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Christopher Okigbo

PIUS OKIGBO

A Toast of

Laughter and tears, cries of joy, and regret are all that he should write not necessarily to communicate but to express himself.
The reading aloud of the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Fellingetti, Duncan, Brother Antoninus and the crowd of the Beat Generation was just coming onto the scene in America. For Christopher, the poet's task was to present his thoughts in significant form, to address reason through sense. He therefore wrote a poetry that read better accompanied by the music of either DeBussy or Duke Ellington as the mood dictated. Yet, he demanded of himself and his peers the highest rigour of thought and language. A purist, he would refine and refine and refine his poems until the final product showed the highest economy of words and phrase often embedded in a private vocabulary of his own and almost unintelligible to the reader. It did not matter that the reader would mistake his local idiom for some abstruse mythological reference taken from his vast arsenal of Greek or Latin literature.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Christopher plunged into the creative page of his life of only ten or so years and wrote as if he knew he had no tomorrow; in that time, he created a work marked not by volume but only by the highest rank and quality for outstanding excellence. Almost prophetic, his vision and his sounds were certainly rooted in the social culture of the time; and since the malaise of which he wrote and against which he warned has now come home full blown to roost, his poems ring today with astonishing freshness.

Although he had abounding zest of life, Christopher could, at any time, withdraw from life to concentrate his mind and thought singularly on the work before him. He could, and often did, as occasion demanded, retreat into himself for two three days with little food but armed only with a pen and paper to scribble all day and all night long until the last drop of verse in him had oozed out onto the pages of the note paper. He had the most abiding respect for two of his contemporaries with whom he thought he formed a trinity: Chinua Achebe in novel and Wole Soyinka in drama with himself in poetry. Their galaxy had also very distinguished satellites close by: John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara in the literary and Demas Nwoko etc. in the visual arts. He had, however, placed himself above the pale of competition in his chosen field. How else can one explain his refusal to be nominated for the competition for the Langston Hughes award for African poetry in which, in spite of himself, he won the first prize, or his paradoxical behaviour in agreeing to travel to Kampala, Uganda, for a conference of writers at the expense of the organisers only to mount the rostrum and refuse to read his poetry to non poets.

Chris rejected the label of African writer; he was not a Nigerian or an African poet, he was simply a poet, whose tastes and sensibilities would make him a poet in any colour or climate or vegetation. That twenty-seven years after his death, with no new work coming or likely to come from him, he is still read avidly more abroad than at home and revered everywhere is, perhaps, the greatest tribute that can be paid any artist of note this side of eternity. It is this permanent lustre that makes Christopher Okigbo the poet's poet.

Chris was in his life time and in his death the greatest friend I ever had; it was not because Chris was my brother for he had other brothers and I too had them, but because between us there was a total communion of souls and of mind. We both shared the same joys and laughter in reading and re-reading the Greek and Latin classics in the original: Vergil, Tacitus, Cicero, Homer etc., or the English...
masters - Mallarme, Joyce, Elliot, Pound, small letter Cummings, Rimbaud, not to talk of the standard University English classroom classics of the middle and later period. For 1, too, had read Latin and Greek in my own earlier training, adventured towards a degree in English literature only to give it up two thirds of the way to finally take a degree in modern history. Is it any wonder then that I should have the rare privilege to have introduced him to the literature of the American exiles: Hemmingway, Dos Passos, Elliot, Pound, Crosby, Cowley, among the more well known.

ABLUTION

Endowed with a curious charm built on frail physique and penetrating wit and intellect which often transfixed his friends, Christopher soon learnt that to get on with his work he had to forget their faces and their names soon after the momentary pleasure or thrill was over. He could therefore, at once, in simultaneous cycles as his moods took him, be both exceedingly warm and exceedingly cold. His friends stood by him to the last; his foes denounced him as emotionally a grasshopper.

He successfully wooed and, after a whirlwind courtship that would have racked the nerves of any young woman, married Sefi Judith Attah, the devoted mother of our adorable daughter, Obiageli. For Sefi was perhaps the only girl he met and knew who understood his quixotic personality. And in return, he showered her with the most passionate and enduring love.

DEPARTURE

Christopher has been tried (by Ali Mazrui) for exhibiting and revealing a personal commitment to the eradication of the social evils of his times. So be it. Some of us are nothing if not snobs writing for snobs; some of us are merely aesthetes who would step over the muck around us and live as if nothing was wrong. Chris lived intensely, felt intensely and expressed himself intensely. Only someone with the most abstruse form of taxidermy could have lived through the Eastern Nigeria of 1966-70 and pretend that the psycho pathology and trauma of the society could not touch him and that his life would ever remain the same again or that he could just go about writing inanities while the life experience around him betrayed the most desperate craving. Let no one dare to condemn him for we, the members of his immediate family, know what it is to lose a revered one having in the same war lost one favourite uncle, two adorable undergraduate nephews and a favourite brother in Chris. Chris was immersed in the life of his time - for more than any other artist of his generation he commended with the so-called common man of his time - the market trader, the street hawker, the buka restaurateur, the foot soldier, the taxi driver. He did not look down on them and he did not treat them as his inferiors. They were men like him. For he was as easily at home with the nobles and the governors as he was with the taxi drivers with whom he could go to eat and drink as coequals without condescension.

The battered Nigerian psyche of today, the anomie and the catalepsis we see, hear and smell all around us, the lingering living death that casts its pall over us, the anguish and the torment of body and soul that cry out all the time from the wizened faces of infants - these are today’s sources of Christopher Okigbo’s poetic vision of thirty years ago. Of such stuff was this extraordinary genius made that his fame far outshone that of any one of the members of his vastly distinguished family that had at one and the same time a world class forest pathologist, an economist, a lawyer, an agronomist as well as the poet laureate himself. He was indeed a meteor, and like a meteor he flashed through the sky for a short speck of thirty-five years, which is indeed merely a dot in infinite time, and dug a hole in the ground for himself.

PASSAGE

He was born wearing the mark of war; he died of bullet wounds sustained at a war he fought on behalf of his new country, Biafra. He died at the hands of his so-called countrymen, at Opi junction, at the outskirts of the University he had helped to build and nurture; he died at the tender age of thirty-five, in the defence of his most cherished values: honour, valour, truth, justice, equity, integrity and, most of all, freedom. We have a duty, in his honour, to keep these values alive in our younger ones for that is the true testament to his greatness. Towards this goal, I am authorised to announce that the OKIGBO family is creating a Trust to establish and administer, with effect from the coming anniversary of his death, in October, scholarships and prizes in Classics and Poetry in the two Universities that gave Christopher Okigbo his foundation and his freedom: the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria. Even in this we have been anticipated first by Wole Soyinka, one of the most loyal of his friends, and now by Chief Berkhout. To both of them I offer my salutations.

I now give you the toast of CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO the poet, born 1932, died 1967, lived at Cambridge House, UAC Crescent, Onireke, Ibadan. GR 8 JULY 1994