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‘Up These Hills to the Mountain Top’:¹ Memories of 'The Golden Sun' in Michael Echeruo's War Poems (*Distanced*)

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Abstract

One of the leading voices among the first generation of post-independence African modernist poets of the twentieth-century, Michael J. C. Echeruo's second collection of poetry, *Distanced* (1975), is, unlike his better-known first collection, *Mortality* (1968), characterized by direct phrasing and open accessibility—in terms of imagery and other signifiers—to the general reader. Composed within the first four years (1970-74) after the end of the Biafran war of independence of 1967-1970, the nineteen lyrics that make up this collection look back with extraordinary candor and passion into the future of the Biafran experience, especially with regard to the problems of reintegration into post-war Nigeria. Burdened by intense agony over what the poetic persona sees as the loss of two "fatherlands"—Biafra ("the real fatherland") and Nigeria ("the victor's sky")—and confronted with "rotund hills", "hunched-up hills", and "other hills" that "rise" as extended metaphors for the numerous impediments on his path and other path of his Biafran compatriots, he resolutely "teaches" himself to avert disabling bitterness and to navigate his way "up these hills to the mountain top." The burden of the present paper is to deconstruct the key trope ("mountain top") which seems to point to the consolation of Biafra ("the golden sun") as a lost but recoverable "golden opportunity" for truly independent and self-reliant modern African nationhood. *Distanced* is thus, on the balance, not a cycle of poems of disillusionment but of songs of regeneration and ascent informed by a determination (born of the lessons of the war) to make the most of the unfulfilled promises of Biafra within the context of a reconfigured Nigerian nationhood.

1. INTRODUCTION

Eight years after the publication of his first collection of poetry, *Mortality* (1968), Michael Echeruo released his second collection, *Distanced* (1975), a slim volume of nineteen lyrics informed by the experience of the Biafran War of Independence of July 6, 1967 to January 12, 1970. *Distanced* was received by critics as a welcome departure, in both tone and phraseology, from *Mortality*. Whereas *Mortality* was viewed as it is still viewed by most critics, as obscurantist by reason of its surface structure of Euromodernist bricolage that masks the Africanisms that actually shapes its meaning at deep structure,² *Distanced* is a record of an intimate personal experience of war conveyed by means of images and phrases within the readerly competence of any member the poet's potential English-speaking audience in Nigeria, Africa and elsewhere in the postcolonial world. Throughout the collection, as even the most detractive of Echeruo's critics would admit, Echeruo is refreshingly often direct. Thus Okeke-Ezigbo, who refers to "Sophia" (the most problematic poem of his first collection, *Mortality*) as a "hard-boned philosophical disquisition" written with an

¹ Paper presented at the 9th Annual Conference of the Igbo Studies Association on the theme, "Nkeiruka: Shaping The Future Of The Igbo Nation," at Howard University, Washington, DC, April 8–9, 2011

² This is the argument of my recent presentation "Africanisms in the Poetry of Michael Echeruo: A Close-Reading of Sophia," at the Michael Echeruo Valedictory Symposium (on "Fifty Years of African Literature and Scholarship in the Academy, 1960–2010") organized by the Humanities Center, Syracuse University, to mark Echeruo's retirement as the William Safire Professor of Modern Letters in the Department of English, Syracuse University, New York, October 14-16, 2010.

“attitude” which “seems to be that poetry is not milk for infants and weak-chested people, but dry meat for strong men with distinguished dentition” (1984: 10), is effusive in his praise of the accessibility of the poems of *Distanced*:

The voice is more communal and homely, more immediate, domesticated, sympathetic, and arresting. The language ceases to be the language of polished bookshelves and aluminum carrels and becomes the person-to-person language of the open air.

In many instances, in *Distanced*, the faces of the individual actants come through vividly and the events and situations recaptured can be precisely located in time and place in Biafra and corroborated with other evidence. But despite its accessibility, there is little or no reference to *Distanced* in most of the major studies of the poetry of the Nigerian civil war (Aiyejina, 1988; Amuta, 1983 and 1988; Asein, 1978; Ebeogu, 1992; Maduakor, 1982 and 1986; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1997; Ogede, 2000; and Okuyade, 2010). Part of the purpose of the present paper is to call the attention of critics to the achievement of Echeruo in his war poetry and to place *Distanced* where it belongs—at the center of discourse on the poetry of the Biafran war.

The collection is divided into three sections, namely (1) *Requiem*, comprising seven lyrics including the title poem, “Distanced”; (2) “Prospect,” comprising one relatively long philosophical and threnodic reflection on the challenges and impediments to the reintegration of former Biafran revolutionaries into the postwar Nigerian body politic; and (3) “My Fatherland,” a corpus of eleven lyrics, in which the poet unveils his agony for the loss of two fatherlands—Biafra, which he calls “the real fatherland” in my interview with him on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday (Azuonye, 1987: 171) and Nigeria, which is invoked in “Prospect” (part II) as “the victor’s sky,” in my reading of the poems, a trope redolent with all the negative connotations of the corrupt and visionless leadership title, *Igwe* (Sky) in contemporary Igbo chieftaincy mêlée. Throughout the collection, the metonym (“the golden sun”) and its variants recur as codes for nostalgic memories of Biafra and the lost opportunities they clearly represent for the poet. Set against these memories are various images of “hills” (“rotund hills”, “hunched-up hills”, and “other hills”) that “rise” from three cardinal points (“east”, “west” and “north”) as patterns of synecdoche, metonymy and metaphor for the numerous impediments on his path. But holding brief for his equally traumatized ex-Biafran revolutionaries, the poet resolutely teaches himself to avert all disabling bitterness and to navigate his way “up these hills to the mountain top.” The deconstruction of the trope “mountain top” in relation to the image of “the golden sun” (Biafra) is the burden of the present close reading of the poems.

