

Kofi Awoonor's Poetry

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KOFI Awoonor is a name that reappears with some frequency in discussions and anthologies of contemporary African literature. He has published two volumes of poetry, *Rediscovery* (1964) and *Night of My Blood* (1971); a novel, *This Earth, My Brother* (1971); and two plays in *Short African Plays*, edited by Cosmo Pieterse (1972).¹ His essays and poems have appeared in a number of magazines, and he has been interviewed in a series on African writers. *Night of My Blood* and the paperback edition of *This Earth, My Brother* have introductions by two of Africa's outstanding contemporary writers, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Chinua Achebe. While Awoonor's published work is relatively slight in volume, it is a substantial achievement in recent African writing in English, and promising in its development and versatility.

The facts of Awoonor's life may in part explain this accomplishment and promise. He was born in 1935 near Keta in Ghana, and attended Achimota School and the University of Ghana, where he later worked in the Institute of African Studies, specializing in vernacular poetry. He edited *Okyeame*, a literary magazine which appeared irregularly in the early sixties, and served as an associate editor of *Transition*. More recently he has co-edited with G. Adali-Mortty an anthology, *Messages/Poems from Ghana* (1971). In the mid-sixties Awoonor was Director of the Ghana Film Corporation. He took an M.A. at the University of London in 1968 and subsequently became Visiting Professor in African Literature at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and Chairman of its Comparative Literature Program.

Awoonor's diversity of interests and the cosmopolitan

pattern of his life have produced a poetry of considerable complexity which presents several difficulties, especially for readers like myself of a non-African background. Among the most interesting of these problems is his use of the oral tradition in the poetry of his Ewe ancestors. I shall attempt to make an assessment of the influence of traditional genres, structures, and rhythms on Awoonor's work. The details of certain tribal customs, especially those of funeral ceremony (which recurs as a theme and metaphor in *Night of My Blood*), and the implications of certain local notions such as "the man of huge testicles" (in "What Song Shall We Sing," p. 27), may also perplex the Western reader.² There are some specifically autobiographical references in Awoonor's poetry, though I find these less a difficulty than the cultural material. Some footnotes in *Night of My Blood* clarify his allusions to personal relationships, and these are also illuminated by a brief reminiscence published among contributions to an African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in Stockholm, in 1967.³ At any rate, Awoonor, like Yeats in his references to Maud Gonne and MacBride, generally makes the allusion serve the poem, rather than the other way round. There remain, however, difficulties in Awoonor's work which may be attributed not to the critic's limitations but to the poet's: the lapses of craft to which writers of any culture are liable.

While he shows a deep interest in the oral tradition of African poetry, Awoonor has also enriched his work through his understanding of Western literature. Excerpts from Dante form an important motif in *This Earth, My Brother*, and many poems in *Night of My Blood* owe something to English writers from Shakespeare through T. S. Eliot. Awoonor has himself remarked on the convergence in his work of Ewe oral tradition and the English language: "I have always felt, perhaps involuntarily, I should take my poetic sensibility if you like the word, from the tradition that sort of feeds my language, because in my language there is a lot of poetry, there is a lot of music and there

is a lot of literary art, even though not written, and so I take my cue from this old tradition, and begin to break it into English, to give it a new dimension as it were."⁴ Awoonor's poetry is exciting because it offers (at its best) the creative fusion of two cultures.

