

CRITICAL  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON  
CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO  
Donatus Ibe Nwoga



An Original by Three Continents 

# **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO**

**Compiled and Edited by Donatus Ibe Nwoga**

**An Original by Three Continents Press**



© Three Continents Press 1984

ISBN 0-89410-258-3

ISBN 0-89410-259-1 (pbk)

LC No.: 80-53349

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the publisher except for brief quotations in reviews or articles.

Cover design by Tom Gladden (for Three Continents edition)

Three Continents Press  
1346 Connecticut Ave. N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036



Drawings by kind permission and © Obiora Udechukwu

## Acknowledgments

With pleasure I record my gratitude to the following individuals and publishers who have granted permission for essays and extracts from essays and books to be reproduced in this book:

- Chinua Achebe. "Preface" from *Don't Let Him Die* (1980). Reprinted by permission of the author and Fourth Dimension Publishing Co., Inc., Enugu.
- Joel A. Adedeji. "A Dramatic Approach to Okigbo's 'Limits'" from *Conch* 3, 1 (1971). Reprinted by permission of the editor Sunday O. Anozie.
- Joseph C. Anafulu. "Christopher Okigbo, 1932-1967: A Bio-Bibliography" from *Research in African Literatures* 9, 1 (1978). Reprinted by permission of the author and the University of Texas Press.
- Sunday O. Anozie. Extracts from *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (1972). Reprinted by permission of the author and Evans Brothers, London, and Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., New York. "Poetry and Empirical Logic: A Correspondence Theory of Truth in Okigbo's 'LAMENTs,'" from *Conch* 2, 1 (1970). Reprinted by permission of the editor Sunday O. Anozie. "Okigbo's *Heavensgate*: A Study of the Art as Ritual," *Ibadan* 15 (1963). Reprinted by permission of Ibadan University Press.
- Ulli Beier. Review of *Heavensgate* in "Three Mbari Poets," from *Black Orpheus* 12 (1962). Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Roland Bouyssou. "Labyrinths ou le quete initiatique de Christopher Okigbo," from *Caliban: Annales de l'Universite de Toulouse: Le Mirail* (1972). Published by permission of the author and the editor in a translation from the French by Prof. Judith McDowell of the University of Texas at Arlington.
- Chinweizu. "Prodigals, Come Home," from *Okike* 4 (1973). Published by permission of the editor, Chinua Achebe.
- O.R. Dathorne. "Review of *Limits*," from *Black Orpheus* 15 (1964). Reprinted by permission of the author. "Ritual and Ceremony in Okigbo's Poetry" from *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 5, 1/2 (1968). Reprinted by permission of the current editor, Mr. A.J. Gurr.
- Romanus N. Egudu. "Ezra Pound in African Poetry: Christopher Okigbo," from *Comparative Literature Studies* 8, 2 (1971). Reprinted by permission of the author and the University of Illinois Press. "Okigbo's 'Distances': A Retreat from Christ to Idoto," from *Conch* 5 (1973). Reprinted by permission of the editor Sunday O. Anozie.
- Philemon Victor Gomwalk. "The Stages of Style and Thematic Preoccupation in Okigbo's Poetry of *Labyrinths*" from *Kuka: Journal of the*

