...

And you talk of the people:
There is none thirsty among them.

This poem is a very good example of Okigbo's use of Biblical analogies for secular ends. There are echoes of the Bible in lines like "he appeared in true form" (transfiguration) "He fed them on seed wrapped in wonders" (Christ's feeding of the multitude) and "They cast him in a mould of iron" (Christ's rejection and crucifixion).

The tension in the poem arises from the relation between the "man out of innocence" and "the people" The "man out of innocence"is a Christ-like figure, a messiah; and the phrase recalls "Initiations" 1 (p.6), where uninhibited innocence is one of the effects of Baptism and "Newcomer"1 (p.17) where the sign of the Cross reminds the protagonist of "Calvary, and the age of innocence..." "The people" are the "mongrel breeds" who, as Mwoya has suggested, may refer to
the politicians in Nigeria before the civil war, who, "drunk in the euphoria of their new freedom would not listen" to the message of the prophet/messiah: "There is none thirsty among them." "Thirsty" here recalls "thirsting for sunlight," in "Siren Limits" II and it is used by Okigbo with all the force the word "thirst" has in the fourth Beatitude: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." (Matthew 5,6). Their rejection of the prophet/messiah is responsible for the disaster hinted at in Silences and described in Paths of Thunder. The rejection is reiterated in "Fragments" IX. and the rejected prophet is now linked with the town-crier of Silences and "Hurrah for Thunder." He is likened to "a blind dog" who, Okigbo explains in a footnote, is known for his powers of prophecy; with the lyrical "Eunice at the passageway, Singing the moon to sleep over the hills" and with the mythical "dawn's charioteer/Riding with the angry stars/Toward the great sunshine."

It is the prophetic quality which links him with the "Crier" of Silences and in "Hurrah for Thunder" where the "Crier" becomes, "I, Okigbo, town-crier..." thus connecting the person of Okigbo with the shifting sunbird-prodigal-prophet-messiah figure of the whole sequence.

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FRAGMENTS OUT OF THE DELUGE (p.30)

AND FROM frame of iron,
And in mould of iron...

For he ate the dead lion,
& was within the corpse -

Which is not the point;
And who says it matters
Which way the kite flows,
Provided the movement is
Around the burning market -

And lilies
Sprouted from rosebeds,
Canalilies,
Like tombstones from pavements;

And to the cross in the void came pilgrims;
Came, floating with burnt-out tapers;

Past the village orchard where
Flannagan
Preached the Pope's message,
To where drowning nuns suspired,
Asking the key-word from stone;
& he said:

To sow the fireseed among grasses,
& lo, to keep it till it burns out...

Like"Fragments"VI this poem is built on analogies from the Bible. The two riddles which are crucial to an understanding of it are references to the Book of Judges. In Chapter 14, 8-9, Samson returned to take the wife he had found among the Philistines and, "he turned aside to see the carcasse of a lion: and behold there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcasse of the lion. And he took thereof in his hands and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them
that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion."
In Chapter 15, 4-5, Samson is denied his wife and he "went and caught three hundred foxes and took firebrands and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. And when he had set the brands on fire he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines and burnt up the shocks and also the standing corn, with the vineyard and olives." Two points from the Samson story are relevant: the unfulfilled hopes of his getting married to the daughter of Timnite and the destruction which came as a result of his disappointment. Their relevance will emerge later.

Another important image is that of the kite that "flows... /Around the burning market." This image looks forward to the last stanza, "To sow the fireseed among grasses/ & lo, to keep it till it burns out..." It also recalls the burning of the "standing corn..." in the Samson story; in all cases total destruction by fire is implied. But the image also derives from a common folk myth of the Igbos. The story, briefly, is that the kite threw his mother into a burning bush, in anger, for causing his pumpkin leaves to shrink by cooking. He later regretted this and whenever there is burning he returns to look for his mother.

