hopes for a society that will show greater understanding and tolerance for the many disparities of life.

However, the greatest point of similarity between Walker and Bandele is the eagerness to be open about their lives. The 'literature of openness' is surely on ascent. There is this feeling that after years of being relegated to the background (through ancient and modern slaveries) and suffering through humiliation, nothing could be too weighty to say. Walker describes herself as a "shameless writer" and Bandele does not feel shy in talking about what she is going through in a bleak but hopeful relationship. Perhaps because both writers draw from the same historical experience, pain becomes a romance toward clarity for them. Bandele's life reflects Walkers' shock at a society becoming more and more hostile and lost.

Bandele's memoir is so intense and spontaneous, perhaps reflecting her deeply internal concern, and Walker through introspective contemplations serves a needling social commentary; yet something of one reflects in the other. This is possibly due to the fact that, as most African-American writers would agree, what they have become can hardly be separated from where they are coming from. Importantly, both writers subscribe to an internal courage that is capable of always triumphing. **GBS**

A Great Feast of Return

BY OGAGA IFOWODO

A 20-year period separated the publication of *The Poet Lied* from the three new collections released at the same time by Odia Ofeimun on the auspicious occasion of his 50th birthday celebrations. These were years burdened with the expectation of more poetry and not many were prepared to acknowledge that after *The Poet Lied*, Ofeimun did, in fact, publish two more collections: *A Handle for the Flutist* (Update, 1987) and *Under African Skies* (Hornbill, 1991). Perhaps, understandably so, given the literary excitement and polemical furor bearing upon the release and quick withdrawal from circulation of *The Poet Lied* by Longman (London), and given the fact that the two latter titles hardly caused fundamental stirs within literary waves unlike the former. It is no surprise, therefore, that in coming out finally from his deep silent rendezvous with the Muse, echoes of *The Poet Lied* should be heard all over the new poems, especially those collected in *Dreams at Work*.

Many had adopted every style of non-combative verbal assault possible to get Ofeimun to publish the poems he was famously honing in the past two decades. The more they tried, the faster his embrace of silence. Despite — or shall we say, *until*? — the intervention of his older compatriot and friend, Wole Soyinka.

In the Nobel Laureate's first post-Stockholm collection of poetry, *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*, he not only borrowed the title of one of the poems in *The Poet* — "My Corpuscles Don't Readily Marry Slogans" — in his own, but also dedicated the 171-line poem to Ofeimun. Essentially a poem in which Soyinka, finding a unity of political and literary temperaments with his younger colleague, sought to respond to sloganeering revolutionaries, especially the campus variety who "dribbled slogans a thousand safety/Miles away, holding forth by the Staff Club swimming pools", and who "midnight missed at the barricades" but found "snoring sweetly in a mistress'/Arms, secured by, wage-slave proletariats", it began with a typically Soyinkean mischief that is worth quoting at some length:

> *Sooner* plead a writer's block, a cramp,
> *Akaraba* worked by the envious, enchantment
> Cast by a beloved siren, jealous of
> That constant rival, Muse. Sooner plead
> A seven-year dream of leanness, the fat to follow.
> Plead a passing inhibition, overdose of reality
> That stuns the mind and beggars lyric.

One is tempted to quote the entire first stanza, but I would rather take from the last four but one lines of the poem:

> But if phrase-mongers have indeed usurped the world,
> And dreams come packaged, handy like a sausage roll,
> The poet chooses: DANGER — DREAMS AT WORK.

Never one to drop a challenge, Ofeimun was stung out of the *akaraba* spell that had seen to those lean years (only, seven then!).

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Odia Ofeimun,
DREAMS AT WORK AND OTHER POEMS,
57pp.

A FEAST OF RETURN/UNDER AFRICAN SKIES,
66pp.

LONDON LETTER AND OTHER POEMS,
64pp.,
Hornbill House, Lagos, 2000.

<< Quick to spot a title-giving line, he in turn grabbed it for his response. And as if to prove a point, ensured his is a full one hundred-and-one line longer. Joy, a thousand lines more, I would say, if at last the lean years are over! Predictably, he accepts the main reason proffered by Soyinka — "an overdose of reality that stuns the mind and beggars lyric" — and this forms the subject of the first movement of the long poem in *Dreams*: "Some wounds cut so deep", he says, "we forget ... how to flow/Some hunger grows so steep/It cuts out the sun/and takes away our eyes..."