In close reading, I follow the order in which they are presented by the poet in the collection, noting the integrity of each section as a decidedly well-measured step in the logical progression of the whole towards an implicit statement about the lessons of the war. Accordingly, the threnodies of Part I (*Requiem*) are deconstructed as unveiling the paradoxical intermeshing of “pain” and “gain” which turn on the paradoxical intermeshing of heroism and victimization in the self-sacrifice and death of the young men and women who perished in the war. Against this background, the long lyric of Part II (“Prospect”) is deconstructed as a philosophical but arresting reflection on the key questions pertaining to the lessons (if any) that have been learnt from so huge a cataclysm and the way forward towards healing the social wounds of the war. The poet’s organizing image of navigating his way “up these hills to the mountain top” is part of the answer offered in this lyric. Finally, the deconstruction of the lyrics in Part III (My Fatherland) focuses on the modalities of the poet’s transition from the post-war schizophrenia and double-consciousness presented as the consequences of the war to the charting of the avenues for regeneration and ascendancy. Here memories of “the golden sun” (the achievement of Biafra) emerge both as a consolation and the way up to “the mountain top.” In conclusion, the paper explores the wider dimensions of the lessons of the war (chiefly with reference to Biafran self-reliant creativity as manifested in the achievements of its Research and Production Directorate and the Directorare of Propaganda to which Echeruo and other intellectuals belonged) towards a summary

statement of what is precisely implied by the poet by the trope of “the mountain top” in the context of post-Biafran Nigeria.

2. ‘REQUIEM’: THE PAINS AND GAINS OF WAR

It is perhaps more of a cliché today than an oxymoron to speak of war—any war—as an experience that is invariably as redolent with gain as it is with pain. In the face of the barbarism, betrayals, destruction and disappointments of the Irish civil war, the nationalist poet and dramatist, William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), screams ecstatically in the refrain of his poem, “Eastern 1916,” that “a terrible beauty is born!” Echeruo’s threnodic recollections of death and destruction in the Biafran war in Section I (“Requiem”) of *Distanced* is likewise intermingled, albeit in different circumstances,³ with joyful celebrations of beauty and heroism.

“Requiem” begins with a tersely pathetic title poem with the power and immediacy of a Japanese Haiku lyric.

They shot him down
 his first night out;
 We buried him
 the very next day

A morning sun proud over him (p. 6)

The quickness of ubiquitous violent death recaptured here is reminiscent of Achebe’s poem of similar brevity and poignancy, “Air Raid” (*Collected Poems*, 2000: 19):

It comes quickly
 the bird of death
 from evil forests of Soviet technology

A man crossing the road
 to greet a friend
 is much too slow.
 His friend cut in halves
 has other worries now
 than a friendly handshake
 at noon.

While both vignettes are from the same experience, the different between the two is stark. While Achebe recaptures a gory image of total and unmitigated disaster tinged with anger and disappointment over of the unexpected complicity of the Soviet Union in the sad and senseless death of innocent Biafrans, Echeruo’s picture of the same kind of sudden violent death evokes—by dint of pathetic fallacy—a sense of ethereal beauty as he summons a “morning sun proud over” the dead in his closing line.

We also see the birth of a terrible beauty in “Lilacs for Heroes” (p. 8). In this fine lyric, the key tropes (“lilacs”, “spring”, and “autumn”) that appear at first sight to be stubborn hangovers of alienisms from Echeruo’s earlier Euromodernist phase reveal themselves soon as antitheses of “harmattan” and other homely images and thus as appropriate codes in the poem’s pattern of rhetorical questions interrogating the ironic complicity of the otherwise beautiful “heroes” of

³ Yeats’ scream in “Eastern 1916” (“All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born”) stems from the radical change in his attitudes towards the Easter 1916 uprising against British rule championed by Roman Catholic lower-middle and working class. In Echeruo, on the other hand, the recognition of beauty in the heroism of the champions of the Biafran rebellion is neither an afterthought nor a reassessment of attitudes but an upfront and wholly affirmative position.

“this triumphant fatherland” with Neo-colonialists agencies (such as Shell-BP and other multinational oil companies) in the rape of their own patrimony: “In hushed creeks that nursed captains/And harlots/For fatherland’s fame?” There is ugliness, sure enough, on the flipside of the personality of the heroes; and grounded in the sarcasm that inheres from this recognition is the irony of schizophrenic patriotism that dominates Part II of *Distanced* (My Fatherland). The “mixed messages” noted in the patriotic “Biafran war songs” studied by Ogonna Agu (1991: 18) turn of perceived variations in “their educational, intellectual, emotional, entertainment and propaganda values.” In Echeruo’s *Distanced*, the “mixed messages” are more fundamentally ambiguous, recapturing patterns of split identities and allegiances within Biafra which, after the war, was transformed into patterns of split identities and allegiances between federal Nigeria and secessionist Biafra, of the double negation of both fatherlands and of the futility in the supreme self-sacrifice “Of men that died/For bravery’s beauty’s sake,” but without the fulfillment. For “these heroes/That wait to have a fatherland,” like their counterparts lamented by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and other poets of the first world war, Echeruo’s poem is but a consolatory wreath of “green lush of lilacs.” By juxtaposing waste and courage, as in “Only the Stains,” Echeruo constantly reminds us that, in every war, the enchantment of heroism is invariably negated by the tears, blood and irretrievable loss. This is true of “this brave captain and man” that “died that night/ at twenty-two” and for whom “Dream-widow nurses/ wept all night,” clothing him again, fixing “his stars” (or pips of ranks) and “kissing his battered lips”:

Only the stains now remain
 where he fought
 and the rags of blood
 which the faithful nurses
 have shared
 and sewn
 into their underskirts
 and the yellow sun
 that fed his love
 and made this mountain-man
 of him

In “The Blade,” despite his rotting carcass, Echeruo’s cynicism pales for most of the eulogy, allowing for an unequivocal salute to heroism almost in the manner of traditional praise-poetry:

He, *he-man*,
 bold-blade of palm,
 erect,
 thunder-maker man of mine,
 whose feet stood the sacred
 ground of fatherland
 and flung revenge
 to west and south and north
 till woods, marsh and men
 learnt his footfall who
 awed both beast and man—

 And to who there asks, Who?
 will all men, everlasting, say,
 He, *Dike!*

Requiem ends on a panegyric note with “The Torchman,” an apostrophic invocation to an

avenging hero—clearly a reincarnation in the Biafra war of survival, of the archetypal hero of Igbo folk legend known as *oku-na-agba-ozara* (as declaimed in the lyric, “flame-that-burns-the-grassland”):

Flames flare up
 where your ire burned
 them who thundered
 thousand arty drums
 from east and west—
 hard leaded rounds of death—
 on new-born land of men
 who rode the wind and rain
 and shame that year of years
 when death
 stalked them in mutual pens
 in west and north and in-between
 to this retreat

It is not difficult to place an historical face on the personality of this hero. The reference to “shame” in “that year of years/when death/stalked them in mutual pens/in west and north” seems clearly to evoke the *annus horribilis* of 1966—the year of the bloody massacre of Eastern Nigerians during the political crises preceding the Biafran secession and war of independence. Other suggestive references include the “new-born land of men”—a popular romantic image of Biafra with echoes of the cant of the Biafran propaganda broadcasts, some of it authored by Echeruo himself, and “this retreat” (from a common parlance in Biafra representing the exciting new nation as the final refuge of Easterners abused in cycles of bloody massacres in the west and the north). In the same vein, Biafra is involved as the beleaguered fatherland, “where booted men/and arms of lead and steel/now rush with hate /with murder in their eyes.” Against this scenario, one can easily see the face of the leader of the first military coup in Nigeria of January 15, 1966, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, a colonel in the Biafran army, the poet’s “my torch man” fabled in Biafran war lore for his extraordinary courage in “grassfields of unequal war/Where man-made thunder struck.” The poem can also apply to Christopher Okigbo, to whom several of the details of the scenario do apply as does the closing apostrophic vision, addressed to the poet of “flash this point/where death made you immortal.”

In the foregoing poems, we are dealing with poetry of action that celebrates vicarious facts of experience within a circumscribed space and time. The title poem, “Distanced,” is more personal and more deeply emotion-toned. It is an elegy on the death of the poet’s beloved and loving younger brother, Kevin Echeruo (1946-1868)—a gifted artist and poet—who died at the age of only twenty-two, albeit of natural causes:

Tolling.

Were it the hangman's only
 Of doom,

Yet would it tell
 A hundred miles from here
 (Good friend!)
 What only the losers know

That death kills
 And the spirit lives
 And memories haunt
 Both living and dead. (p. 12)

The intensity of this personal loss of a precocious and talented brother, whom the poet remembers as “Good friend!”¹ is underlined by the insistent sound of the death knell (made all the more overwhelming by the graphological ploy of placing the word “Tolling” as unit of attention set as an autonomous line of verse and complete stanza. As Okpewho (1985: 262) notes,

The way this word is left hanging loosely—entirely on its own and grammatically unconnected with the rest of the poem—gives is a striking feeling of something suspended and unfulfilled. What is *tolling* is either (literally) the bell for the funeral service in the village church, or (metaphorically) the memory of the dead man, which lingers on like the sound of a distant bell.”

The passion is further amplified by the hyperbolic comparison of the death to “doom” from “the hangman’s summary intervention and the imagined reverberation of tidings of the loss beyond “a hundred miles from here.” Further notes on Echeruo’s artistry are offered by Okpewho (1985: 262) with reference to the last line of the poem:

That the dead man should be haunted by the same memories that haunt the living implies that he is not *quite* dead. There can be no more effective image than this of a life snatched away in its prime, and Echeruo has painted this image with a poetic technique for which he is particularly well known: a combination of economy of expression and intensity of thought.

But as the poet confesses in my interview with him on his fiftieth birthday (Azuonye, 1987: 171), the meaning of the title *Distanced* goes beyond its immediate occasion (the loss of a brother). It encompasses the totality of the war experience (the loss of two fatherlands—Nigeria and Biafra):

Distanced is "distanced". Perhaps, one ought to have written poems during the war. One didn't. One only made sketches. The war was too real for some of us to allow for that. But at least, some of the poems were actually first drafted during the war. It was after the war that some of those poems came to be re-made in their kind of form and I thought that they were *distanced* from the original experience. That's the title. But *Distanced* also is the experience explored in the poems and the question was: will it, years from now, tell what had happened. I was so distanced from it that the telling can only be surreal. So, that's *Distanced*. There is no disillusionment. In general, I think it is the agony of the fatherland that one recalls...let's put in differently. The "fatherland"....There are at least two of them in that collection. In some cases, it is the fatherland,...our present fatherland. In some cases, it is the fatherland as at 1967—Biafra, the real fatherland, so to speak. And so, there are resonances of sorts: sometimes I was talking about Nigeria as my fatherland, sometimes about Biafra as my fatherland, sometimes both in the same context. But, I think, *Distanced* was also a reaction to some of the war poems of the time, specifically, J.P. Clark's or his *new name*?² You can sometimes "look the sun in the face."³ You can also "see God and live". Some have in fact seen God and they live, in a sense like Biafra. So in a sense, the death of Biafra is real, but in another sense, they only can see God who are dead, who could look Him in the face. So there is no disillusionment, only agony at the loss of a fatherland, I mean the losses of both fatherlands.