81 Kites normally hover over any burning bush to catch rats, lizards and flying insects that would try to escape the burning. Nwoga (JCL Vol. VII, p.97) is wrong in suggesting that the movement of the kite is aimless, but he is right in saying that the movement connotes "failure of expectation."
The image of "the lilies" that "sprouted from rosebeds...
/Like tombstones from pavements" picks up the theme of the
resurgence of life which pervades the whole sequence. The
last of the images, that of the pilgrims... floating with
burnt-out tapers..." combines several different images in
surrealistic fashion. The pilgrims who come to the Cross in
the void with burnt-out tapers are pilgrims in search of Sal-
vation, like the pilgrims "bound for Shibboleth" in Distances
III. This cross also, like the "immense crucifix /of phospho-
rescent mantles" in Distances IV, is in the void. The cruci-
fix in Distances IV expresses a form more profound than the
materials of which it is made. Also it is on the pilgrim's
way to his homecoming; it is at the entrance to the bridal
chamber. But in this poem the pilgrims lack solidity; they
are "floating" and benighted, they have burnt-out tapers.
They pass "the village orchard where"Flannagan 'preached the
Pope's message/ To where drowning nuns suspired." When
these pilgrims ask the "key-word" from "stone" (which may
be interpreted here as 'rock' and therefore Peter, or the
Pope, as the rock on which Christ promised to build his
Church, and nearer still, Flannagan), the answer is: "To sow
the fireseed among grasses,/ & lo, to keep it till it burns
out..." That is to say, the key-word of Christianity is
destruction.
The implication is that these expectant, benighted pilgrims are moving towards their own destruction. Curiously what leads to the destruction here is not rejection of Christ but acceptance of him through the preaching of Flannagan, who Okigbo's note says "was a well-known Irish priest of the 1940s." Their situation is analogous to that of the Franciscan nuns whose drowning is recorded in Hopkins' "The Wreck of the Deutschland". which is specifically alluded to in the reference, "where the drowning nuns suspired." Another reference to the nuns in "Lament of the Silent Sisters" has the same implication of hopeless faith: "For in breakers in sea-fever compass or cross/makes a difference: certainly makes/not an escape ladder. 83

What all the images have in common is the theme of hopeless expectancy and ultimate destruction. They therefore connect appropriately with Samson's situation. The eating of the dead lion was to be a prelude to his marriage feast, but destruction followed when the Philistines deprived him of this wife.

The poet's vision of society is grim. As the title shows, the situation is comparable to the disaster of the Biblical deluge and the poems in the sequence are fragments which the poet has gleaned from the wreckage.

83 Labyrinths, p.39.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

One of the important characteristics of Okigbo's poetry which has emerged from this study is the thematic and stylistic link between all his poems. As he said in the Introduction to Labyrinths (p.XIV), his poetry is "a fable of man's perennial quest for fulfilment." This quest is the theme of the Heavensgate-"Siren Limits"-Distances sequence.

In this section an attempt will be made to relate this sequence to a later one comprising Silences and Paths of Thunder. In the second part of Limits subtitled "Fragments out of the Deluge," the poet's concern is the fate of a culture overrun by another culture whose values are markedly different. Interpreted in the Nigerian historical context it is the poet's reaction to the coming of Western European Christian missionaries to Igbo-land and the resultant overthrow of Igbo traditional religion and culture. In this historical context missionary activity is synonymous with colonial administration and it may be inferred that what the poet says of missionary activity at the religious level is also true of colonial administration at the political level. The attitude of Okigbo's persona, the poet-protagonist, to Christianity is cynical, bordering on rejection as is implied in his remarks in "Initiations." His rejection of the Christian "gambit" is demonstrated in his desperate effort to be re-united with his ancestral deity and
be identified with his traditional culture. This union with his ancestral deity which is achieved in Distances has the effect of making him a whole man, at one with himself, and armed with greater insight than most men. Equipped with this greater insight he takes on the role of the prophet and messiah of his people, pointing out, and warning them against the effects of Christian missionary activity. But his warning is not heeded for in "Fragments" IX, (p.32), they say: "Give him no chair, .... /The dawn's charioteer/Riding with the angry stars/Toward the great sunshine." The people who reject him are the "mongrel breeds" ("Fragments" VI, p.29), the offspring of cultural diffusion, who are in a way like the colonial "eagles" ("Fragments" VIII, p.31) that engendered them.