- English Department, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1978–79. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Annemarie Heywood. “The Ritual and the Plot: The Critic and Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*” from *Research in African Literatures* 9, 1 (1978). Reprinted by permission of the author and the University of Texas Press.
- Ime Ikiddeh. “Iron, Thunder, and Elephants: A Study of Okigbo’s ‘Path of Thunder,’ ” from *New Horn* 1, 2 (1974). Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Dan S. Izevbaye. “Okigbo’s Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird: A Reading of *Heavensgate* (1962),” from *African Literature Today* 6 (1973); “From Reality to the Dream: The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo,” from *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*, ed. Edgar Wright (1973). Reprinted by permission of the publishers: Heinemann Educational Books, London, and Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., New York.
- Omolara Leslie. “The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo: Its Evolution and Significance.” Reprinted by permission of Raman K. Singh, editor of *Studies in Black Literature*, 4, 2 (1973), and of Thomas J. Holdworth, Contract and Grant Officer on behalf of The Regents of the University of California, publishers of *Ufahamu*, 4, 1 (1973).
- Bernth Lindfors. Extracts from “Okigbo as Jock” from *English in Africa*, 6, 1 (1979). Reprinted by permission of the author and the editor, Andre de Villiers.
- Gerald Moore. Extract from *The Chosen Tongue* (Longman, London, 1971). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
- Anthony Nazombe. “Meaning in Okigbo’s Poetry,” from *Odi*, Journal of the English Department, Chancellor College, Malawi, 3, 1 (1978). Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Christopher Okigbo. Quotations from “Interview with Lewis Nkosi, Ibadan, 1962,” “Interview with Dennis Duerden, London, 1963,” “Interview with Robert Serumaga, London, 1965” from *African Writers Talking*, ed. Dennis Duerdin and Cosmo Pieterse (Heinemann, London, and Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., New York). Reprinted by permissions of the publishers.
- Kole Omotosho. Extracts from “Christopher Okigbo: A Personal Portrait” from *New Horn*, 1, 2 (1974). Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Muriel Rukeyser. Review of *Limits* from *African Forum*, 1, 1 (1965). The copyright holder could not be traced.
- Paul Theroux. “Christopher Okigbo,” from *Transition*, 22 (1965). Reprinted by permission of the author and the editor, Wole Soyinka.
- Peter Thomas. Extracts from “Ride me Memories,” from *African Arts*, 1, 4 (1968). Reprinted by permission of the author and the Art Director, *African Arts*.

- Obiora Udechukwu. "Aesthetics and the Mythic Imagination: Notes on Christopher Okigbo's *Heavensgate*, and Uche Okeke's *Drawings*." Published here for the first time by permission of the author.
- Nyong J. Udoeyop. Extracts from "A Branch of Giant Fennel" from *Three Nigerian Poets* (Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1973). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
- Theo Vincent. "Okigbo's *Labyrinths*," from *Black Orpheus*, 2, 7 (1972). Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Dennis Williams. Review of *Heavensgate* in "Three Mbari Publications" from *Nigeria Magazine*, 75 (1962). Reprinted by permission of the editor.

I also express gratitude to the editor of *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* for permission to reprint my article "Okigbo's *Limits: An Approach to Meaning*" which appeared in Vol. 7, No. 1 (1972). My other essays in the collection were written for this publication.

The pen drawings which illustrate the volume were done by Obiora Udechukwu and reproduced here with his permission.

**NIGER**

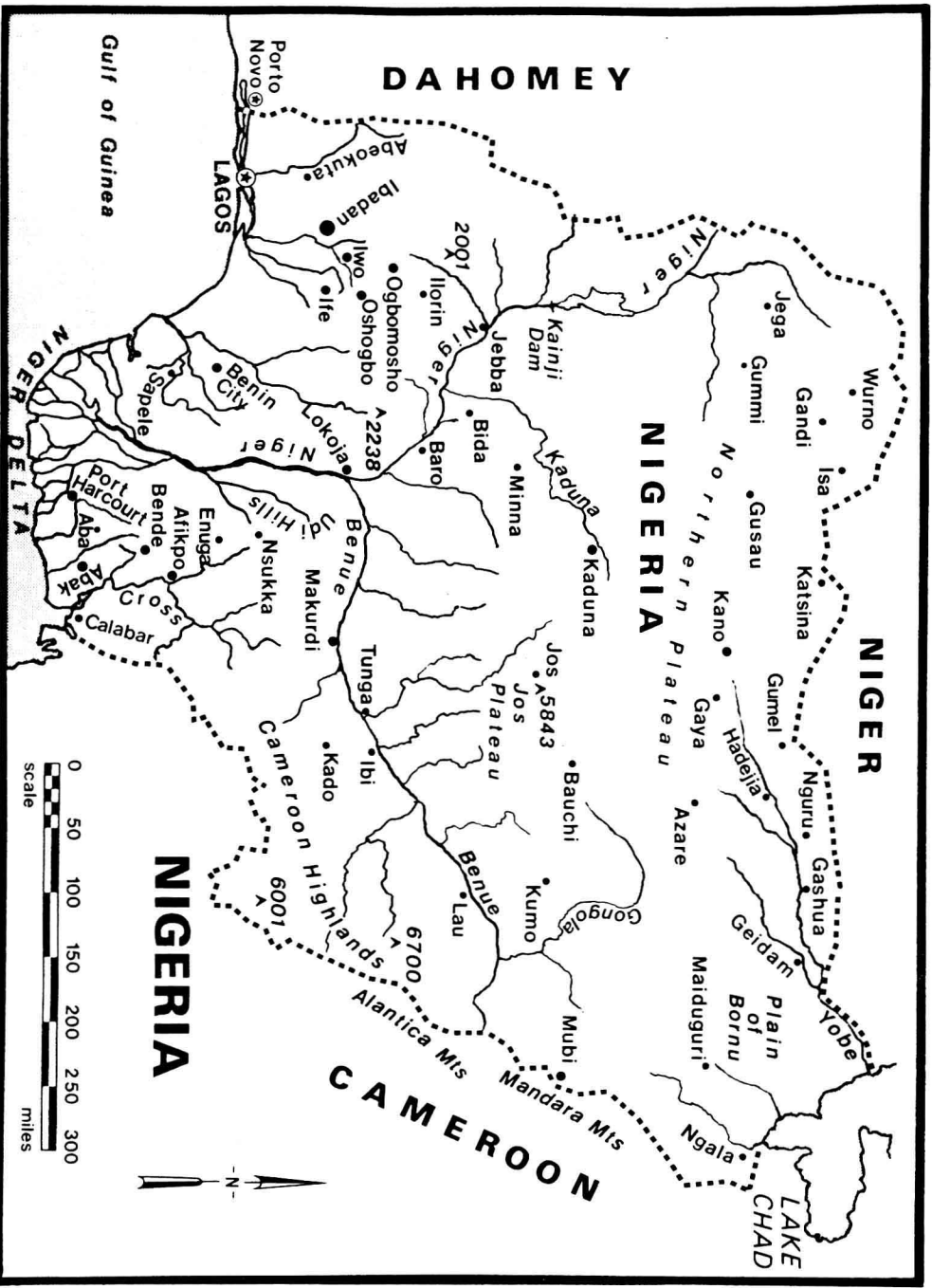
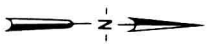
**NIGERIA**

