

O, Polyphemus: On Poetry and Alienation

Obi Nwakanma

I have chosen my spot in Kierkegaard's triad of existence—the aesthetic, ethical and religious. I have chosen to be aesthetic; to strive after the subtlest, sensual forms of beauty, far beyond the strictures of ethics, and the irrationality of religion. I choose to be a poet, and to be epicurean. To love wine, and never disdain pleasure. It is true that William Barrett, like Kierkegaard whom he studied closely, compares the aesthete to the child, moved by the spontaneity of momentary experience, whose “childlike immediacy of response” (163), much like Virgil's Daphnis, is more beautiful than the poem, so to say. “They are sometimes beautiful to watch, these immediate ones ... as they glow in the moment responding to some simple and beautiful object with all the grace of their nature and their blood” (163), writes Barrett. The loss of the moment, the withering of the flower of delight, nevertheless throws the aesthete into the abyss of despair; a truth which epicurean tradition, “haunted by the images of despair,” reflects upon by its willingness to banish dependency from the psyche. This mode of counter-response of the epicuri to despair is by metaphor, by its longings and sorrows, by its forms of representation: “The most beautiful Epicurean poems of the Greek and the Romans are those haunted by sadness: there is a grinning skull behind the flower” (Barrett 163). The epicurean tendency to fragment, to succumb to despair is powerfully illustrated in the fate of Lucretius, the greatest of the epicurean poets, driven mad both by pleasure and by despair, by the bind of a soul driven into the abyss by the prospects of his finitude, and the infinity of time in which the self is trapped outside of its spirit; just like Don Juan, Barrett says, who is so haunted by pleasure that he has to be trapped in the cycle of a “search for new loves” (163–64).

I think, however, in spite of it all, that to disdain wine and pleasure is to suffer detachment—to be alienated from the real; to enter into

the fruitless debate in which the self that suffers becomes an excuse or even a metaphor for the unknowable self. The self unknown is blind to beauty: it is detached. As William Barrett again lets us know in his phenomenal book on existentialism, *Irrational Man*, the notion of *detachment* as a reflection of the fully shaped mind and its capacity for radical or ontological autonomy, is the product of the rational abstraction of Greek philosophy. In its counter to the more pagan, or natural essences of feeling, it expresses itself as the “intellectual deliverance from the evil of time” (76). But I have struggled to be earthbound. To be harmonious and seamless with time. To journey into the excesses of aesthetic experience, as a poet of the senses, kin to Okigbo and Hafiz. To be no mere spectator of the universal, yet to embody the local, the absolute excess of my identity, swollen every time by the tide of my indulgences. It is indulgence, for instance, to stubbornly remain Igbo, in the face of the movements of history, the so-called trap of time named globalization and its metropolitan tyrannies. Detachment is separation: to be fully removed from one’s essence of being, to enter the cold, dreary mortuary of logic, and thus fail to sense, to smell, but rather to convene all the power of the rational mind towards its own sheer rationality. To be incapable of commitment, since commitment is contrary to the idea of *detachment*—seen as “the path of wisdom.” And if commitment is as Barrett says, “the passionate involvement (of man) with his own mortal being (at once flesh and spirit), with offspring, family, tribe and God” (77–78), exile is detachment, a full, imponderable separation from the spirit of the land, and a sense of the self. To be removed from one’s sacred spot, that little piece, or yardage of earth, on which we consecrate our past and future is the burden of alienation. Poetry testifies to this experience in unique ways.

The tragedy of the exiled imagination is its ambiguity: although life continues, its pace is at once exponential and at once fixed; it is life trapped in time. Soon, the senses, like an inconsolable erection, rise towards strange orifices to their own dismay. The past is soon tinged, and becomes both cruel and disjointed. But the longing after the past is cruelest. This longing for past is coloured, and is powerfully refracted as a homage, a cry of pain, and a love poem to the homeland, offered to

us in its sheerest potency in these words by the great eighteenth-century German Romantic poet, Novalis, quoted in Azade Seyhan's fine book, *Writing outside the Nation*:

There [in the homeland] nature appears human and understanding, a dim memory reflects, through the transparent present, sharply outlined images of the world, and so one enjoys through memory a double world, free of all cruelties and violence, a world that is the magical, poetic, fable-like projection of our senses. (3)