In Silences and Path of Thunder, the situation changes in perspective as the indigenous "eagles," the "mongrel breeds", replace the imperialist "eagles." The poet/protagonist as prophet points out the evils inherent in the practice of politics and warns against the dangers to come. In a way it may be said that the poet sees the situation as the "fait accompli" of growing up to political maturity. He also sees the political problems as macrocosmic manifestations of the kind of tensions, distractions and frustrations he has gone through in his own process of maturation.

By projecting his own situation into that of his external world he feels that he, better than any one else, can under-
stand and assess the problems. His intuition is thus the link between his internal microcosmic world and this external world and his personality forms the most important link between the poem-groups that describe these worlds.

In the later sequences there can still be heard the voice not only of the prodigal who knows the value of returning to his cultural roots in order to realize himself, but also of the forest "sapling" who has shouldered his "way through a mass of ancient/nights to chlorophyll" ("Elegy of the Wind," p.64). The "town-crier" of the later sequence is the prodigal "at Heavensgate" crying from the depth of his anguish and depression to be heard by his deity.

The events which occasioned these later poems were traumatic. As Okigbo himself said in the introduction to _Labyrinths_ (p.XII), "Lament of the Silent Sisters" was inspired by "the Western Nigeria Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba" (the first Congolese Premier); "Lament of the Drums" by the imprisonment of Chief Obafemi Awolowo "(ex-Premier of Western Nigeria), "and the tragic death of his eldest son." _Path of Thunder_ was occasioned by the events in Nigeria between 1965 and 1966, growing in intensity from the internal crisis in the Action Group party, the party which had until 1962 been the ruling power in Western Nigeria; through the military coup d' état of January 15, 1966, to the mass killing of Igbos in parts of Nigeria in the same year. These are the events that culminated in the civil war, "the

Apart from the personality of the poet-protagonist the two groups of poem-sequences share a common motif, that of growth. The later group may be said to be a record of the events which follow upon the attempts of a country to attain political maturity and is analogous to the record of the poet/protagonist's struggle to realize himself and achieve a poetic voice.

The poet's response to both situations follows the same pattern of linear progression from disorder, tensions and turmoil to order, reconciliation and peace. Although the later group does not quite achieve the kind of reconciliation and fulfilment enacted by the union of the protagonist with the goddess in *Distances* there is a vision of it in the prophetic last lines of "Elegy for Alto:"

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....

These lines also imply the recurrent pattern of the experiences which occasion these poems, a pattern which the poems establish through association with mythologies of various cultures and ages, and by their own patterns of imagery and symbols.

The images of struggle which describe the protagonist's quest for a unity of being in the earlier sequences reappear in *Silences* and *Path of Thunder*. In "Siren Limits" III (p.25), the poet-protagonist says: "So we must go, eve-mist on shoulders/
Sun's dust of combat/With brand burning out at hand end."
This idea of a difficult task re-appears in "So one dips
one's tongue in ocean, and begins/To cry to the mushroom
of the sky:" ("Lament of the Silent Sisters," p.40). In
Path of Thunder it is expressed in various images of violence
and hardship: "iron chapter", "path of stone" (p.66); "bayonets
and cannons" (p.71).

In "Elegy of the Wind" (p.64), all the dominant images
in the Heavensgate-Limits-Distances sequence are reassembled
in a way that makes the later poem a recapitulation of the
earlier ones.

ELEGY OF THE WIND

WHITE LIGHT, receive me your sojourner; O milky way,
let me clasp you to my waist;
And may my muted tones of twilight
Break your iron gate, the burden of several centuries,
into twin tremulous cotyledons...

Man of iron throat - for I will make broadcast with
eunuch-horn of seven valves -
I will follow the wind to the clearing,
And with muffled steps seemingly out of breath break
the silence the myth of her gate.

For I have lived the sappling sprung from the bed
of the old vegetation;
Have shouldered my way through a mass of ancient
nights to chlorophyll;

Or leaned upon a withered branch,
A blind beggar leaning on a porch.

I have lived the oracle dry on the cradle of a new generation..
The autocycle leans on a porch, the branch dissolves into embers,
The ashes resolve their moments
Of twin-drops of dew on a leaf:
And like motion into stillness is my divine rejoicing -
The man embodies the child
The child embodies the man; the man remembers
The song of the innocent,
Of the uncircumcised at the sight of the flaming razor—

The chief priest of the sanctuary has uttered
the enchanted words;
The bleeding phallus,
Dripping fresh from the carnage cries out for
the medicinal leaf...

