The Wry, the Witty, and the Laconic: Expression and Mythology in the Poetry of Chinweizu

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Abstract
Chinweizu's commitment to Africa's social reality is woven in literary criticism and creativity, mythology and postcolonial themes—a consciousness for social change. His notable works, such as *The West and the Rest of Us*, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* and *The Anatomy of Female Power*, amongst others, have raised intellectual engagements and re-interrogations of monolithic constructs that challenge Eurocentrism, while extolling African identity, cultural heritage and resistance. His fearless and avant-garde methods of discourse have earned him enormous respect and a permanent position of reckoning from scholars and students of Africanism, history, literature, politics, political science, criticism and gender studies. However, his collections of poetry, *Energy Crisis and Other Poems*, and *Invocations and Admonitions,* have not received as much attention as his other works. His deft applications of wit, wry humour, eclecticism and mythology in addressing humanity and allied themes in his poetry are as engaging as they are worth studying. This paper, therefore, critically approaches his verses through contextual and textual perspectives—a fresh and stylistic (re)assessment of his poetic style and genius to tackle the question of humanity and relations.

Keywords: Wit, Wry, Laconic, Myth, Chinweizu

Introduction

I

The ability to express one's self in a particular fashion is indicative of style. Notably, the expression of ideas of human interest is for the specific reason of "communicating ideas, experiences and information that add value to human existence and relationship" (Akporobaro,16). In fact, the audible creations of man—oral or written, are perceived as the ultimate essence of human existence. By this, we mean that the nature of medium a literary artist adopts in artistic communication imposes a unique style and form as creative matrix. There is no

mystery about this articulation which derives its aesthetic effects from literary productions wrapped in tangible and independent existence of thoughts. Very relevant is the transmission—the artistic literary quality that forms the connection of the existence. The discourse may offer a beauty of form or an aesthetic effect perceived from the pattern of articulation. This ideational perspective is a "self-imposed responsibility" foisted on the literary artist by the realities of human conditions (Emezue, 50). No doubt, any poetic style is shaped by the poet's sensitivity to the social, cultural and political situation within a given milieu. The word 'style' is a tool that interprets how language shapes thoughts, thus highlighting the dialogic connection between the poet's cultural context and the linguistic choices. The linguistic standpoint of the poet is paramount for literary interpretation—an inference which appropriates a particular manner of expression in writing or speech. Basically, literary works exhibit extra-linguistic subjectivity which does not exist in abstraction. There are often communication strategies that come up with humour and satire—a witty pattern with a linguistic monopoly that questions human conditions.

Specifically, a peculiar manner of liveliness and quickness of intellect with distinct aptness in expression falls within the ambits of wit; especially if done in an amusing way. The uncanny connection of thought band expression most often deliberately designed to delight us in its surprise and unexpectedness, is slightly reminiscent of the ingenuity present in a metaphysical conceit in metaphysical poetry – that comparison whose "ingenuity is more striking than its justness" (Helen Gardner, "Introduction" *The Metaphysical Poets*). Wit "feeds" off humour – while the latter is intrinsically funny, the former latches on as a comic form or technique and makes the situation more humorous. This is basically achieved through observations, irony, association, expansion, wordplay, punning, and so on. The spectacle of a tall person accidentally hitting the head on a ledge is inherently funny but for one to comment that "shortness is a virtue" or "do not damage the ledge" is witty. Surprises, expectations and their reverses are often fit situations for wit as the inherently incongruousness lies between what we expect and the disconnect that jolts us with its reversal. William Hazlitt has it thus in his celebrated "On Wit and Humour":

> Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be. We weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious matters: we laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles. (5)

Different scholarly views further flesh out the concept; broadening and simplifying

it. Babette Deutsch's *Poetry Handbook* describes it as the "faculty that makes for metaphor by the perception of likeness in unlike things" (169). She takes off from TS Eliot's quote of Andrew Marvell on the same subject ("a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace"), and then holds that wit "is now admired as a sign of the poet's power to relate incongruities and so give a fresh understanding of complexities" (170). Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz's *A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms* simplifies it: "…in modern times, wit is limited to intellectually amusing utterances calculated to delight and surprise" (240). Wryness then, fits in perfectly as it is associated with wit. The quality of being wry in literature requires one to be cleverly humourous; often ironically and or grimly. The common ground here is the cleverness that is involved in the humour while the distinctness of being wry is found in the high propensity for the grim. Again, being laconic requires being concise to the point of seeming mysterious, and poetry being generally condensed and cryptic, becomes a natural haven for laconic utterances. A mixture of wit, wryness and the laconic appear to serve Chinweizu's intentions well, as they blend with his dispositions to life and his concerns regarding humanity and human problems.