**CAMEROON**

**DAHOMY**

Gulf of Guinea

**NIGERIA**



## CONTENTS

Preface	3
Part I     In Memoriam	
Don't Let Him Die (Chinua Achebe)	9
Christopher Okigbo: The Man and the Poet (Donatus Ibe Nwoga)	14
Part II     Reviews and Studies of Individual Works	
HEAVENSGATE	
Review of Heavensgate in "Three Mbari Poets" (Ulli Beier)	43
Review of Heavensgate, 1962 (Dennis Williams)	45
"Okigbo's Heavensgate: A Study of Art as Ritual" (S.O. Anozie)	48
"Extract from Okigbo: A Branch of Giant Fennel" (N.J. Udoeyop)	55
"Okigbo's Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird: A Reading of 'Heavensgate,' 1962" (D.S. Izevbaye)	65
"Aesthetics and the Mythic Imagination: Notes on Christopher Okigbo's <i>Heavensgate</i> and Uche Okeke's <i>Drawings</i> " (Obiora Udechukwu)	78
LIMITS	
Review of <i>Limits</i> (1964) (O.R. Dathorne)	86
From Review "Two African Poets" (Muriel Ruykeyser)	88
"A Dramatic Approach to Okigbo's 'Limits'" (Joel A. Adedeji)	90
"Okigbo's <i>Limits</i> : An Approach to Meaning" (Donatus Ibe Nwoga)	95



## SILENCES

“Poetry and Empirical Logic: A Correspondence Theory of Truth in Okigbo’s <i>Laments</i> ” (S.O. Anozie)	105
“The Emergence of the Poet of Destiny: A Study of Okigbo’s Lament of the Silent Sisters” (Donatus Ibe Nwoga)	117

## DISTANCES

“ <i>Distances</i> : Fantasy or Dialectic” (S.O. Anozie)	131
“Okigbo’s Distances: A Retreat from Christ to Idoto” (R.N. Egudu)	153

## PATH OF THUNDER

Extract from “Okigbo: A Branch of Giant Fennel” (N.J. Udoeyup)	167
“Prodigals Come Home” (Chinweizu)	177
“Iron, Thunder and Elephants: A Study of Okigbo’s ‘Path of Thunder’” (Ime Ikiddeh)	184