O wind, swell my sails; and may my banner run
the course of wider waters:

The child in me trembles before the high shelf
on the wall,
The man in me shrinks before the narrow neck of
a calabash;

And the chant, already all wings, follows
In its ivory circuit behind the thunder clouds,
The slick route of the feathered serpent...

"White light" (1.1) is the lioness "wearing white light about her" in "Watermaid" (p.11). The "sojourner" asking to be received by "white light" (1.1) and the "blind beggar leaning on a porch" (1.16) recall the prodigal returning to Idoto,
"leaning on an oilbean." ("Passage", p.3). "Sojourner" also recalls the poet-pilgrim making his "homecoming" journey in Distances. "Muted tones" (p.3), recalls "broken monody" ("Watermaid" p.13), and "twilight" in the same line carries with it all the associations of "dim light" ("Lustra,"p.15), damp half light" (Siren Limits,"p.23), "twilight moment" ("Siren Limits"p.25), and "half light" (Silences, p.42), as the moment of potential inspiration. "Iron gate" (1.4) as the gate through which the object of the quest, as "Idoto",
"Watermaid" or "Death" can be reached, echoes "Heavensgate"
(Passage, p.3), "high arched gate" (Siren Limits III, p.26), and "marble archway" (Distances IV, p.57). "Man of iron" (L.6) recalls "They cast him in a mould of iron/And asked him to do a rock-drill" ("Fragments VI, p.29). "Clearing," (L.8) recalls the "clearing" in Distances III (p.56) where the poet placed the "dantini", and its recapitulation in Distances VI (p.59). The whole of the third stanza recaptures the image of the forest sapling in "Siren Limits" III, struggling to come to light. "My divine rejoicing" (L.21) echoes the question "But what does my divine rejoicing hold"? (Distances I, p.53) which the protagonist as pilgrim asked at a point when he was on the threshold of union with the goddess.

What Okigbo has done in this poem is comparable to Eliot's technique in the Four Quartets where he brings together all the major concerns of his poetry, and to Yeats' in "Under Ben Bulben" where he recounts all the principal symbols of his poetry. By using these images and symbols in a new context Okigbo gives them added significance which also illuminates their meaning in earlier contexts, making a re-reading of the earlier poems a necessary exercise for a full understanding of them.

Another important feature is Okigbo's traditionalism in the sense which Eliot defines the term. It is not only

1. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot argues that tradition "involves .... the historical sense ...., and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence:" and that "the historical sense compels a man to write .... with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer, and within it the whole literature of his own country, has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Selected Essays, p. 14).
that he has the historical sense which makes it possible for him to see his poetry as deriving from all the poetry of the poets who wrote before him, in Greek, Latin, English or French, as well as the oral poetry of his Igbo ancestors, but that he welds all these influences together in a manner that gives his poetry an independent existence. His traditionalism is also manifested in his longing as poet/protagonist to be reunited with "mother Idoto" his ancestral deity, and his insistence that an African work "must have its roots deep in African soil, must take its birth from African experience, must pulsate with African feeling."^2

Okigbo is known to acknowledge openly the debt he owes his predecessors. At the African Writers' Summit held at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda in 1962, he said:

My *Heavensgate* was influenced by the Impressionist composers. It is curious how it happens, but this is the truth, or part of it. I wrote several parts of *Heavensgate* under the spell of Debussy, Caesar Frank and Ravel. 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?^3

The influences on *Silences* are also acknowledged in the same manner in the *Introduction* to *Labyrinths*, (p. X11). These influences are so wide and varied that some are not

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3 ibid., p. 12.
often recognised by critics. For example, Okigbo is not usually associated with Wordsworth, but an examination of the *Heavensgate-Limits-Distances* sequence shows that they follow the method of the *Prelude* in which Wordsworth traces the growth of his mind. Both Wordsworth and Okigbo trace their development in images of a mystical journey. There are also echoes of Wordsworth's poem in some of Okigbo's images and symbols, as the following passage from the *Prelude* shows. (The underlined words occur in contexts which are similar to their contexts in Okigbo's poems).