Indeed the argument in self-justification continues into the third movement: "in the heat and sweat of the wrongs/that become our fare before every arrival/we must wait for the selves trapped in stone to awaken." Finally, he goes to Ogun, a shared patron-god, who "waited till his anvil could hold the purest fire" for divine explanation. The poem ends with a tribute-as-prayer to Soyinka in the tenth and last movement sub-titled "Let Them be Mad." Although there is no dateline to it, it is easy to surmise that this was either written, or radically re-written, in the days of the locust when Soyinka had, in a twist of double irony, to once again "borrow seasons of alien lands"; that time of recent memory when the plainly lunatic certified the sane mad. "To pray for you now in this hour!/As roads are turned back on themselves ... O let there always be those/who call the guilty by their names/and please let them be mad/if we, we are too sane to be counted."

The second part of *Dreams* titled 'Gods and Tongues' has poems for Fela, "it was the knife stuck in his back ... /his broken sax on the rubbish heap/taught the musician of rattles and banter/to take the bitterleaf of his song to the soupmaker ... /to rework life's crooked timber'; Obafemi Awolowo, the "patriarch (who) asked for joy, naive/to the end in childlike ploying/to raise tramps to the height of avatars ... the dancer who became our forward-gaze"; Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, who knew "that no tongue could escape from sin/nor could hearts live by tongue alone/ where God is one, languages many". There are also poems for the late Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marachera, who "cockroached through parks and alleys,/the dark democracy of forgotten undergrounds/ wishing there were no slogans to die for ... in a world where the broadday whore/soon wins Virgin Of The year Award'; Che Guevara who "preffered to be reaped far from altars ... shrines and gravestones, grooves calling to pilgrim's feet.." and thought it "far better to be honoured by birds/flying with strips of his song/to fertilize barren acres", as well as Ortega and Vaclav Havel who now could "lower your folded sleeves/stiffen your collars; get used to well-knotted ties ... (and) acknowledge the million hearts flung at your motorcade."

The third part, "True Worship" raises the question of what gods are truly deserving of our strongest feelings of respect and admiration. Personally, I could worship his "Oyin" of the first poem, "a brittle wonder that survives/the eternal risk of poetry ... /a life that civil faith/has turned into a hymn/ ...simply woman made joyous."

The last part, "Muafangejo's Kraal", which came out of a poetic intervention in a 1991 Oxford exhibition of linocuts by the late Namibian artist who is eponym of the poems, is an elating experience that turns Ofeimun's eye, so fixed on the public space, onto himself

I do not think that the rest of the poems in that intervention live up to the beauty of "No Way to Go", admirably captured in a wistful, defiant melancholy where the poet seems to be saying to himself, "You are (growing) old Father Williams, and at your age ..." ("The fog of sadness comes over/my sense of songs, my kit of dreams", wails Ofeimun at the beginning). This poem does to you what a good old blues tune , such as Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue" or Satchmo's rendition of W.C. Handy's "Atlanta Blues", does. By the time one gets to the last lines, "I seek/vanes for my guitar to wrest waves/for my blood to know its acre/and be at home with itself again!", one is tempted to immediately take the road leading to that house of experience.

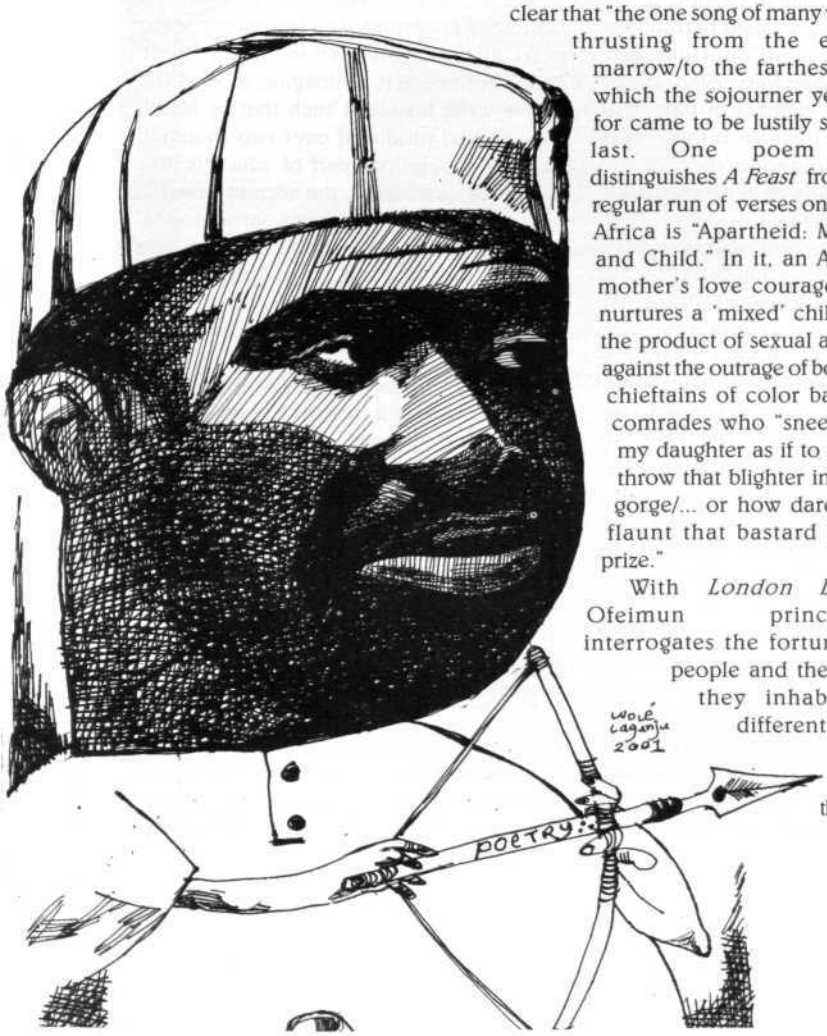
The Muafangejo poems testify to the unity of art, in striving to represent much in images and words: Ofeimun's ability to conjure the original drawings before the reader denied their visual advantage connects with the kindred feeling and uncanny insights that only true inspiration can bestow. As homage to resilience, *Dreams* is brilliant in showing how truth discerned from art provides the mortar that binds an often quick-to-succumb flesh to the spirit that keeps dreams alive and truly at work.