I have quoted this confession in full because it provides all the necessary background for a fruitful close reading of both Part II (“Prospect”) and Part II (“My Fatherland”) of *Distanced*.

3. ‘PROSPECT’: HEALING THE SOCIAL WOUNDS OF WAR

As stated in the introduction, the long lyric, “Prospect” (pp. 17-20) which constitutes Part II of *Distanced* comprises a philosophical reflection on the pathways to the healing of the social wounds of war. The social wounds of war presented are in the form of patterns of collective post-traumatic stress experienced by the ex-Biafrans after the loss of Biafra. A bridge between the initial inspiration to the idea of “distanced” and the full exploration of various associated moods and sentiments in Part 3 (“My Fatherland”), “Prospect” is a threnody on the humiliating experience of ex-Biafrans in their

relationships with other Nigerians following their defeat in January 1970, after three years of heroic resistance, “Prospect” is also a poem of regeneration, indeed Echeruo’s song of ascent “up these hills to the mountain top” (p. 18). The end of the war was a time of great disillusionment for all ex-Biafrans. In the poem, “hills” (“these hills”, “rotund hills”, “hunched up” hills, “other hills” that “rise”, etc) are an extended metaphor for the innumerable impediments that seem piled up against the erstwhile romantic revolutionaries in their quest for survival in a “fatherland” that had ostensibly offered a general amnesty with the cant “no victor, no vanquished.” These obstacles are symptomatic of the disabling *real-politik* of the Nigeria shade of the intractable “fatherland.” Marginalized, embittered, denied of love and forced to seek the comfort of secure snug-holes, the poetic persona is forced to give vent to his anguish:

Where, O where is love?
 Those hills are not love to me
 Here hideout-bound
 Watching alone the hills of the West (“Prospect,” ii)

Throughout the poem, the three cardinal points (east, west and north) are invoked and deployed in contexts that leave the reader in no doubt that they refer to the three regions of Nigeria’s first republic. Through them, the troublesome geopolitical cleavages in Nigeria are evoked:

From east and north,
 The Idlemen look out;
 The hills are hunched up
 Against the sky, bare:

But sometimes the poet points with directness of phrasing to some entities and parties he sees as among the villains of the scenario:

Here is game-and-hunting ground
 And gamboling fields for majors
 And war-worn women hunched up
 Against the Hamdalla skies
 bare and tyrannous
 with the urgency of rage and lust.

Unmistakable in these lines is a direct-pointing, through the synecdoche of “Hamdalla skies,” to the Kaduna Mafioso who, since the loss of the Biafra, have been in disproportionate and unrestrained control of the wealth of the nation. As a matter of fact, the poem is a statement in verse of an opinion expressed elsewhere by Echeruo about the collective post-traumatic experience of the Igbo as discussed after the war by an inner circle of Igbo leaders of thought:

Immediately after the war,...a group of us met for quite a while in Enugu and talked about the long-term effects of the war on the Igbo. Our people had virtually given up, wanted almost to give up—wanted almost to give up their own names. Our daughters spread out all over the country and got married to the erstwhile “enemies”. People sought to make their own separate peace—in finding jobs; and new contracts, etc. That would be total alienation. It’s one of the points made in our report that everything had to be done to enable our people regain their sense of self-confidence...But, it’s always like that after wars. What was difficult with our experience, immediately after the war, was that we were not sovereign. There is a difference between a defeated sovereign nation and a defeated non-sovereign people...A defeated sovereign nation would lick its wounds arid begin to re-build. Its leaders would speak to its people—talk of reassurance, even if it is overstretched. There was no such leader to do that hence the loss [173] of that impulse to re-emerge, that enterprising spirit. I don’t think it would go on for very long. It was the consequence of a genuine leadership not having emerged that was partly to blame for all the suffering. Chief Asika, unfortunately, was not the figure to say to ex-Biafrans: “We fought, we lost”. He had no way

of saying that. He was in no position to say that. He could only say "You fought; you lost". And he did say that. And, therefore, he drifted apart from the people, and the people from their roots (Echeruo, in Azuonye, 1987: 173-174).

By and large, these loveless cleavages and situations are teaching moments or opportunities to learn the lessons of the war and to cultivate the will to survive. Says he: “I will ask for blessings”; “I will stop and teach my heart,” and finally,

I will teach my heart to romp
 O, like madness in spring
 like love in Eden
 By Spring waters, O Eve!
 Up these hills to the mountain's top. (p. 18)

The final evocation takes us back to “Eve” and the “Spring waters” of Eden, as depicted in “Sophia,” thus to the archetypal moment of rebellion against coercive power and authority—the “sweet” orgasmic fulfillment of the human capability to bring down to earth the image of the “the victor’s sky,” with which the poem begins. With these powerful *litotes*, the poem ends with the consolation that the successful rebellion of the first woman against the injunctions of Almighty God offers the hope (or “prospect”) that the post-war prohibitions of the tin gods of the new dispensation will be overcome in the course of time.

4. ‘MY FATHERLAND’: FROM SCHIZOPHRENIA TO REGENERATION

The foregoing reflections on the other side of “the fatherland” leads us straight into Section 3 (“My Fatherland”), in which we have the largest number of poems in the collection (eleven altogether), among them five of the poet’s favorite poems (personal communication)—“Manifesto” (p. 21), “The Frames” (p. 27), “The Anniversary” (p. 29), and “Their Finest Hour” (p. 33). But, in order to gauge the tone and spirit of this body of poems, we need to begin with the title piece, “My Fatherland” (p. 31):

Where is the new argument
 to this tale?