This faculty has been the moving soul Of our long labour: we have traced the stream From darkness and the very place of birth In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard The sound of waters, followed it to light And open day, accomplished its course Among the ways of Nature, afterwards Lost sight of it, bewildered and engulfed... 4

In this passage can be recognised Okigbo's "Hurry on little stream to the lake." ("Siren Limits" III, p. 26); "Dark waters of the beginning." ("Passage", p. 4); "Come into my cavern" (Distances VI, p. 59); "Laughter of waters"("Newcomer" p. 19). "Followed it to light..." recaptures the whole process of the quest and of the poet/protagonist's growth summarised in "Elegy of the Wind" (p. 64, lines 11-14).

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For I have lived the sappling sprung from the bed of the old vegetation;
Have shouldered my way through a mass of ancient nights to chlorophyll.

The poet who is usually associated with Okigbo is Eliot and through him, Pound and the French Symbolists. The technique which Okigbo learnt from Eliot, as has been pointed out in this study, shows strong similarities with the techniques of Igbo oral poetry.

Like Eliot and the Symbolists, Okigbo uses images not for what they denote but for what they can be made to connote by association with other images. For example, the description of the "Watermaid" as "lioness" in "Watermaid" (p.11), carries all the associations of destructiveness because of the nature of the beast, the royalty associated with a queen, the beauty of a woman and the enchantment and distraction associated with it.

This method of free association of images makes it possible for Okigbo to develop his symbols, often bringing to them meanings they do not have for anybody else. Because the symbols are continually developing, they appear new in each occurrence with the result that with a few symbols Okigbo builds up a complex net-work of significances without ever giving the impression that he is repeating himself.

One of the most recurrent symbols in Okigbo's poetry is that of the "sunbird". In its first occurrence in "The Passage" (p.4), the "sunbird" appears to be just a simple sing-
ing bird. But its song is not just an ordinary song. It is a song "to mourn a mother on a spray." It is also the uncertain, terrified bird "at the passage," symbolizing the prodigal awaiting re-admittance by an offended deity, from whom he had exiled himself. In "Siren Limits" (p.23), it takes on the talkativeness of the weaverbird which is now an appropriate description for the poet/protagonist who, like the sunbird in "The Passage," is seeking to be united with himself, and who in a half conscious state seems to have suddenly discovered himself. In "Fragments" VIII (p.31), the "sunbird" becomes the prophetic bird who is later killed in "Fragments" X (p.33), before the invading "eagles" can get at the "twin-gods" representing the soul and culture of the people. In "Fragments" XI (p.35), its resurrection has the implication of the indestructibility of the poetic-prophetic voice.

The "elephant" symbol also undergoes the same kind of metamorphosis. In "Siren Limits" III (p.26), "white elephant" is the huge but useless object of the protagonist's hurry to the "rock point of Cable," whether this object be poetry or even a frustrated love affair. In "Thunder Can Break "(p.63), it occurs in the line: "Obduracy, the disease of elephants." This is a reference to Nigerian political leaders of the period immediately preceding the coup d'état of January, 1966 whose tardiness to handle the issues of the day amounts to obduracy. The same symbol occurs in "Hurrah for Thunder" (p.67) where
it has a much wider significance. The elephant is the emblem of the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Police and the Standard Bank of Nigeria. In this poem "tetrarch of the jungle" evokes the hugeness, strength and majesty of the elephant. It may be a reference to the armed forces who played such an important role in the political events of the day, especially if the "four trees" are taken to symbolize the four regions of Nigeria at that time. It may also be a reference to Nigeria, as a country which is often referred to as the greatest African nation or, even to the Federal government of Nigeria as the superior legislative power of the federation. In whichever context it is considered "elephant" has the basic implication of hugeness although it begins to acquire a wider significance as the poem sequences progress, connoting the collapse of the nation.

In the same way the two principal personae in the poems take on added functions, or expand the ones with which the reader is familiar, in every subsequent poem. At first the poet-protagonist is the "prodigal" soliciting the audience of his native deity. From this point he moves on to become the poet aspirant ("Siren Limits" II, p. 24), the prophet, the messiah, the metamorphosed Pharoah and the "branch of fennel" ("Fragments"). In Distances he becomes a pilgrim, and the "chief acolyte" of the goddess. Quite often he is presented as an ordinary man on a love quest. The female persona is variously "Idoto" (Passage, p.3); the lioness, the queen of the grove and
even the temptress and zombie type of woman who comes unsolicited, *Limits*; in *Distances* she is "Death herself." The relationship between the protagonist and the goddess also follows the same pattern; the union which the protagonist seeks is variously union with the goddess, union with "Death" as well as the union of man with woman.