Sometimes, this double-vision yields to melancholy. Melancholy drives the sexual appetite to its acme. The irony is no accident here, for in the lonely moments, coupling fulfils the search for the self in fusion with the other. Random coupling is the extreme expression of the pagan rites of community; it is the search for a community of pleasure; a way of reconnecting the broken body of Osiris, gathered by his lover and sister, the beautiful Isis, till its scattered and multiple fragments are fully embodied into our distinct selves encountering other selves through acts of embodying, of love-making, and love-taking. And leave-taking. To be in exile is to dwell in uncertainty—about one's self; one's present; one's future. How does one then resolve this uncertainty? By embracing his anger? The dismay of his separation? By trusting his body to permit that separation, or even its unity of irrational desire with the rational assent of intellection, the one that says truth precedes faith? That one is neither fully blood nor fully flesh? By entering that disjunction, the crossroads of experience in which distance from home is starkly physical, while the future in homelessness is no less stark? That distance and its terrifying junction creates the double-toned sense of the world, that attempt to unite spaces of experience and identification, as we perceive in Chris Abani's worlds between Afikpo and Los Angeles. That is alienation. That irreconcilable crossroad.

This crossroads—the split—is powerfully embodied in the character, Black, the painter or muralist of chaos in the city of Los Angeles, the backdrop of Abani's newest fiction, *Virgin of the Flames*. It is a new kind of African fiction, nestling between the locality of culture, and the tem-

porality that marks what Homi Bhabha, that Brahmin Indian theorist of liminal nationness and ambivalent selfhood, describes as the unmanned sites of culture: the gathering from the peripheries of this horde of the displaced in the lonely cafes of the metropolis, and its *unheimlich*, a terrifying sense of time and space. It is the “meanwhile” that “barred sign of the processual and the performative, not a simple present continuous, but the present as succession without synchrony” (Bhabha 309). It is a new domain of African fiction that gestures towards namelessness. It does not wish to be named or fixed to one notional spot, or claimed by one conscious identity: it wishes to be self-consciously ambivalent and universal; to pay particular tribute or homage to the multiple forces that shape our hybrid beings as children of complex polarities; multi and bi-raciality; trans-nationality; trans-gendered; cross-dressed by our border crossings. In short, Abani’s fiction challenges the question of the named self. This gesture at the universal is in itself, ironically, the problem of the double-bind: within metropolitan chaos, and in the flux of existence in this gathering in the epicenters of the “multicult,” of the meaning of home, and of the names and identities attached to home, are nullified. The erasure of the once familiar self by the ebb and flow of life lost in the heady, complex, parallax of voices creates ambiguity and ambivalent humanity. The impact is reproduced in the imagination, in the janus-faced condition of the figures lost in the history of migrancy and displacement; living both within and outside culture; who encounter the world from the uncertain, and ambivalent locale of their own marginality. We sense this figure in Black, in *Virgin of the Flames*. Black is split, precisely because his consciousness is rootless, ambivalent, unable to find the impossible node of identification with a past or a future, with a homeland. He is known simply as Black, the bi-racial son of an Igbo father and a Salvadoran mother, but his true name—Obinna—hovers somewhere in the netherworld of absence and tragedy. We encounter him from the beginning, emerging out of a Lacanian mirror, trying to efface himself, the antithesis of the aesthetic impulsion, by covering himself with the artist’s clay. He wishes to escape from his own identity with the paste he applies to his face, layering a palimpsest of the self: “Too thick maybe, but when he was mixing it, he thought it would take that much to cover

his complexion. It would also help the mask to harden with a sheen he could paint over: rouge cheeks, blue eye shadow, and really black eye lashes. But right now, he had to get the right shade of white” (4). All the tropes of his desire, the markers of race and identity, are constituted in his longings to be different; to pass; to step into the street and assume the external layer of the other self covered underneath his “complexion.” It is the complexion of power and acceptability. The entire significance of this figure of the crossroad, of Black’s complicated identity, of his ir-resolute doubleness, is signified in his love for Sweet woman (half man, half woman), who embodies his psychic dilemma.

But his father’s absence marks his alienation, signified by his profound fascination with space ships, not simply because his father, an Igbo space scientist who worked for NASA and was drafted to fight in the war in Vietnam, never returns. His father’s memory nevertheless, haunts him with the words “echefulam”—never forget. Through the metaphor of the spaceship, however, we sense Black’s unwillingness to embrace the terrain of the real. He navigates experience by imagining, and by representing alternative, surreal visions of the world on the streets of Los Angeles; a poet of the street, using icons of violent histories to resolve the inner demons stirred by his complicated desire to de-identify. It is a quest ritual, for in the end he is led, through his final encounter with that symbol of his doubleness and desire, Sweet woman, to finally hear the wind “howling through the city, tearing souls from their moorings, and casting them into the primordial swirl of making and unmaking” (289). It is the metaphor of the unfinished odyssey, of arrivals and departures, of the poet stuck in the muddle of history and experience.