II

The act of making and the way one makes thoughts and feelings known, belong to the field of expression. In poetry, apart from literary techniques, such as metaphor, simile, personification, etc., which constitute elements of style, the concept of voice is a key element in the business of expression. The speaker in a poem is the persona and the persona owns the voice. According to Laurie Kirszner and Stephen Mandell in *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, "…then speaker of a poem is a persona, or mask, that the poet puts on. Granted, in some poems little distance exists between the poet and the speaker" (852). Given contextual circumstances and the personality of Chinweizu, we will find out that there is little or no distance between the poet and the persona in his poetry.

The application of myth or mythology and its usage here is slightly different from the norm. From Akporobaro's explanatory perspective, myths "symbolize human experience and embody the spiritual values of a culture—those that depict humans as integral part of the universe" (188). The norm is the common view as such seen in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, which holds that myth is "a story that was told in an ancient culture to explain a practice, belief, or national occurrence", or mythology being "the myths of a particular group or culture". Another view, one which is more germane here is that which holds myth or mythology as "an *idea* or *story* that is believed by many people, but that is not true"; ideas that are believed by many people, but that are not true". Simply put, "unfounded or false notions" are the

most apt of descriptions for the idea of myth and mythology as subject of discourse. However, in whatever vein we consider it, Donna Rosenberg's position in the preface of *World Mythology,* is germane to this treatise; she says: "myths reflect human nature, with its needs and desires, hopes and fears. Myths reveal the human condition" (xiii). She states further: "The world's myths continue to inspire many creative and intellectual pursuits. They enrich the appreciation of literature…" (xiv). This is exactly what is obtainable here – we are embarking on this intellectual pursuit to see how the poet Chinweizu expresses his ideas through being witty, wry, and laconic and as usual, tackling, interrogating, and debunking certain contemporary notions, beliefs, and myths through his poetry collections *Energy Crisis* and *Invocations and Admonitions*.

Chinweizu

Remarkably, the prominence of Chinweizu is laced with a vision for social change patterned in literary criticism—a cultural consciousness that seems to eclipse his trends of orality and creative ingenuity. Not one to avoid or shy away from confrontations, Nigerian-born Chinweizu has made quite the name for standing with conviction and scholarship (albeit amid and enjoying the controversies), on otherwise testy issues most would prefer to avoid. Historian, philosopher, literary critic, mathematician, economist, journalist, Egyptologist, and of course, Occidentalist, this poet has also been described as one "…who is aware of the intricacies of social activities" and can "conceive reality from a truly revolutionary perspective" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 116). His *The West and the Rest of Us* treats the logic of western civilisation's development and the underdevelopment of the rest of the world, especially Africa. Naturally, he takes the side of the oppressed peoples, coming forth with analyses strongly based on the materialistic conception of history. He fits Africa into the construct of a conquered nation, complete with the struggle for liberation while remaining cognizant of those who are true allies and patriots on the one hand, and dictators and lackeys on the other – the latter serving the interests of Western dominions. This infamous group keeps the continent open for continual attack and underdevelopment because, for Chinweizu, Africa's problem is not really that of colour. He advocates a traditionalist cultural revival, a reconstruction of Africa and its society in order to be self-sufficient and become a global power; all these attainable through economic autarky with Japan and the erstwhile Soviet Union.

Another controversial and powerful projection of Chinweizu in his fine art of trembling veils, shaking complacencies, and questioning spurious dicta, is found in his stance against the debilitating and insidious versions of matriarchy in the sphere

of sexual politics. In *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*, he, as a dark horse agent provocateur, cuts a provocative stance through an avalanche of wide-ranging references, that women actually control and manipulate men. For him, the apparent picture of women being oppressed and subjugated under men is a false notion which, interestingly, has been designed to look so; it being the stealth masking of the real scenario: an age-long deception that men have been too blind and too fed with to recognize that they are actually the perpetually vanquished in the ancient war of the sexes. Of course, in the face of historical and contemporary indices regarding women being the more trafficked, kidnapped, abused, suppressed, raped, etc., his position would at first glance seem inhumanely outrageous. But again and importantly, one is humbled and sobered by the sheer barrage of the intriguing intellectual rigour packaged in the treatise by an obviously pro masculinist and anti-feminist Chinweizu. Stanley Macebuh comments on the book's blurb:

> Chinweizu has done it again. As with *The West and the Rest of Us*, he has taken on a difficult and controversial subject, forced it under his sardonic and demanding eye, and come up with observations that spare neither men nor women. This is hilarious reading. No one can read this brief treatise and not confess to some powerful feeling, either of vengeful excitement or of virulent rage. It is strong stuff indeed, and it should do something to our traditional notions concerning the sociology of history.