His poetry is also exciting because it transcends particular cultures. This universality is especially expressed in the recurring archetype at the core of *Night of My Blood*, the journey, which as quest for meaning and identity is a pattern implicit in Western poetry since Homer. Awoonor develops the motif in several ways. There is the historical migration of the Ewe people chronicled and mythologized in "Night of My Blood," and there is the recent traumatic journey of the African people out of a technologically primitive culture of their own into the welter of modernization and Westernization. This development is viewed as a journey of the dispossessed in "Exiles" (p. 23). Conversely, there is the journey of "rediscovery" undertaken by those Africans who (like Awoonor, in "Desire," p. 24) seek to regain the wisdom of their ancestors. The most important refinement in Awoonor's use of the motif involves the journey as voyage, with its cluster of associated symbols, the canoe, the river, the estuary, the sea. The boat as a symbol of the journeying soul is an archetype in the works of such English Romantics and Moderns as Shelley, D. H. Lawrence, and Malcolm Lowry. We don't need to invoke the European tradition, though. The symbolism of the Ewe mythology of death and beyond is clearly the source of the boat image in many of Awoonor's poems:

The Journey Beyond

The howling cry through door posts
 carrying boiling pots
 ready for the feasters.
 Kutsiami¹ the benevolent boatman;
 when I come to the river shore
 please ferry me across
 I do not have tied in my cloth the
 price of your stewardship.

¹Kutsiami: In Ewe mythology Kutsiami is the ferryman on the river that divides the dead from the living. He

ferries those who die into *avlime*. He must be paid for his services. That is why money is put in the dead person's coffin to enable him to pay Kutsiami. If the dead person carries no money and is therefore unable to pay him, his spirit will wander on this side of the river forever. (p. 41)

One of the most arresting things about Awoonor's poetry is its music, the quality which first interested me in his work, and which is signified in the dedication to *Night of My Blood*:

To the memory
of my grandmother
Afedomesi;
who set me
on the way of songs

Awoonor's heritage includes the oral tradition of African village songs, with their various communal forms, themes, and functions. A few of the poems in *Night of My Blood* seem to be faithful versions of the oral songs which Awoonor's people performed on ceremonial occasions. "The Purification" (p. 39) records a sacrifice to the sea-god in a time of poor fishing, and "A Dirge" strikes the authentic communal note:

Tell them, tell it to them
That we the children of Ashiagbor's house
Went to hunt; when we returned
Our guns were pointing to the earth,
We cannot say it; someone say it for us.
Our tears cannot fall.
We have no mouths to say it with.
We took the canoe, the canoe with the sandload
They say the hippo cannot overturn.
Our fathers, the hippo has overturned our canoe.
We come home
Our guns pointing to the earth.
Our mother, our dear mother,
Where are our tears, where are our tears?
Give us mouth to say it, our mother.
We are on our knees to you
We are still on our knees. (p. 63)

Awoonor's countryman and co-editor, Geormbeeyi Adali-Mortty, has written that Ewe song in general has a "vague, all pervasive sadness," which he attributes to the harshness of Ewe life.⁵ Elegiac and ritual rhythms are a

powerful presence in Awoonor's work, but so is the sound of ocean. He was born, he tells us, "at Keta (Ghana) — the flood town, with the sea in my ears."⁶ And his rhythms also echo those of certain English poets, especially T. S. Eliot, with whom he shares an ear for cadences so memorable that even lines of obscure meaning haunt one's mind by virtue of their sound. Whatever their lineage or source, an impressive number of Awoonor's lines do sing, a quality which often makes the difference between good and mediocre poetry.

The structure of many of Awoonor's poems resembles certain features of traditional oral verse. Images, phrases, even whole passages in his poems of the early sixties are repeated in later works, especially in the two long poems which mark the main stages of his development, "I Heard a Bird Cry" and "Hymn to My Dumb Earth." His radio play "Lament" (in *Short African Plays*) is essentially a re-assembly of passages from these and other poems. His practice, therefore, resembles that of folk art, which is liable to catalyze traditional pieces at each new performance. "I Heard a Bird Cry," in particular, achieves the effect of improvisation common to folk song, in the way it accumulates fable, refrain, proverbial folk wisdom, and ceremonial utterance. Many commentators on the oral traditions of Africa have noticed the random progression of tribal songs. Thus Kwabena Nketia on the recitative style in Akan poetry: "The delivery is usually fast, the emphasis being on the continual flow of utterances which need not be linked by any apparent intellectual thread, but which are united by their cumulative emotional effect."⁷ Awoonor's poetry often achieves the illusion of this kind of spontaneity and alogical movement; in fact, it is usually intellectually coherent, having a sophisticated unity of symbol and theme. In his latest work, however, he has abandoned the linear (if apparently random) movement of "I Heard a Bird Cry" for the complex collages of "Hymn to My Dumb Earth" and *This Earth, My Brother*.