Associated with Okigbo's patterns of images is his use of language, which is apparently difficult and obscure. Admittedly, he introduces neologisms like "sophisticreamy" (*Watermaid* p.10), "worldunder" (*Watermaid*; p.13), "moondew" (*Lustra*; p.14), "shrinehouse" (*Fragments* XI, p.34); and some compound hyphenated words like "salt-emptiness" (*Watermaid*; p.10), "Ne-goat-on-heat" (*Siren Limits* I p.23), "rock-drill" (*Fragments* VI, p.29), "split-tongue" (*Elegy for Slit Drum* p.68), and "twin-beaks" (p.69). Such words serve him as a means of achieving vivid pictorial effects especially when he is describing complex notions.

Yet a claim is made, based on insight achieved from the analysis of his poems in this study, that Okigbo uses simple everyday English words. As Moore remarked, he learnt from Eliot "the art of handling complex ideas in simple language, by the rearrangement of a selected group of words and symbols." 5 His syntax is also, paradoxically, the syntax of ordinary prose, although this does not seem so at first glance. When he omits verbs and connectives it is always for the purpose of concentrating pictorial or sound effect. In "The Passage" (p.5), it is the absence of verbs which helps to give concentration

to the gloomy and ominous picture of the "silent faces at crossroads." The chaos of the scene depicted in "Siren Limits II" (p.25) is also concentrated in the same way in the opening lines: "Banks of reed/Mountains of broken bottles." He omits connectives and punctuation marks when he wants to make an undifferentiated list as in Distances III (p.56) where he enumerates the objects that identify him as the chief acolyte of the goddess: "in my hand the crucifix/the torn branch the censer, or as in the lumping of the objectionable "camphor iodine chloroform;"or the categorising of "vendors princes negritude/politicians"as belonging to the lowest rung of the creative ladder. In each case the items or categories enumerated are seen by the poet as synonymous with one another.

Okigbo is particularly concerned with the music of his poetry. Often the disordered syntax is a result of his attempt to achieve a pattern of sounds. Although his poetry is strikingly deficient in rhyme, it is remarkably rich in alliteration and assonance. There is, for example, the alliterated "b" in "arched like a boa bent to kill" (Passage" p. 4, L.4), "b" "l" and "k" in "Faces of black like long black/column of ants behind the bell tower"("Passage" p.5, 11 3-5), "m" in "Summoned at offside of dream remembered" (Siren Limits" I, p. 23, 11 3-4) and "Making harmony among the branches" ("Siren Limits" III, p.25, L.13), and the "f" in "from flesh to phantom" (Distances I, p.53, L.1), and "After we had formed/then only the forms were formed/and all the forms/were formed after our forming..." (Distances IV,
Occasionally ambiguities arise from the disordered syntax as in "Watermaid" (p.10), where the verb, "breaks," (l.8) is shared by the subjects "Secret" (l.5) and "Maid of the salt-emptiness." (l.12). In such a case the syntax may be ordered by a careful analysis of the underlying sentences which makes it possible to restore the words to their normal order.

There is, however, a remarkable change in the technique of the poems of Silences and Paths of Thunder. Although he still uses symbols and images, the language is more direct and less allusive. It is likely that the need to reach people in a subject which is essentially public, compelled Okigbo to make these poems more dramatic and their technique less involved. The following lines are typical of this group of poems:

"The eye that looks down will surely see his nose/
The finger that fits should be used to pick the nose"

"Hurrah for Thunder" (p.67 Ll.13,24).