In yet another powerful and epochal text, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, Chinweizu teams up with Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike to take a hard-hitting swipe at some African writers (especially poets) who are "un-African" in their works; and instead slave to emulate, albeit wrongly, Euro-modernist literary traditions of the West. In the chapter "African Poetry and its Critics", the troika takes on the negative tendencies in the poetry of Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and the early Christopher Okigbo. For him, their Euro-modernist tendencies and aping of European modernist poetry represent and produce a "failure of craft" and describes their verses as filled with

> …old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language, obscure and inaccessible diction; a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from African oral poetic traditions, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism. (168)

These Euro-modernists are faulted in their archaic language, lots of imported imagery and attitudes, unsuccessful and ineffectual imitation (Hopkins Disease), etc. as would be expected, the stinging critique triggered strongly-worded replies and critiques and engendered a very lively critical period in Nigerian and African

literature with many critics weighing in and taking sides.

As a scholarly agent provocateur, Chinweizu, through those texts once, again, spurred on and re-interrogated stances, notions, and traditions; and it is indeed striking and remarkable the manner in which he achieves this. In his poetry, it is this unique ability of his, the special use of words (wit) which force us to re-assess and re-interrogate our views of certain conceptions, amid his laconic, wry, bold and confrontational stances daubed in self-effacing humour that we are about to be enamoured with in this essay.

Chinweizu and his Poetry

I

On Chinweizu's poetry, Ezenwa-Ohaeto comments that he employs accessible diction to make messages powerfully effective (131), is concerned with the Third World struggle (124), and also incorporates sexual imagery as "also used to satirize certain attitudes in human nature" (131). He is quick to comment on a unique quality of Chinweizu's poetry: "they can be solidly informative and not merely dazzling, for they possess that rare quality of combining sense with pleasure" (125). He believes so because of the discovery that:

> Chinweizu's poems also possess these qualities because they are concerned with the trepidations of colonialism, neo-colonialism and socio-economic exploitation, as the poet forges words into images, replicating the devastation derived from the history of Africa. (125)

In line with his concern for Africa and Nigeria, Ogaga Okuyade hints at an apparently evocative aspect of his poetry in the piece "The Vanished City", which "describes the evacuation of people from their primordial base to become exiles in strange and foreign lands" as a result of war – in this case, the Nigeria-Biafra War. He captures in that particular collection, *Energy Crisis*, "the traumatic experiences of war" and "the pain of chaos" (210).

Victoria Arana, in the entry for Chinweizu in *Facts on File Companion to World Poetry* provides arguably the most succinct and comprehensive overview on him as a poet. Her view is that his reputation as a poet rests primarily on his two collections (under review here) which contain a good dose of "scathing satire" and to a great extent "socially conscious" and "contentious poetry". For Arana, the verses contain "rich versions of his standard messages in prose" and often are "delightfully satirical, sometimes exploiting a carefully calibrated double entendre" (102).

An outstanding application of this double-meaning literary device is seen in the title poem "Energy Crisis", and Arana comments thus;

> "Energy Crisis", for instance, records a conversation between a woman desperate to fill her gas tank and a gas station attendant who claims he cannot do so because of the national energy crisis, which has left him depleted due to an inordinate demand for his goods. The sexual subtext is cleverly managed so that the poem seems to refer all at once to the world's mismanagement of natural resources, to Nigeria's cupidity and political culpability for the shortages, and to the insatiable sexuality of women…. (102)

In the second collection, *Invocations and Admonitions* he continues in his characteristic style, while introducing more acerbities. He raises questions of religious and political hypocrisy, rattles colonial recidivism, exposes the challenges of science and "makes fun of deconstructionist literary criticism" and Euro-modernist obscurantism. Interestingly, there is an antithetical balance of sorts in the poem "The Penis of a God" in which he "renders a biting critique of postcolonial African men and their notion of patriarchal entitlement" (103); as pitted against a predominance of poems that "praise a footloose and fancy-free masculinity and excoriate the possessive female, who is used and discarded in poem after poem" (102). He makes the "pompous husband" who is hooked on "foolish self-aggrandizement" receive stinging reprimand and upbraiding from the wife who sees through the entire charade.