The poet in exile is like that seeker, the restless traveler and wanderer, Odysseus, whose encounter with the blind giant, Polyphemus, offers us another metaphor for contemporary alienation. In Homer’s epic, the *Odyssey*, we first encounter the story of Odysseus and twelve of his crew, returning from the Trojan war. War-worn and hungry, they steer themselves to the island of the Cyclopes. In their search for food, water, medicine and other provisions, they wander into the cave of Polyphemus, the giant Cyclops with a single eye on his forehead. Polyphemus is away tending his flock. Odysseus and his men nevertheless steal some of his

food and become curious. The thirst for knowledge, to know what a true Cyclops looks like, grips the men, and they decide to stay. They hide in the cave until Polyphemus returns. He rolls a massive boulder to close the entry into his cave. The sight of this monstrous giant is overwhelming, and the men gasp from fear and surprise; from a revelation beyond them, of the true nature of the beast. From their inexorable stirring, Polyphemus senses the presence of these aliens in his cave, and begins to kill and devour them in their doubles. The first pair for dinner, the next pair for breakfast. At dusk, after another meal of two of Odysseus' men, and perhaps feeling a postprandial lethargy, or perhaps even a sense of *élan*, Polyphemus glimpses Odysseus, and asks him: "who are you?" to which Odysseus replies, "outis"—nobody. A nullity. It is a response made both in fear and defiance; from frustration and anxiety, as well as from guile and self-awareness. It is the mark of ambiguity. But the metaphor of this narrative assumes an important meaning for us. Polyphemus is the figure of the *patrie*: the imperium and its metropolitan power. Its eye—the lone cyclopic eye at the center of his head, allows us to read into it, the sign of the empire, its universality, its capacity for surveillance, as well as its powers to discipline and punish. As the symbol of the metropole, of "late capitalism," that immense globalizing giant—Polyphemus is carnivorous, and isolate in its terrifying power. The cave of Polyphemus is figuratively, the metropolis, epicenter of culture and authority, gathering émigrés and refugees, Odysseus and his twelve men, whom Polyphemus soon begins to devour and erase, one after the other. Furthermore, that immense boulder rolled across the entry into his cave is the regulatory feature or condition of all border posts that complicates migrancy both as immigration and emigration. I have worked this narrative into my new, and evolving body of poems, "Indigo Street"—poems set on the streets of these metropolises, and set around characters at the edge of cultures. The African poet in America is Odysseus, the wanderer, standing before Polyphemus, America, seduced into its domain, this metropolitan cave, in search of "provisions," trapped, and saying, before you, I am nothing. I have no identity. I am *outis*. Nobody.

We hear the echo of our mournful past, however, and are summoned to the task of re-membering the detached mind to its own body of his-

ory and thus bow to history's infinite claims on all of us. Through poetry, we make that gesture, make that claim for a spot among the echoes. That's what poetry means to me: a form of memory which helps to put the philosopher's balm on the pain of finitude, for out of the ambiguous vocation of living in the margins of a world and a culture, and a society to which one becomes a sudden stranger, comes the irrevocably clear truth that exile is an act of renunciation, a sort of bleeding self, which one struggles finally to embrace. It is, as Azade Seyhan says, to reclaim "the lost experience of another time and place in language and imagination" for re-membering, "is an act of lending coherence and integrity to a history interrupted, divided, or compromised by instances of loss" (4). This gesture of "re-membering" is precisely what the Kashmiri poet, Agha Shahid Ali, that "refugee from faith," makes in reclaiming the shattered statues of the Hindu gods, in his "Ghazal":

Executioners near the woman at the window.
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

*Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken;
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.*

Has God's vintage loneliness turned to vinegar?
He's poured rust into the Sacred Well tonight.

In the heart's veined temple all statues have been smashed.
No priests in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice, in pity for Heaven;
he's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. ("Ghazal" 20)

The vital conceptual roots of poetry are in the image: the profound power to call forth a sense of being, of being beyond disambiguation, to find coalescence between the word and the parts it creates. In that act of

creation, in which poetry participates, is the cipher of meaning. Let us again take the rites of Osiris as such a metaphor of creation, of the poetic act of disassembling and re-assembling the scattered pieces of meaning, especially the meaning of home, into a profound sense of being. The ritual can be found in a rite even more ancient than the example of the Osirian myth: the rite of the Ozo. The agnate submits to ritual death, and out of the death-experience comes life renewed. Poetry attempts to enkindle that kind of renewal (especially for the exiled poet, who suffers the death of the spirit), the form of experience we now call alienation. Poetry attempts to make intelligible, the small, abstract links to home, or a sense of home through poetry, and to force through the refractory light of memory, an uncovering of the unsettling maps, and the opaque veils of one's remorseless, and meaningless journeying.

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