From Ofeimun, we also have the second life of *Under African Skies*, which had first been published in 1991 under the same Hornbill House imprint. This collection is born of a communal ethos of art going back to the origin of time: an African dance ensemble in London commissions a poet (Ofeimun) to write poetry to select dances telling a story of Africa from pre-historic times till a now (then) best captured in the state of unfreedom that was South Africa before May 1994. *Under African Skies* is poetry-as-performance written for the live

stage, though it can singularly be related to as poetry, devoid of the theatrical.

The collection scours the continent to distil tales reaching from the 'golden age' of earth- mother worship, marking an epoch resolutely opposed to blood sacrifice, to the period of priest-rulers and divine kings which was also the warrior and empire-building epoch, down to the continental agony of slave trade. The pitfalls of an anti-colonial struggle whose vision did not go beyond the lowering of the imperialist flag and the hoisting of the loom-fresh cloth of the newly independent nations, find good treatment here too. As poetry written for, and actually performed through a tour of 13 cities (twice in London) in the UK in 1991, *Under African Skies* gives meaning to the widely-held notion that poetry, mostly, aspires to the condition of music/song.

If *Under African Skies* tells a pan-continental tale, *A Feast of Return* concentrates its attention on South Africa as a way of engaging the ravage attendant upon the cradle of humanity, Africa. Here, through the priestess of memory, a sort of chorus links the visions of commoner and king, warrior and housewife, priest and supplicant. Although written before the historic dawn of May 1994, and ending therefore with the refrain, "when shall we arrive?", "when shall we breast the warmth/of homecoming", it is clear that "the one song of many voices/ thrusting from the earth's marrow/to the farthest star" which the sojourner yearned for came to be lustily sung at last. One poem that distinguishes *A Feast* from the regular run of verses on South Africa is "Apartheid: Mother and Child." In it, an African mother's love courageously nurtures a 'mixed' child, not the product of sexual assault, against the outrage of both the chieftains of color bar and comrades who "sneered at my daughter as if to say/go throw that blighter into the gorge/... or how dare you/ flaunt that bastard like a prize."



With *London Letter*, Ofeimun principally interrogates the fortunes of people and the cities they inhabit, at different turns and tides, through the eyes of an exile. Though, "free from the swarm and crush of Lagos/the sweated journey turned to a fiasco/fiercer than the wars of democracy", he nevertheless sees Lagos everywhere, none the least in "fellow countrymen interpreting Jim Crow/saving London from London's filth, sick city falling/ artlessly beggaring my city by the lagoon" (Lagos). No surprise that the refrain, a self-inflected irony, is that of a popular highlife tune which sealed in the public mind the notion of Lagos as the city of "so so enjoyment." It therefore went in similar logic that London had to be "so so enjoyment" as well. The thanks for how this wasn't the case goes mostly to Dame Thatcher; and even at its (London's) low, Ofeimun's countrymen "knowing that the pound yields no stink at dusk/after the sweat of day returns to the Thames" still seek their dreams there. T.S. Eliot once refered to London as 'unreal city', and while observing crowds flowing over the London Bridge remarked on how he 'had not thought that death had undone so many.' London or Lagos, Ofeimun in *London Letter* seems to be saying, " I had not thought that *life* had undone/can undo so many!"