II

As has been hinted earlier, Chinweizu's interesting personality and controversial stance dons a fresh and scintillating garb in the poetic genre – a unique style of expression. His poetry often adopts an assertive tone, which is vividly direct and confrontational in tackling the salient issues of colonialism, cultural imperialism, and the impinging effect of Western influence on Africa. His poetics of orality is woven in acerbities, sarcasm, satire, irony, tongue-in-cheek, double entendre, and so on, find a fitting vehicle in the ambits of wit. His wryness and laconisms as he battles time-tested myths find in wit their most penetrating and smarting barbs; yet, as he pokes spiritedly on wide-ranging human issues. His expression and handling of myths and mythology come to the fore.

In the collection *Energy Crisis*, the poem "Misencounter' opens with the descriptive laconisms: "Friday night./ Girl in semi-dishabille./Airs: Demi-aristocratic /Tanned by common sun", followed by lines 5-9 in which the lady described above supposedly "inspects" the poem's persona thusly: "I approach;/ Receive side-long crotch inspection:/ Nigger erotomania/ Super-fecundating

animalia/ In his genitalia" – a wry sexual objectification laced in dark humour of the persona. The tone set, the poem goes ahead to situate and with terse humour describe an encounter of airs as the aristocratic lady reels of her supposedly glorious ancestry to which the poet answers self-effaced; "I must reciprocate. Peasant courtesy demands:/ Nothing to speak of; nothing to be found/ In the records of any/ Genealogical Historical Society./ Nevertheless, I didn't materialize a moment ago./ Priest-Uncles. Rain makers. A witch doctor or two./ A medicine man here and there./ Bone surgeon in traditional style./ Look at this arm. Does it ever look shattered?/ A psychiatrist on the maternal side,/ Several generations back, /Cured madness with emetics./ Guerilla generals against British intrusion./ All forebears. Cannibal creators" (9). This genealogical trajectory becomes more darkly comical in the light of race tensions and relations as it is presented as a counterpoint to the lady's ancestry: "Vassar, Duke or Bennington?/ Guinea, Polack, Melting pot Roob,/ Specimen of upperclassy Wasp,/ Dropped-out Southern Belle,/ Or escaped Jewess from New Orleans? (lines 24-28)

Chinweizu is in his quintessential wryness and laconism in the six-line poem, "On Welcoming Predators" with the explaining byline of 'In memory of Lobengula Who welcomed in Cecil Rhodes". The poem is essentially this: "With open arms/ He welcomed a smiling tiger into his home:/ With open jaws/ The tiger welcomed him into its belly./ After all, smiled the beast,/ One good welcome deserves another". This brief description of Rhodesia that later became Zimbabwe, is succinctly memorable and the indelible message about colonialism in Southern Africa is most felt. In comparison, "Originality?" as a terse tercet trumps "On Welcoming Predators" in brevity albeit taking on a broader philosophical issue. It plays wittily on the saying about nothing being new under the sun, except the really ridiculously unthinkable and impossible. The poem in full goes thus: "He who must do/ Something altogether new/ Let him swallow his own head'(37).

"Elegy on the Middle Way" is Chinweizu's witty condemnation of people who sit on the fence and take the "middle way" on issues he believes they should not. The long poem is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's seminal "A Modest Proposal" – his cloaked diatribe against England's oppression of Ireland. Chinweizu's witty tongue-in-cheek attack takes off according to his explanatory byline, from "the background of Allende's martyrdom and butchery in Chile, Isaiah Berlin's apology for the Liberal Predicament'. In the second stanza of the poem, he condemns their posturing with disdain: "Praise the votaries of the Middle Way,/ All you downs and all you outs:/ They have the refined sentiments/ Their butcher guardians can't afford;/ They have the rarified ease/ From where poverty's rags have charm;" (lines 14-190 and it continues to even the swipe on the personhood of the Christian God in order to drive

home their highfalutin pretentiousness: “They would be pure where all are tainted;/ They would be perfect in a world/ Without possibility of perfection;/ A world their omniscient, omnipotent god/ Was never able to confect to his high taste,/ … A world he abandoned to its follies/ With a promise of the fire next time” (lines 22-28). He “makes a case” for their behavior, seemingly defending them; “They are not fools with soft compassionate hearts” (line 56), and goes ahead to absolve them of the ills of cowardice, vacillation, feckless will, impotent generosity, infirmity of purpose, opportunism, etc., (lines 58-660; instead praises “their purity/ These saints of the Middle Way” (lines 69-70).