Song is not only the mode of much of Awoonor's poetry, it is also a theme and a value. One infers that the *act* of singing is in itself a triumph over adversity. The first poem in *Night of My Blood* establishes this view of the value of singing and relates it also to the prevailing theme of modern African literature (and of Awoonor's early work): the dispossession of Africans of their social heritage, and the forced implanting among them of European institutions and ideas:

My God of Songs Was Ill

Go and tell them that I crossed the river
 While the canoes were still empty
 And the boatman had gone away.
 My god of songs was ill
 And I was taking him to be cured.
 When I went the fetish priest was away
 So I waited outside the hut
 My god of songs was groaning
 Crying.
 I gathered courage
 I knocked on the fetish hut
 And the cure god said in my tongue
 "Come in with your backside"
 So I walked in with my backside
 With my god of songs crying on my head
 I placed him on the stool.
 Then the bells rang and my name was called thrice
 My god groaned amidst the many voices
 The cure god said I had violated my god
 "Take him to your father's gods"
 But before they opened the hut
 My god burst into songs, new strong songs
 That I am still singing with him. (p. 22)

In this poem the old culture remains for Awoonor a source of renewed vitality despite the disappearance of mediating priests and beliefs.

Another feature of Awoonor's work illustrated in "My God of Songs Was Ill" is the communal voice which is created in most of his poems. This is another obvious influence of his heritage of oral song, and distinguishes his poetry from much that has been written by Western poets in our century. One of the characteristics of modernism in poetry is the introversion of the speaker, his sense of isolation (or alienation) amid the complexity and dis-

order of modern society and recent history. It has been remarked by more than one observer that whereas the Western writer speaks for himself, out of his own experience, and often with great difficulty, the African writer, like his ancestors, often speaks for his community. Today, though, he too has difficulty because of the shattering of communal traditions through the advent of modernism in Africa. Awoonor has defined this as the essential problem of contemporary Africa and of its writers: ". . . one invariably returns to a certain basic aspect, which is the technological advancement of Africa, and all the things that are added on to it: what are we going to do with some of the basic traditions of African life, African communal life, the general spirit that did motivate African societies long before the white man came? . . . one has to adjust oneself to the thinking, the way of life which has almost died, to marry it to this new technology."⁸ The communal impulse informs much of Awoonor's verse and issues in a voice to which Ezekiel Mphahlele has attributed "the aura of a sage's words."⁹

It is interesting that Mphahlele, who has been one of the most persistent adversaries of negritude in African writing, has written an admiring and sympathetic introduction to *Night of My Blood*. Revulsion from the European influence in modern Africa, and a search for values in traditional African culture, form the subject of many of Awoonor's poems, as they formed the basis of the negritude movement. But his disgust with modernism and his yearning after the sustaining ethos of the shattered traditions seldom harden into doctrine and precept in Awoonor's work. Far from making the prescriptive statements of a negritude manifesto, Awoonor's is essentially a poetry of questions, indeed of *quest*, which is precisely the theme on which Mphahlele's introduction focusses. Awoonor's songs express some of the deepest agonies of recent African experience and while they may at times suggest the attitudes of the negritude school, they generally sustain their intelligence and quality as poems. In any case, we

should entertain the critical axiom that one can disagree with the viewpoint implicit in a poem while continuing to admire the excellence of its poetry.