Is the roundtable ceremony
 still bereft of meat and salt
 —and valour?

Are the big-beaked scavengers
 still hurrying to sundown?

Is the King still king
 among the fluting masqueraders?

Is this my fatherland? (p. 30).

This is a perfect image of the triumph of disorder in post-war Nigeria—a Nigeria reduced by the terrorism of years of visionless military rule to a morass of epistemological emptiness, spiritual nullity, ethical disorientation, and cultural sterility. Set in a mirage of what appears to be a traditional folk festival, what is actually conjured up is a deceptive Yeatsian “ceremony of innocence” in which “the best lack all conviction/while the worst are full passionate intensity.” The idea of an Arthurian “roundtable” of chivalric equals is negated by the anomalies and emptiness of the ritual. Not only is it a joyless feast “bereft of meat and salt,” its illusionary masks, which on the surface appear to be like *ojionu* (the hawk or eagle mask of real traditional festivals) are in actual fact “big-beaked scavengers,” akin to these same breed of birds of prey gloating over carrion at the beginning Okigbo’s *Lament of the*

Silent Sisters I.

THIS SHADOW of carrion incites
 and in rhythms of silence
 Urges us; gathers up our broken
 hidden feather-of-flight,
 To this anguished cry of Moloch:

By the time this poem was published in 1975, Echeruo the scholar had published two of the outcomes of his research on Igbo folk festivals and rituals in the light of the theory of the origins of drama (1972 and 1973). His Africanisms in this poem are thus perhaps more deeply grounded in an understanding of travesties of custom and ceremony (of wholesome and socially regenerative *mimesis* and *diaonia*) in the absence of active reenactments of potent myths to live by in the empty rituals of the three post-war “rs”—reconciliation, rehabilitation and relief. Not surprisingly, the poem ends with the vitriolic rhetorical question, “Is this my fatherland?” The answer is deafeningly emphatic! If this is a fatherland at all, it is a fatherland no one can recognize.

The theme of the fractured “fatherland” is continued in “Statue on the Marina” (p. 22), “Rachel’s Song” (p. 23), and “Sheba’s Lament (p. 24). “Telling tales” in “Statue on the Marina,” an ex-Biafran, returned to Lagos (former capital of Nigeria), is struck by a sculpture “with sinews of marble” chiseled by a fellow Biafran, presumably Ben Enwonwu. Siezing upon it as one of many contributions of his people to the land in which he now roams dispossessed, he bursts into a therapeutic ego-trip and wish-fulfillment fantasy:

I chiseled him
 Who holds God’s light on Lagos
 Like a thunderbolt
 Looking out to sea and sky
 Beyond those boats
 And the the Lebanese men
 And lace-breed Yoruba
 On the Marina front.
 I made the fire he home.
 Pass him by, my countrymen,
 Like proud MiGs roaring past
 In war-haste to that darkness
 Beyond the lagoon
 Where God sees not (p. 22).

In “Rachel’s Song,” the sight of “ugly caesarian stitches/ where the rags lie/and the clots/ a baby also lies/ that died/ on the surgeon’s knife,” evokes a memory of the waste of infant life in a surgical operation (as the federal police action against Biafra was initially called) that amounts a massacre of innocents of the kind in Rama bemoaned by Rachael in the New Testament: “how mortally touching/ o fatherland,” the poem sarcastically concludes. In “Sheba’s Lament,” a cryptic prophecy of “the doom of Israel’s Joy/and our wonder/that had a fatherland,” issues from the mouth of the Queen of Sheba, just wedded to King Solomon.

Now have I wedded
 The god-sent Joy of Israel
 His bed my bed
 My child his own son.
 He will be my joy
 till that crack of thunder
 tells the doom of Israel’s joy

and our wonder
that had a fatherland.
(p.26)

But its relevance of this prophecy to the post war situation in Nigeria after the Biafra challenge is yet to be understood. There is perhaps a link between this vision and the echoes that dominate the poet’s memory in “I Hear Echoes Only”:

I am no sing-song-master
no weaverbi rd.

I, once song-master,
only remember singing
of the blue mornings
filled with the cheer of patriots
and the brazen daring
of proud proud men.

Exile, I do not sing
beyond these smiles and tears
of fatherland,
but only talk and weep
each day
at the golden sun’s unsung decay
beyond the hills. (p. 24)

Here, Echeruo’s angst over the loss of Biafra is tied personal memory of his role as a key conductor of the smooth propaganda orchestra of Biafra through his directorship of the War Information Bureau and chairmanship of His Excellency’s Briefs Committee (a committee that advised and composed the speeches of the Biafran Head of State, General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu. As “song-master,” Echeruo’s words and phrases resonate in several of the famous speeches of Ojukwu, the newstalks of Okokon Ndem, and the morale-boosting war reports delivered to the tune of the March from XXX’s *Aida*.

It would appear that the confidences shared with the younger generation in the homiletic piece, “To My Son,” draw from the same experience as “I Hear Echoes Only”; but they are so deeply personal that we can never know what it is precisely. But, from the pattern of semantic and antithetical parallelism,

my laughter/ the other night/	beneath	the bamboo bed/	in granny’s hut”
that laughter from the grave/	beneath	a trench/	on the Awgu road
my trumpet some awesome night	above	the shame/	on the same Awgu road
		of grave and trench	

the contrast between insidious “laughter” that startles or angers from “beneath” and the triumphant “trumpet” that sounds from “above” suggests a trajectory from shame, defeat and despair to pride, confidence and hope, a trajectory that charts the kind of optimism most ex-Biafran strove to share with and pass on to their children. The closing line (“And you’ll be there, I know”) sums up that final ascent of the spirit above the desolations of the war.