The prominence of Chinweizu’s trends of witty orality is visible in the poem "Faithful Mary Lou". Chinweizu’s deployment of satire—a form of exaggerated humour to comment on social behaviour, societal norms and the patterns of mentality people adopt to justify morally questionable way of life is very alluring. Significantly, the poem projects the poet as a satirist –a defender of societal morals. This presents a unique scenario where the subject of discussion—a woman, Mary Lou, is questioned by her husband on his suspicion of her infidelity. Her response is wrapped in wittiness—a defense mechanism borne of deceit in the wake of her husband’s criticism. In the lines below, we perceive an ironic revealing in her claims and response:

> Ah only slept with his name;
> Ah only slept with his color;
> Ah only slept with his money not with him.
> Ah ain’t been unfaithful to you, can’t you see?
> (*Energy Crisis and Other Poems*, p. 26)

The lines above have raised issues of criticism with a reasonable assessment that is obvious. In fact, very remarkable is the use of irony and satire which smells of absurdity and nonsensical justification wrapped around three cogent reasons for her actions: name, colour and money—a perspective she has adopted to shield her conscience from active reprimanding of her soul, a perpetual guilt. Her defense is an indication of loss of morality—a deliberate act that exposes irrational behaviour as a patterned hubris. The general undertone visible in Chinweizu’s lines captures materialism and excessiveness as the penultimate force of bonding in relationships. This mindset reels in a perfect imagery of moral compromise devoid of sincere human soulful connections. The poem also captures certain gender dynamics in Mary Lou’s mentality and behaviour. The subtlety of her actions exposes character ambiguity—an ambiguous pattern of thoughts and way of survival that exhibit contemporary female assertiveness in the euphoria of feminism. With a form of

imbued colloquial tone of expression in Mary Luo's voice and the use of personalized pronoun, the readers are drawn into the persona's world—a mindset presented in vivid jarring pattern that highlights the need for societal reflection on human values. Chinweizu's poetic lines smell of sarcasms—no wonder he clearly presents the view that if individuals should find his poems accessible, engaging, titillating or pleasing, he would be glad. In his words, "I should be extraordinarily rewarded the expenditure of social resources incurred in publishing" this literary piece (Energy Crisis, viii). The humour in his tone is indicative in his pattern of thoughts and the richness in the use of words. In fact, in an interview with Ezenwa-Ohaeto in July 1991, Chinweizu has revealed that his poems cover various topics on monologue, dramatic exchanges between personas, parables, satires, elegies, laments and invocations" (*Daily Times*. "Interview with Chinweizu", 14).

No doubt, there is sense in Chinweizu's artistic sensibility. His apparent use of self-contradictory expressions is a deliberate attempt to project his poetic pattern. The poem, "The Cross Roads" reveals an intentional humour for awakening consciousness and self-realization marked by shedding illusions captured in the euphoria of "charmed crossroads"—multiple roads that breed chaos because of lack of direction. No wonder the "Exasperated travellers exchanged/ Vague, comforting ignorances" (*Energy Crisis*...2) with the harsh realities confronting them. The credibility of the poet's views is drawn from the igniting humour and counterintuitiveness that underscore the importance of awareness, assertiveness and action in the journey of liberation. It seems the lines resonate with an unwholesome approach noting the undiscerning attitudes the poet points out in a satiric style.

Chinweizu's pattern of Orality presupposes an intelligent approach arising from emotions and aesthetics of literary depiction. There is always a substantial ridicule and humour in his tone—a freshness with absurd analogies of human thoughts and experiences. In the poem entitled "The Spring Memories", the persona is befuddled by memories of broken love—a stored agonizing memory which creates "sharp wound of separation" (*Energy Crisis*...4). Here, the persona reflects on a specific mode of imagination which is derived from his failed relationship. He assumes a conscious position to lead the audience into his emotion for appropriate understanding of the sad memories he has about his lover. In a monologue he laments: day after day your face churned/the waters of my craving/ left me thrashing like a hooked shark" (*Energy Crisis*….4). One does not overlook the linguistic resources with a manipulated artistic end—a tool fashioned in fishing out imagery that exploits his emotive elements. He laments:

Yes! My heart is withered

The tremors have dropped from my caresses
And my passions are spinner now
As abandoned lumber (Energy Crisis….5)