One of the European institutions superimposed on Africans, towards which Awoonor does maintain a well-defined attitude, is the Christianity purveyed by missionaries and their converts. Some of the best of Awoonor's early poems are powerful rejections and critiques of the Christian view. "Easter Dawn," one of the few poems from *Rediscovery* which I think Awoonor errs in excluding from *Night of My Blood*, rebukes the neglect of his ancestral gods as set against the flourishing of Christian ritual.¹⁰ An early poem that is reprinted in the later volume says much about Awoonor's reaction to Christian teaching:

In My Sick Bed

This flesh shall melt in the melting pot
Of receding clay and the flesh shall peel off
And be used to muffle the funeral drums.
The lights are grey and the voices faint
The buzzing flies ask soul searchers' questions
Expecting answers
Liars and hypocrites
Who says there is a resting place elsewhere?
It is here with us,
Here with us in the sound of the fall of
dust on coffin
And in the priestly prayers of the communicants
Not beyond, not beyond O Lord. (p. 26)

Here the imagery of a distinctly African scene is combined with echoes of the kind of medieval Christian meditation on sickness and death which reaches its finest expression in poems like Nashe's "Litany in Time of Plague" and Donne's "Hymn to God My God in My Sickness." But the characteristic attitudes of the Christian meditation are significantly qualified. While the speaker acknowledges his mortal frailty and evokes the sense of despondency and squalor that attends sickness, he rejects the idea of an after life where all manner of things shall be well. "The priestly prayers of the communicants" are valued as rituals of reverence and communion among the living mourners, not as a communion with deity. Prayer — supplication — is

a pervasive attitude in Awoonor's poetry, but rather than any abiding faith in God or gods it reflects the intensity of his distress, and his articulation of his people's anguish. Other powerful poems on Christianity and its influence in Africa include "The Cathedral" and "That Flesh is Heir To."

Two long, fine poems that followed *Rediscovery* represent the culmination of Awoonor's interest in the pre-colonial culture and history of his people. "I Heard a Bird Cry" is a poem of symbolic subtlety and considerable beauty. By turns mournful, prophetic, and hortative, it seems to move forward, twist, double back, leap forward again, conveying its meaning through motifs and gnomic utterance. The singer weeps for the desolation among his people and decides to seek regeneration in the neglected gods and rituals of his fathers. A vision of corruption in the modern African scene (which will be portrayed with greater bitterness in *This Earth, My Brother*) is followed by the account of a ceremony of sacrifice and supplication to the ancestors. The central motif of the bird is developed, and then a variation of Awoonor's familiar symbolism of canoe-river-quest is introduced. The general meaning of the symbolism of birds involves war, anarchy, and destruction in the prophet's country:

There was a tree which died in the desert
Birds came and built their nests in it.
Funeral songs reached us on the village square.

I shall weave new sisal ropes
And kill two white cocks
Whose blood will cleanse the stools. (p. 42)

The desert river was dry
Before the harmattan came
And the storm wind does not
Frighten the eagle. (p. 44)

The swooping eagle does not give to its child.
So the child must turn a beggar in the market place. (p. 47)

The heroes, where are the war heroes?
Did they smear themselves
With the blood of fowls
And are bellowing, bellowing
Like wounded hippos? (p. 49)

The swallow says
 It is the harmattan wind
 That chased him into the rafters of the rich (p. 49)
 Weaver birds came and ravaged my corn-field (p. 50)
 A cock has laid an egg by the river side
 But a hawk came and snatched it.
 What shall we do? (p. 51)

The key passages are exchanges between the crows, westernized mockers of those like the speaker who seek for nourishment in the dead past, and the vulture, who represents the latter:

Those who stood around the ring laughed
 And said my feet had blundered
 And our hands have lost the cunning of the drums.
 We answered them, answered them
 That the crow asked the vulture
 You are an uneatable bird
 Why are you so full of your own importance? (p. 45)

The vulture, it says
 Because helpers are not there
 That is why
 I have shorn my head
 Awaiting my funeral.