Dominated by images of “morning”, “dawn”, and “sunset”, “Manifesto” seems to be a poem of rebirth—a “dream” come true of a joyful atmosphere evoked by means of the double simile, “like morning,/like glory after death.” But this is a poem of oxymorons (“dreams are real”, “sunbird...at night”; “wisdom is folly”), that call for a closer look beneath the veneer:

Dreams are real.

The sunbird sings
sometimes at night
out of joy.

Wisdom is folly's dawn
folly's gift
like love at the end.

And, indeed what we see beneath the veneer are "daggers in the East/ like fires/ sweeping the face of the world," a world in which the living are as dead as the dead, seeing or knowing "no mornings", "no folly"; "no glory". In concluding, the poet urges courage and resoluteness in the face of skepticism and fear:

Don't fear the daggers of morning;
don't fear to look this sunrise
in the face (p. 21).

In "The Frames," we have a dark memento of "war and the pity of war," leading to further doleful reflections on the post-war experience of ex-Biafrans ("they"). With "two frames" as the opening unit of attention (as in "Distanced"), we are led through an existentialist "stumbling" through "mist", "groans", "splutter of guns", and "roll of mortar," in a regression to "the far west":

in the morning mist
they stumbled their way
to the far west;
and their vague groans
framed the splutter of guns
and the hard roll
of mortar
as they stumbled on.

the birds are on wing
before dawn
in this mist
and new winds sweep
leaf and stem with flares
beyond retell.

what fires
clasp these harried loins
in this place of death?
what winds cry past us
in this tunnel of fear?
what new echoes, tormented
in consideration,
moan ruthlessly beyond us?

do not, do not
remember the many days
and months
as if on wing
chasing death from these fields
fighting the fire-flares
that close in now
in chase.

this then is the holy spot
for our sacrifice. (p. 27)
The maggots
are crawling towards the west
ahead of us
to the rendezvous.

I know there will be no urns
and no bones
to send home
till this mist clears
for another sun-struck morn (p. 28)

In "The Anniversary," recalls the first post-war celebration of the Biafra declaration of independence on May 30 1971, by a casual group of "music-makers, people's men/ tongue-tied wakeners/ heaving, unheard,/ drums trumpets/ past/ my doorstep, I. / first foster-son/ fatherland's darling dancer/ / lover on." Although the poet shares the passion of the celebrants, he sees the celebration is a pathetic ritual (hence the anaphoric repetition of "Pity them"). With "heart-tied to silent tears and silence," he is gripped with fear 'of "the sharp proud march/ of soldiers" (presumably Nigerian soldiers) "in this morning light," as "the song-laughter/cheer-cries of wonder/ from pipes and drums/ of fatherland's music-making men/.../cheer up in the morning light." With memories of the setting at noon of the golden sun of Biafra, the poem closes on a note of disconsolation with intertextual resonances of the titles of postwar memoirs such as Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973) and Vincent Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), both imaging the sudden collapse of the Biafran dream:

They wake now,
the sadder people's music-makers,
uncheered, unheard,
who, whilom, saw the sharp tongues
of the sun,
golden, my god, in morning splendor
fall at noon
back to the edge of the world
in the east, unmourned (p. 30)

Of all the poems of *Distanced*, the closest to my heart is "Their Finest Hour," not least because I was a witness to its birth at Akwakuma, Owerri, in 1968. I was the first person to read the freshly typed poem as soon as it rolled out of the typewriter of the then secretary of the War Information Bureau, novelist Eddie Iroh. For days, I pored over the poem and was comforted by its humanity and optimism in the face of so much destruction and hopelessness. For me, the poem became the song of Biafra and the jewel of the collection of war time poetry which I collected with the assistance of Lovett Okoroji:

I have known, beside the hearth,
the little ewes and the small kids
by the bulging udders, the fireside,
listening to a mild wind
watching the fires come and go
the wood cackle and shine.

Now, I do not know.

Where will the ewes now go, where the kids?
Do I now know

the hearth from the fires that consume,
with this roaring wind in the air
and the fires still, still coming
the wind fanning the embers to death?

O, the little ones! O, my lovely ones.

Let the gentle wind, let the udders
where ancestral fires burned
be still, still feed,
warm, O, and caress.
Else what tempests, what breeds
in this dear, O, this dear ravaged land (p. 33).

5. WIDER PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that if Biafra had survived it would by now have become a self-reliant and truly independent, modern state and an example to the rest of Africa, the black world, and indeed the entire postcolonial world. The seeds of independent nationhood had already been sown in the efficiency and sophistication of the many institutions that sustained the Biafran revolution, especially its the Directorate for Propaganda (within which Echeruo directed the War Information Bureau) and the Research and Production Directorate (which against all odds counteracted every impediment imposed by the economic blockade of the new nation made possible by the unholy alliance of the Western democracies and the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites). The necessary story of the inimitable Biafran propaganda machinery is yet to be written; but details of the accomplishments of the Biafran Research and Production Directorate is the subject of numerous publications, among them Ukaegbu (2005), Anya (1993), Arene (1997), Ebeogu (1992), Ezekwe (1997), Madiebo (1980), Ogbudinkpa (1985), and (Onyeani, 2003). Citing several of these accomplishments, Ukaegbu (2005: 1396) refutes the widely held assumption “that the content of scientific and technological education that Third World scientists and engineers receive abroad is so far removed from the problems of their native countries that they are unable to do socially relevant science at home.” On the contrary, he asserts,