The very close correspondences between Okigbo's technique especially in the earlier poems, and Eliot's, has occasioned spirited attacks on Okigbo's originality as a poet. From the examination of his poems in this study, it is clear that a relationship of influence exists between them. According to Shaw, "an author may be considered to have been influenced by a foreign author when something from without can be demonstrated to have produced upon him and/or his artistic works an effect
his native literary tradition and personal development do not explain."6 Shaw goes on to say that "literary influence on an author will result in his literary works as such having pervasive organic qualities in their essential inspiration or artistic presentation, which they otherwise would not have had either in this form or at this stage of his development."7 And also talking about the nature of influence he says:
"Influence is not confined to individual details or images or even sources - though it may include them - but is something pervasive something organically involved in and presented through artistic works."8

Okigbo's debt to Eliot has been shown in this study to be pervasive and probably derives as much from his reading of Eliot's poetic theories and critical writings as from his reading of Eliot's poems as works of art. If this view is accepted, Eliot's influence on him may then be what Jones has described as indirect influence, that is, the kind of influence that "implies that one poet discerns in the writings of other poets an attitude towards the material of his art which strikes a responsive chord in his own as yet unrealized attitude. He does not necessarily take over all of the other poets' attitude and he invariably adds something personal."9

8. Ibid., p. 65.
There is also the possibility of a shared world-view which is possible for any two different people passing through identical phases of life or of civilization as in the case of Eliot and Okigbo where the environment is that of a world of disintegrating cultures and collapsing values. As Jones put it, "Individual intuitions can catch glimpses of aspects of the transcendental in a glass darkly. These intuitions are phenomenally and historically different, but they have two things in common. Firstly they embody a number of recurring patterns, whether these patterns take the shape, for example, of philosophical themes, psychological Gestalten, mythical forms, or those permanent emotional complexes which are symbolized by social ritual. Secondly, intuitions which embody these patterns follow a law of growth which works either by development or repudiation." (p. 25)

But there are also in Okigbo's poetry images and other stylistic details which derive specifically from Eliot. The question is the effects such similarities have on Okigbo as a poet. Some critics, like Mazrui, think that this amounts to imitativeness and lack of originality on the part of Okigbo. But the reading of Okigbo in this study shows that he is an original poet. Influence need not be confused with originality. As Shaw points out, "... influence shows the influenced author producing work which is essentially his own."


Originality, as Weisstein has pointed out, applies to "creative innovations in form and content as well as reinterpretations and combinations of ingredients borrowed from diverse models." 12 Wellek and Warren, remarking that "Originality is usually misconceived in our time as meaning a mere violation of tradition, or is sought for at the wrong place, in the mere material of the work of art, or its mere scaffolding ... they assert that to work within a given tradition and adopt its devices is perfectly compatible with emotional power and artistic value." 13 And as Shaw put it, "The original author is not necessarily the innovator or the most inventive, but rather the one who succeeds in making all his own in subordinating what he takes from others to the new complex of his own artistic work." 14

Taken together these ideas about originality define Okigbo's poetry. The impression that emerges from this study of his poetry is that of a poet's personal responses to experiences about which he feels deeply, and in which he is both emotionally and spiritually involved. It is true that Okigbo marshals into his responses analogies drawn from his wide and varied reading, but he also fuses the borrowed elements with the techniques.


of Igbo traditional oral poetry such as the use of allusions, ellipses, epigrams and proverbs, thus giving his poetry a unique form and pattern of meaning.

15 For a detailed discussion of these forms the reader is referred to Austin J. Shelton, "The Articulation of Traditional and Modern in Igbo Literature." The Conch Vol. I, No. 1, March 1969, pp.30-49.
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APPENDIX I

The following is a list of Okigbo's published poetry showing the dates of composition as given by the poet himself; the dates of first publication and of revised publications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Date of Composition</th>
<th>First Revised Publication</th>
<th>Final Revised Publication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Four Canzones'</td>
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<td>Song of the forest</td>
<td>1957</td>
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<td>Debtor's Lane</td>
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<td>1960</td>
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<td>1961</td>
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<td>Heavensgate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idoto</td>
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<td>11 Initiation</td>
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<td>V Newcomer.</td>
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<td>of the Deluge V-X</td>
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<td>Drums 1-V</td>
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<th>Date of Composition</th>
<th>First Revised Publication</th>
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THE ONLY WAY TO GO THROUGH THE MARBLE ARCHWAY TO THE CATATONIC PINGPONG OF THE EVANESCENT HALO...
after we had formed
then only the forms were formed
and all the forms
were formed after our forming...