Just before the title poem is a short lyric, incidentally titled "London", dedicated to Ben Okri. This 'London' is a woman encountered at a coffee shop, and its perhaps an attempt to temper the long grim letter immediately following that urged the placement before this of the image of an enchantress, refered to simply as 'the blonde *olokun*'. Somehow, by the end of the volume, after the poem to "Eko - my city by the lagoon" or "Tripping Central Bankers at Tinubu Square"; after the self-exorcism over a son's inability to respond to his father's "Come home, son" wishes followed by a soul-trying absence at his (the father's) funeral, and "The Mother of All Mischief", the last poem which speaks of the amorality of all sides during the 1995/96 American/Iraqi Gulf War, the imagery that persists in the mind is that of a *wench*, London. Or how does one relate to the lines where Ofeimun is "gulping every Renoir/that memory could grant as recompense", or where he lets "metaphors drop their clothes /to free the pure lust *(?!)* that teased/the roof of my, mouth with dryland" ?

While realizing his poetry in the oral performative mode energizing *Under African Skies/A Feast*, Ofeimun seems to have found the oral form irresistible even when his subject nudges toward a different mode; hence, a repetitive mannerism and rhetorical flourish exerts considerable toll on a good number of the poems. This is more evident in *London Letter*. For instance, while the stylistic device of beginning the next stanza

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<< with the last line of the preceding one essays a connecting thread in the more narrative "Eko", the fact that this is often so gives an uneasy feeling of following form to a fault; though in performance, this would hardly matter if it keeps the audience focused on the tale as a whole. Moreso, one also does not think it comes off well in lines such as: "his lorries hurtling down/down to valley-centre...", "from the world, the wider world that always ... ", "of haggling and heckling, heckling and haggling" , "matching my nomad's regress to the native's progress/ matching the native's progress to my nomad's regress" ("Giagbone"); "its due, its staggering due" ("Oxford summer"); "as we make carnival, a hearty carnival" ("June Around Us"), to cite a few.

I do not doubt what prosodic uses this strategy can serve, but it is always at the cost of sharper, crisper lines and more intense imagery, not to mention the subtlety that a greater economy of words assures. This unfortunately leads to the lingering echo of a tone, a monotone that is difficult to get rid of. **GBS**

The Likeness of An Incomplete Masterpiece

BY ADEREMI RAJI-OYELADE'

Memory is all: touchstone, threat and guiding star.

FIVE years after his death, the great American author comes alive, assuredly and textually immortalized in the publication of a second full-length novel entitled *Juneteenth*. "Always in progress, Ellison's work may now find pause, not cessation but pause....", so concludes John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary editor, in his incisive introduction to the author's long-awaited narrative, a work which has been in constant and peculiar progression over four decades until its appearance in the summer of 1999. The expressed notion of *pause* rather than *cessation* is a subtle admission of the phoenix-like creative energies generated in the 'completion' of the text.

The story of the dynamic and *inerasable* life of Ellison's *Juneteenth* has taken on the saga of myth. It is perhaps the most celebrated work-in-progress in American literature that would span over four decades; it is the only work of fiction by a major writer of the twentieth century that would be literally resuscitated or wrested from the fangs of fire which consumed over 360 pages of the original manuscript; and it would remain for a long time to come a ready material for literary controversy, an uncompleted narrative rehabilitated and presented in part as an organic and completed novel by the author's literary executor.

Ellison started writing the post-*Invisible Man* text in 1954 and had almost completed the narrative when on November 29 1967, his residence got burnt and with it a section of the manuscript. Between 1967 and 1977, Ellison presented excerpts from the manuscript for publication in literary journals and magazines; these excerpts and part of the original manuscript dating back to 1960 (eight in all) were featured in *The New Yorker*, *The Noble Savage*, and *The Quarterly Review of Literature*. And for twenty-seven years after the mysterious fire incident, Ellison continued to re-imagine, reconceive, and re-write his script such that by March 1994 he had produced over two thousand pages of typescripts, part of which is now known as *Juneteenth*, the second novel, if not the sequel to the author's narratological commitment to the history, memory and dream of the black persona in American life. A prolonged and postponed composition, *Juneteenth* is the re-creation of a novelist with the soul of a musician, a writer who played the trumpet early, studied classical music, worked as a freelance photographer and became a virtuoso of jazz and the blues tradition.

The novel revolves around Reverend Alonzo "Daddy" Hickman, a Southern black Baptist minister, and Bliss, his formerly beloved spiritual child who would leave him to settle in Washington and live another life as Senator Adam Sunraider. Bliss, a white boy, was raised by the minister in a predominantly black community and church, and on the values of black cultural heritage in the hope of making him an ambassador of blackness. Sustained from the interrogative and dialogic connections of these two characters, the central story of

Ralph Ellison, JUNETEENTH, Vintage Books, New York, 2000, 400pp.