The Biafran experience challenges these assumptions. All these perceived handicaps existed in Biafra, yet through the wartime organization known as Research and Production (RAP), Biafran scientists, engineers, and technicians managed to perform socially relevant science, sustain their efforts through the three-year Nigerian-Biafran war, and put Biafra on the path to technological development, had the young nation survived. Thus I suggest that technological development is driven more by the effective harnessing of human agency, nurtured by appropriate sociopolitical conditions, than by the presence of glamorous technological preconditions. That proposition is examined here in the context of scientific and technological practice in prewar Nigeria, wartime Biafra, and postwar Nigeria. I conclude with lessons and suggestions for socially relevant science in Nigeria. By socially relevant science I mean the use of educational skills and knowledge in science and technology to solve problems of society while continuing to advance that knowledge to improve and perfect technological devices. Where scientists, engineers, and technicians cannot rise to that challenge in this age of science-based production, their work degenerates into social irrelevance (Ukaegbu, 2005: 1396).

A Detailed account of the achievements of RAP has been given by in her invaluable book, . Some of the spicy details of the practicality of these achievements can be gleaned from several other sources, among them the memoir of Alexander Madiebo, the last Chief of General Staff of the Biafran Armed Forces:

As soon as Port Harcourt fell in May 1968, and with it, most of the oil fields and the refinery, shortage of fuel was felt all over the country. A Petroleum Management Board (PMB) was established to control what was available as well as find ways of effecting replenishments. The Board designed and built a sizeable

and efficient refinery at Uzuakoli. What they produced was not sufficient for the needs of a nation at war, thereby making petrol rationing imperative. The Research and Production Directorate, which considered no problem impossible to solve, soon stepped in to assist. It designed and built several refineries and produced petrol and diesel at a considerably fast rate. With its assistance also, all major armed forces units and formations as well as civilian organizations set up oil refineries. Products of these numerous refineries were generally fair and satisfied the urgent fuel needs of the nation even after the main refinery at Uzuakoli was lost to the enemy (1980:114-15, emphasis added)

Ukaegbu’s conclusions on the after-effects of the loss of Biafra for the Black world is particularly relevant to the deconstruction of Echeruo’s image of “the golden sun” in *Distanced*. He reifies the image of “the golden sun” in mundane terms as a “golden opportunity” lost:

The failure of Biafra aborted the foundations it had laid, as well as its readiness, for a takeoff in technological development. That takeoff would have shown that Black Africa was capable of technological development even if only at a crude and rudimentary level. The history of technology shows that societies quite often proceed rapidly from crude to polished stages of development. Hence, Black Africa lost a society, a golden opportunity, that might have served not only as a technological role model but could also have kindled the intraregional imitation and competition historically known as catalysts of technological advancement.

There thus is absolutely nothing romantic about the imagery of “the golden sun” and the cognate metaphors by which the achievement of Biafra has been evoked in the poems collected in *Distanced*. Biafra as a promise of African renewal was real and the enemies of Africa—the Western powers and African surrogates knew it. Against the background of the mirage of independence won on the so-called platter of gold, which between 1957 and 1967 shored up nothing but instability and crises and death—a postcolonial existentialist circuit of doom evoked by Okigbo in the concluding lines of his early poem. “On the New Year” (1959) in his frighteningly accurate prophecy of African nation states like Nigeria,

forever playing this zero-sum game
With fate as mate, and forever
Slaying and mating as one by one
Our tombstones rise in the void (lines 43-45):

Biafran bid for independence came as the very first attempt by an African nation to seize its own destiny on its own terms and to define its own goals without the usual paternalistic but disable feasibility and development agenda shaped by the vested interests of Western neocolonialism. The then British prime minister, Harold Wilson, put the cold facts on the table when he uncharacteristically stated: >>>>. The West clearly foresaw the domino effect of the success of Biafra in arousing the collective best self of postcolonial Africa towards the protection of African resources for African peoples and did everything in their power to squelch its resurgence. There is in fact no comparison between Biafra and other African states such as Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, Angola etc that have gained their independence through armed rebellion or revolution. In the southern African states, the goals of true independence ended up being compromised by truth and reconciliation agenda that kowtowed to the vested interests of the powerful and entrenched white minority elites; and where such a truth and reconciliation failed, as in Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, the implementation of the goals of armed revolution against racist oligarchy and malignant colonialist exploitation has been transformed by Western divide et impera tactics into a state of permanent crisis in which the revolutionary leaders is stymied into a diabolical dictatorship. The Biafran situation was different. Despite ethnic differences, already addressed by the provincial system of government and the principles of devolution entrenched in the Ahiara Declaration, the state of Biafra was a homogenous African nation without the split allegiances constituted by the white minorities in southern Africa. It was clear to the West and the rest

of the neocolonialist world that hard times of difficult negotiations lay ahead in post-war independent Biafra and Africa led by the Biafran example.

This scenario does not by any means seek to romanticize the real politik of Biafra and the obvious failures and miscalculations of its leadership under Odumegwu Ojukwu. There would have been political turmoil, in a high and moving tension, in postwar, independent Biafra. As many a perceptive observer know all too well, Ojukwu would have been overthrown and replaced by a more perceptive leadership. The revolution would have been reclaimed and directed to the goal to which it was destined. There is however no denying the possibility that the opposite could also have happened, resulting in business as usual in Biafra as in other postcolonial African states. But such a turn of events would have been tantamount to a colossal tragedy of the kind which Echeruo fears in part I of *Distanced* as he pays tribute to those who paid the supreme sacrifice for the survival of the exciting new nation.