My heart, be at rest
 For the vultures that came
 Shaking the rafters of your house
 Have flown away, flown far away,
 Towards the land of my forefathers.
 It was in the season of the burning feet,
 And the feast is ready for us. (p. 53)

Ultimately, I think the poem suggests the inadequacy of any of the birds (including the vulture) as menders of the torn society. Some are predators, some victims, others scavengers. A true healing of the prophet's wasted country requires a steady focus on the realities of the present. (The refrain "Hush! I heard a bird cry" commands alertness at the same time that it directs our attention to the symbolism.) The poem accumulates more and more perceptions of violence, poverty, suffering, venality, gullibility, as it moves towards the resolution quoted above.

"Night of My Blood," which follows "I Heard a Bird Cry" in the volume to which it gives its title, is Awoonor's attempt to render a mythology of his people's past, of their

origins and experience. The recounting of the Ewe migration many centuries ago from the interior to the coast of West Africa is elaborated in a vision of their character, their sufferings and yearnings. There are distant echoes in this poem of "The Journey of the Magi," and it is perhaps his interest in Eliot's work that led Awoonor to use the Christian symbolism which startles one in "Night of My Blood," a poem whose theme is the dimly recalled past of a pagan people. Nevertheless, this technique issues in some lines of concentrated power and nuance:

We walked from the beginning
towards the land of sunset
We were a band of malefactors
and saints. (p. 54)

And the poem conveys a sense of the enormity of great historical movements — of the anonymous multitudes who suffered and vanished into the earth. In the European tradition, melancholy is an aberration of the individual. In "Night of My Blood," Kofi Awoonor evokes a tragic melancholy as the prevailing condition of his people.

The shape of Awoonor's work as it develops in *Night of My Blood* is through the early poems from *Rediscovery* towards the two long poems I have just discussed. I think that there is then some decline in quality in a number of the succeeding lyrics, until Awoonor's talent crests again in three more long poems at the end of the volume. There is also a shift from his interest in the ancestral traditions to a concern with events in West Africa in the late sixties, a movement towards present realities which is already implicit in "I Heard a Bird Cry." One assumes that Awoonor would assent to this last remark, given the biographical note in *Messages*, the anthology of Ghanaian poets which he co-edited:

Kofi Awoonor's early poetry — published under the name of George Awoonor-Williams—marks his apprenticeship as a poet; this period saw him using and translating traditional poetry. The poems of this period — some of which are included in Beier and Moore's *Modern Poetry from Africa* — capture the songs and the funeral dirges of the Anlos. What may be described as the second phase

of his development is marked by the poetry of *Night of My Blood*, and the poems which are included in this volume. He says of this phase: 'I have gone through the trauma of growth, anger, love and the innocence and nostalgia of my personal dreams. These are beyond me now. Not anger, or love, but the sensibility that shaped and saw them as communal acts of which I am only the articulator. Now I write out of my renewed anguish about the crippling distresses of my country and my people, of death by guns, of death by disease and malnutrition, of the death of friends whose lives held so much promise, of the chicanery of politics and the men who indulge in them, of the misery of the poor in the midst of plenty'¹¹

Awoonor's less successful poetry includes not only some of the "apprentice" poems from *Rediscovery* — such as several wordy love lyrics — but also some later, shorter imitations of "I Heard a Bird Cry." Poems such as "More Messages" (p. 65) and "At the Gates" (p. 68) rehash the themes and motifs of earlier works without achieving the earlier intensity and coherence. In these poems and a few others, I think that Awoonor abuses two elements of his style which he practises elsewhere to good effect: his musical facility and his taste for oblique utterance. Occasionally he indulges in sound without regard to substance, and he is sometimes gratuitously cryptic.