## LABYRINTHS

“Okigbo’s Labyrinths” (Theophilus Vincent)	196
“The Stages of Style and Thematic Preoccupation in Okigbo’s Poetry of <i>Labyrinths</i> ” (Philemon Victor Gomwalk)	201
“The Ritual and the Plot: The Critic and Okigbo’s <i>Labyrinths</i> ” (Annemarie Heywood)	207
“ <i>Labyrinths</i> , or the Initiation Quest of Christopher Okigbo” (Roland Bouyssou)	226

## Part III General Essays and Interviews

Okigbo Interview with Louis Nkosi	237
Okigbo Interview with Dennis Duerden	243
Okigbo Interview with Robert Serumaga	247
Extract from Okigbo Interview with Marjorie Whitelaw (1965)	252

“Christopher Okigbo” (Paul Theroux)	254
“Ritual and Ceremony in Okigbo’s Poetry” (O.R. Dathorne)	261
“Vision and Fulfillment” (Gerald Moore)	274
“The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo: Its Evolution and Significance” (Omolar Leslie)	288
“From Reality to the Dream: The Poetry of Christopher Okigbo” (Dan S. Izevbaye)	300
“Meaning in Okigbo’s Poetry” (Anthony Nazombe)	328
“Ezra Pound in African Poetry: Christopher Okigbo” (Romanus Egudu)	337

## Bibliographies

Christopher Okigbo, 1932–1967: A Bio-Bibliography (Joseph C. Anafulu)	349
Addenda to Okigbo Bibliography (1982) (Bernth Lindfors)	362

Notes on Contributors	365
-----------------------	-----

## Drawings by Obiora Udechukwu

Cover Drawing for “Homage to Christopher Okigbo” catalogue/7
Portrait of Young Okigbo/18
Watermaid/38-39
Portrait of Okigbo/41
Lady with Calabash Bowls/235

## Map of Nigeria/vi

**CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON  
CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO**



## Preface

Christopher Okigbo's poetry attracted instant critical attention because of its striking individuality. Reactions ranged from exasperation with the apparent impossibility of extracting meaning from the verse to excitement with its verbal proficiency; from despair at the imitativeness of the poetic style to imaginative thrill at the vastness of Okigbo's reading and poetic resources. Did he have something to communicate or was he merely making music and images? What was hidden behind his surface obscurity—a profundity of insight or an absence of intentional meaning? To use his own question in another context:

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

If he had something to communicate, was it merely a private significance or had it social significance?

Ali Mazrui, in an essay in which he argued against "abstract poetry," concluded about Christopher Okigbo:

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 many versifiers the bulk of whose poems are untranslatable, and whose genius lies in imagery and music rather than conversational meaning. Of course there will be attempts at "translating" Okigbo, but for much of his work the exercise is futile and perhaps basically dishonest. Meaning can be translated, but imagery can only be imitated at best.<sup>7</sup>

Is it really impossible to "translate," by which I understand Mazrui to mean interpret, the poetry of Okigbo? Are we perhaps dealing, not with the absence of meaning, but with the nature of the experience and the manner of presenting that experience? In his reply to Mazrui's exposition, M. J. Etherton related Okigbo's practice to the experimental approach of the Surrealists (in addition to Okigbo's classical and traditional backgrounds). The experience to be portrayed is other than conventional: it is at the level of vision and has "to do with the dream. Not the dream itself, but the dream as an image of something else." The manner is new because conventional words are inadequate "to evoke accurately the emotions occasioned by the marvellous: dreams, visions, magic, seance, psychedelic trances, hallucinations, hypnotic sleep."

Thus, the Surrealists sought in their poetry to release words from the straight-jacket of punctuation, syntax and prosody; they endeavored in the

free association of words with each other, to forge, in new images, an unknown reality. Much of the modern poetry of Africa owes a great deal to the experimentation of the poets of Surrealism, particularly the poetry of Christopher Okigbo and Tchicaya U Tam'si. In the case of Okigbo, the surrealist experience is scored with classical images of shore-line, groves, and mutation of the elements.<sup>2</sup>

But did Okigbo perceive his life and environment with Surrealistic apprehension or did he merely borrow the techniques of the Surrealist poets? Okigbo's poetry raises many questions. The manner in which his poetry was published contributed initially to the problem. *Limits* written in 1961-62 was not published till 1964 when one of his later poems "Distances" had already appeared in *Transition*. Dathorne's review of *Limits* (published below) shows the influence of this time schedule. Moreover, Okigbo's poems, instead of being individual statements on specific issues and experiences, went into sequences so that when they were anthologized in the early 1960s interpretation and argument were sometimes intense and acerbic but outside the point. For example, the analysis and counter-analysis of "Love Apart" which was an anthology piece in *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (1963), went on for three years before it was realized that the poem had to be seen in the context of its being the conclusion to one of the poems in "The Four Canzones, 1956-1961."<sup>3</sup> Okigbo also worked and reworked his poems so that they appear in many versions, sometimes so radically different that criticism is occasionally thrown out of joint.