The tragedy of Biafra, as aptly recaptured in Echeruo’s *Distanced* is the triumph of the decadent idea of Nigeria, a triumph that is also a tragedy for Africa as a whole. As our analysis of the poems reveal, the immediate impact of the loss of Biafra, for ex-Biafran, was the fusion of patriotic schizophrenia and double-consciousness—the loss of two fatherlands: Biafra and Nigeria. But the impediments (“hills”) that occupy the post-war socio-psychological topography of the geographical expression called Nigeria (to borrow Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s⁴ well-known imagery) are not just impediments to the reintegration of ex-Biafrans into the body politic of the failed postcolonial state of Nigeria but a tragically indefinite deferment of the true goals of African nationalism going back to the 19th century—a subject to which Echeruo has been much engaged in his scholarship. From the 19th century nationalist journalism of Victorian Lagos and its antecedents in the works of Blyden and Horton, through the writings of early twentieth century nationalists such as Jackson, Solanke and Macaulay, to the immediate pre-independence anti-national writings of Nnamdi Azikiwe and his contemporaries, the emergence of a permanent postcolonial state of Nigeria was never an end in itself but a means to an end. Nnamdi Azikiwe puts the matter lucidly:

The West African Colonies have a common foe.... So long as we think in terms of Nigeria, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Gambia, and not as one United West Africa we must be content with a Colonial Dictatorship instead of a Government of the people by the people for the people—namely, Democracy.

Thus, as (Coleman, 1958:) observes,

In the early years of his career Azikiwe seldom if ever referred to a person as a "Nigerian"; invariably it was "African" versus "European." The title of his main organ, *West African Pilot*, suggestive of his expansive, universalist, racialist orientation, Azikiwe arrived in time to carry on the tradition of Jackson and Solanke.

The vision of the early nationalists was clearly that of a Union of West Africa or of Black Africa as a whole. Squelched by colonialist and neocolonialist manipulation, one of the consequences is the failed state of Nigeria which Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka has rightly called “the open sore of a continent.” It was to this open sore that the defeat of Biafra brought back Echeruo and his Biafran contemporaries after the glorious vision of the possibilities of a truly independent African nation. Clearly the imagery of the ubiquitous cataracts of hills in a wide diversity of shapes in *Distanced* is an image of the apparently insurmountable problems of living inside this open sore. At first sight, the ultimately resolution of the problems seems to be a defeatist Hobson’s choice—either permanent disillusionment and defeat or permanent assimilation into the maelstrom of the triumph of disorder that has become the

⁴ As rightly pointed out by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, “Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no ‘Nigerians’ in the same sense as there are ‘English’, ‘Welsh’, or ‘French’”. The word ‘Nigerian’ is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not” (*Path to Nigerian Freedom*, 1947: 47-48)

distinctive characteristic of Nigerian nationhood. But, as our analysis shows, Echeruo eschews any consideration of this choice and opts for the true lesson of the war. Composed within the first four years (1970-74) after the end of the Biafran war of independence, the nineteen lyrics that make up his collection of war poetry, *Distanced* (1975), look back with extraordinary candor and passion into the future of the Biafran experience, especially with regard to the problems of reintegration into post-war Nigeria. Burdened by intense agony over what the poetic persona sees as the loss of two "fatherlands"—Biafra ("the real fatherland") and Nigeria ("the victor's sky")—and confronted with "rotund hills", "hunched-up hills", and "other hills" that "rise" as extended metaphors for the numerous impediments on his path, he resolutely teaches himself to avert disabling bitterness and to navigate his way "up these hills to the mountain top." In this respect, Echeruo's strategy stands illuminated by Jay Wright's (1987: 15-16) commentary on the transmutation of the burden of memory in Okigbo and Soyinka into social praxis:

Like Okigbo and Soyinka, the attentive black American poet has been able to see creative dimensions in myth and formal possibilities in ritual. You need not look for a one to one correspondence in any poem; a poem is not ritual. But the ritualistic pattern of separation, transition and incorporation to which we have earlier referred can illuminate and even define what we may call an epistemology of poetry. The difficulty in Okigbo's poetry does not reside in his often capricious vocabulary, or, as the critics would have it, his disreputable privacy. His poetry's difficulty comes with his refusal to set aside the difficult search for fulfillment. Okigbo knows that the questions one asks and the form of the questioning determine the answers, and finds in ritual a form conducive to the most rigorous self- and cultural examination, undertaken in an exact and fertile context. There, to borrow Soyinka's words again, "It is, in fact, not a question of the difference between 'I' and 'we' but a deeper subsumption of the self into vision and experience. And although this applies to all poetry, we may insist that this is the true African sensibility, in which the animist knowledge of the objects of ritual is one with the ritualism, in which the physical has not been split from the psychic, nor can the concept exist of the separation of action from poetry." Within the paradigm of ritual form, Okigbo's return to origins is a return to authentic individuality, buttressed by a history and a culture. Attention to ritual in any traditional society will reveal the attempt, which is apparent in Okigbo and other black poets, to look into experience and to go beyond what is merely given to invest it with a significance which enhances and restructures experience.

Distanced is thus, on the balance, not a cycle of poems of disillusionment but of songs of regeneration and ascent informed by a determination (born of the lessons of the war) to make the most of the unfulfilled promises of "the golden sun" (Biafra) within the context of a reconfigured Nigerian nationhood.

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Wilfred Owen's (1965:31) admonition that "all a poet can do today is warn"

NOTES

¹ Okpewho (1985: 262n) recognizes the phrase used here by Echeruo as an old English phrase for a dear relative.

² J.P. Clark's new name is J.P. Clark-Bekederemo.

³ See J.P. Clark's *Casualties* (Longman,1970). The poem alluded to here is "Song" (p. 1): I can look the sun in the face/ But the friends that I have lost/ I dare not look at any