Three of the last poems in *Night of My Blood* show, however, a renewed and increased strength in Awoonor's abilities as a poet. "Lament of the Silent Sister" is an elegy for Christopher Okigbo, the Nigerian poet who was killed in 1967 while fighting on the side of the Biafran forces. "This Earth, My Brother" and "Hymn to My Dumb Earth" are also concerned with the recent violence and despair in West African nations. The last poem, especially, resembles Awoonor's novel, *This Earth, My Brother*, in technique as well as in its pessimistic interpretation of the current West African scene. Donatus Nwoga has accurately described the mood of Awoonor's recent work: ". . . he still carries a tone of tragedy and confusion born of his long-distance look at himself and his home. The poetry of West Africa has deepened its mood of dismay, of fearful concern for communities that appear to have no way out of a catast-

rophic future, in spite of harsh experiences already undergone."¹² The pity, the terror, the dismay of Awoonor's reaction to the present condition of his homeland, seem to have renewed his creative energies, for the long poems toward the end of *Night of My Blood* are among the best in the volume.

In "Lament of the Silent Sister" the persona is female, one of the chorus, evidently, from Okigbo's poem "Lament of the Silent Sisters." She experiences a visitation, as though in a dream, from the slain man (perhaps on the night of his death). Okigbo appears to her as a Christ-figure, sacrifice and redeemer. The opening movement of the elegy is rich in images of youth, fertility, birth and death, in tones of awe and grief:

That night he came home, he came unto me
 at the cold hour of the night
 Smelling of corn wine in the dawn dew.
 He stretched his hand and covered my forehead.
 There was a moon beam sparking rays in particles.
 The drummer boys had got themselves a goat.
 The din was high in the wail of the harvest moon.
 The flood was up, gurgling through the fields
 Birth waters swimming in floods of the new blood.
 He whispered my name in a far echo
 Sky-wailing into a million sounds
 across my shores. His voice still bore
 the sadness of the wanderer.
 To wail and die in a soft lonely echo
 That echo I heard long ago. (p. 74)

The speaker remembers the living man and her previous immaturity in relation to him. Imagery of birth and of sexual initiation merges with the symbolism of canoe and river as she recalls an incomplete experience of redemption in her acquaintance with Okigbo:

Into the bright evening I rushed
 Crying I have found him I have found him.
 He stood there rustling in the wind
 The desire to go was written large upon his forehead.
 I was not ready for his coming.
 I was not ready for his loneliness,
 for his sad solitude against the rustling wind. (p. 75)

The arousing of love and vision in her were insufficient, falling short of the commitments of speech and action that

Okigbo made in the "howling wind" of the Nigerian debacle. The poem then returns to the visitation described in the opening lines, and now the speaker's redemption is consummated, again in sexual imagery:

He was erect like the totem pole of his household
 He burned and blazed for an ending.
 Then I was ready. As he pierced my agony
 with his cry, my river burst into flood.
 My shores reeled and rolled
 to the world's end, where they say
 at the world's end the graves are green. (p. 77)

The evidence of the speaker's redemption is the breaking of her silence into the eloquence of the elegy itself, the first fruit of her achieved sense of total relation to the world.

"This Earth, My Brother" is in several respects a poem of extremities. Anguish and bitter despair take the poetry at times to the verge of incoherence. The modern warfare in post-colonial Africa is linked to the tribal slaughters of the past. Ritual sacrifice is understood as an expression of sexual impulse. Even the attitudes of hope and prayer are considered potential sources of violence. As if in rejection of the prospect of redemption envisioned in the preceding poem, the figure of a redeemer is conjured up only to give way to a graphic account of a massacre of prisoners:

They led them unto the mound
 In a game of blindman's bluff
 They tottered to lean on the sandbags
 Their backs to the ocean
 that will bear them away.
 The crackling report of brens
 and the falling down;
 a shout greeted them
 tossing them into the darkness.

and my mountains reel and roll
 to the world's end. (p. 81)

Upon the beauty and affirmation of "Lament of the Silent Sister," "This Earth, My Brother" follows hard like a shriek of the damned.