In spite of all these problems, Okigbo has been recognized as one of the most original, distinctive and important of African poets. This anthology of essays is a contribution toward giving substance to the imaginative excitement which his poetry has generated.

Three books have already appeared on Okigbo: Sunday Anozie's study of Okigbo's life and work in *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric*, Ali Mazrui's imaginative novel *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, and an anthology of memorial poems, *Don't Let Him Die*, edited by Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okafor. Numerous essays have also been published and continue to be written. I have tried to select and present here those extracts and essays which most expose significant facts and ideas about Okigbo the person, the theme of his poetry, and his significant contributions to the advancement of consciousness of both the private and public aspects of the human condition, and the style of his poetry.

Disparate approaches and thematic interpretations are represented in the essays. Some critics prefer the approach of taking meaning from the lines or images clear to them and building their themes out of them; others relate Okigbo's poetry to the stages of his life or his surrounding sociopolitical environment; others yet prefer the theoretical approach, especially explaining the predicament of the poet who has to establish a style for himself in the

maelstrom of social and literary disestablishment. Various methods and models are suggested as characteristic Okigbo compositional strategy, reflecting how the critic must approach Okigbo's work in order to break his code and serve as a bridge between the poet and his audience. Thematic interpretations vary with regard to specific images and symbols, individual poems, and the whole bent of Okigbo's work. This collection does not attempt to integrate these approaches and interpretations but presents all of them as guides for selection by the interested critic and general reader of Okigbo's poetry.

The three sections into which the collection has been divided are simply explained. A critical biography of Okigbo still needs to be written which will give greater insights into the details of his life, his reactions to his extensive contacts with people, events and books, and the overall meaning of life for him. This biography should be written soon while many who knew him intimately still remember him. I have put together a preliminary biography from published sources and personal reflections for Section I. Section II is organized chronologically around the sequences that make up his definitive collection, *Labyrinths*. This has meant that criticism of the poems which Okigbo did not choose to include in *Labyrinths* has been excluded except where the essays extend to the poems which are republished in *Labyrinths*. I would have liked to have organized Section III into essays which deal with: (a) influences and borrowings, (b) style and (c) themes. But at this stage of Okigbo criticism, most of the essays have tended to overlap these issues. The section therefore remains a collection of general essays on Okigbo's poetry.

It has been a great satisfaction to me doing this anthology, not only because the person of Christopher Okigbo remains vividly before me and this is the beginning of some tribute to him, but also because many people have contributed generously of their time and goodwill to make it possible. I make grateful acknowledgment to them. First, of course, are the authors and publishers who have allowed their published material to be used and republished here. Bernth Lindfors, the general editor of this series, not only first suggested that I compile the book, but kept in constant touch with its progress, had me over to the University of Texas at Austin for the Fall semester 1979, gave me access to some unlisted essays, allowed me to truncate his essay "Okigbo as Jock," and enlisted the typing services of Scott Bobo. Joseph C. Anafulu's "Christopher Okigbo, 1932-1967: A Bio-Bibliography" was my main guide to sources, and Celestine Uwechie of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Library worked long and cheerfully to search out and photocopy the essays for me. The University of Pennsylvania and my host, Dan Ben-Amos, provided for me during the Spring semester 1979-80 the environment that made it possible for me to organize the material here and put together the Okigbo biography and the essay on "Lament of the Silent Sisters." Finally, if my wife had not permitted me to desert her for this

period, this book might have remained a wish still to be fulfilled. To her, to those mentioned above and others not mentioned, I am grateful.

Donatus Ibe Nwoga

March 22, 1980



**Part I    In Memorium**

**HOMAGE TO  
CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO**

BY OBIORA UDECHUKWU

**CATALOGUE**