Awoonor's novel of the same title of a study of squalor and injustice in contemporary Ghana. *This Earth, My Brother* portrays impartially the ignorance and corruption

of the British colonial officials before Ghanaian independence and the ignorance and corruption of the African government and people since. It is merely a question of whose ignorance is most damaging and whose corruption sustains some semblance of social cohesion. Sexual and marital failures among the characters mirror the larger social deterioration of the country. Awoonor's technique in this novel — interspersing the fictional narrative with symbolic and highly lyrical prose-poems which record the protagonist's memories and dreams — resembles after a fashion his technique in "Hymn to My Dumb Earth," the last major poem in *Night of My Blood*. The themes of the two works are also similar.

"Hymn to My Dumb Earth" is a poem of even larger dimensions than "I Heard a Bird Cry," and also incorporates pieces of shorter lyrics. The intricate symbolic movement of the earlier work has been replaced by an extraordinary collage of voices and images. Among the voices are those of the clown, the prophet, and of Awoonor himself as, variously, the cosmopolitan African, the self-conscious poet, the adult recalling his childhood. Ghanaian "cultural activists" and turncoats are juxtaposed with American Black Power radicals and jazz musicians. Nkrumah himself appears, as do Okigbo (again) and a number of less famous persons. Scriptural phrases and Marxist slogans, Sunday School hymns and tribal folk proverbs — all are presented as implicit comments on one another. Snatches of English poetry appear. The influence of Eliot which can be discerned for better and for worse in Awoonor's work, is finally brought completely under control:

O Son of man.
The brigade major held a conference;
fear death by guns. (p. 90)

The ominous esoterica of the English poet is simultaneously parodied and converted into a pointed remark about the sad facts of West Africa in the late sixties. Indeed, "Hymn to My Dumb Earth" seems more like a chronicle of ruin than a shoring of fragments. Awoonor's lyric eloquence

is toughened and extended in this poem through a new skill at irony:

What has not happened before?
 An animal has caught me,
 it has me in its claws
 Someone, someone, save
 Save me, someone,
 for I die.
 What a wounded name.
 At the Central Committee today
 a vote was taken on democratic centralism.
 It will be written next week
 into the Constitution.
 Everything comes from God. (pp. 86-87)

The refrain of "I Heard a Bird Cry" was a signal of revelation. The refrain of "Hymn to My Dumb Earth" — "everything comes from God" — is a pious cliché that becomes an increasingly bad joke as the poem piles up its exhibits of sorrow, sordidness and death in a kaleidoscope of irony and lyricism.

Night of My Blood shows a development of craft, of scope, and of thought in Kofi Awoonor's poetry. His work achieves an extraordinary fusion of traditional African and modern English cadences, techniques, and themes. I hope that his talent survives the devastation of the society to which he feels such a deep relationship. While the earth is dumb, the singer delivers his song, however bleak and painful.

NOTES

- ¹*Rediscovery* was published under the name George Awoonor Williams; his later books bear the name Kofi Awoonor.
- ²Page numbers refer to *Night of My Blood* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), from which all my quotations of Awoonor's poetry are taken. *Night of My Blood* reprints as about a quarter of its volume, about two-thirds of the poems in *Rediscovery*.
- ³"Reminiscences of Earlier Days," in *The Writer in Modern Africa* ed. Per Wastberg (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), pp. 112-18.
- ⁴"Kofi Awoonor," in *African Writers Talking / A Collection of Interviews* ed. Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 30.
- ⁵"Ewe Poetry," in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 4.
- ⁶Note in *Rediscovery* (Ibadan: Mbari, 1964), p. 4.

- ⁷"Akan Poetry," in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier, p. 25.
- ⁸"Kofi Awoonor," in *African Writers Talking*, p. 30.
- ⁹"Introduction" to *Night of My Blood*, p. 9.
- ¹⁰"Easter Dawn" is probably more readily available to Western readers in *Modern Poetry from Africa*, Revised, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 103.
- ¹¹*Messages / Poems from Ghana*, ed. Kofi Awoonor and G. Adali-Mortty (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 183.
- ¹²"West Africa," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 7 (December 1972), 29.