Evidently, the persona has recounted his experiences in a high flown manner which provides a satiric content aimed at social control. For obvious reasons, the persona has been exploited for his love and is battling the enormity of his problem. A peculiar trend is seen in the poet's choice of words in the titles of his poems—a target that gives credence to his artistic manifestation and creative stimulus. There is complementarity between his choice of words and his insight into human behaviours. Titles such as "A Chronicle of Matrimony", "Faithful Mary-Lou", "On Welcoming Predators", "Faculty Party", "In Praise Song of the New Notable", "They Do not Like Anger", "Epitaphs of War", "The Return of the Flies", "Elegy on the Middle Way" and other poems are imbued with underlying such satiric irony that makes the readers ponder on the reasons behind the poet's lamentation. There are evidences of implied ironic trend and satiric ideology that speak for the oppressed people. Most of the poems speak of human betrayal, cowardice, destruction, infidelity, disbelief, deceit, falsehoods and sorrow, etc.

Chinweizu's commitment to accessibility in his long historical collection, *Invocations and Admonitions* (1986) is recognizable. In *Invocations and Admonitions*, Chinweizu prays in the traditional way and seeks ancestral guidance as he embarks on "exile" in the poem "Invocation on a Day of Exile". The lines resonate with the solemnity befitting supplication, but elements of religious myth are also seen. Lines such as "My *chi* is alert/ And my seed shall not go to waste" (39-40), "I shall stride forth on exile's road/ Ofo and Ogu in my hands!" (67-68), and "I have said yes;/ My *chi* will also say yes!" (78-79) feature the guardian spirit and personal god, *chi* and the totem staffs of righteousness and justice, Ofo and Ogu of Igbo ontology. In Igbo traditional religion, the belief holds sway that with those appurtenances one can neither come to harm nor be subject to blame or injustice; but in reality that often trumps the obvious myth, causalities occur regardless of one's mytho-religious beliefs and fortifications effectively rendering such constructs mythological. Wit once again appears in the poet's plea that the "Love God" in "Invocation to the Love God" not to send deceptive wolves-in-sheep-clothing kinds of ladies his way in the lines: "Sugar and spice and everything nice/ May be what little girls are made of;/ but bitters and ice and clamping vice/ That's what that dazzler of eyes/ Was chock-full-of" (line 14-18). The wit continues as he prays against fisher women, the always needy, the gold-diggers, termagants, feminists, nags, pious prigs, virtuous madonnas, etc., and the bland ones especially, described as purveyors of the view that

"thou shalt neither demand orgasm nor enjoy it!" (line 40). He also prays against the miserly ones: "Thou shalt demand on pain of neuroses,/ The minimum daily dose prescribed/ By pundits of normality" (line 44). These prayers are tongue-in-cheek, ridiculous, and funny. Another "invocation", this time to the hapless meal of salmon about to be devoured by the poet and the girlfriend, shows the fish being addressed with mock concern and empathy: "Like you, we too have strayed,/ My girl and I, from our home grounds./ Let us assemble, you and us,/ Wanderers all, at the twilight hour;/ Let us gather and make merry/ At the altar of that god, Stomach," (lines 17-22). Wit and myth run all through "Good Friday: Admonition from the Cross" as the poet makes mockery of Christ's predicament on the crucifixion cross. He uses the thief to sum up on the Christian religious myth of a divinity who is killed with common criminals as he speaks in reaction to Christ's cry of forsaking: "Don't shame your fellow gods/ By moaning and groaning…/ And if you please, dear man-god,/ Keep quiet and grant me peace/ To compose my soul before it starts/ Its sojourn down in hell" (lines 30-36).

In "The Penis of a God", the poet assumes the character of a chief's wife and summarily dismisses the superiority myth of the husband's "chief and head of the home's" myth, starting with "O chief! O husband of mine!/ If you think you are a god/ … Don't sit here on earth among us,/ Don't sit here/ Eating, drinking, shitting, farting, fucking,/ … And still expect us to treat you as a god" (lines 5-13); and hitting the crescendo with "I've never seen the penis of a god,/ But I've seen yours! (line 15). She delivers the crushing coup-de-grace with the final lines: "Go go go go go away!/ Hang yourself from some fine tree,/ Like Sango did;/ Then we'll treat you like a real god!" (31-34). "The Vow" starts with the knowledge that the poet's childhood friends are all wealthy and influential, but he had all along channeled all his energies to pleasures. Hear him: "I am lost to my wastrel ways:/ To give pleasure to those few women/ Who focus on my roving lust;" (lines 8-100. In his normal witty ways, he answers his spirit-double that questions his lifestyle thus; "I shall indulge my pubic charities;/ I shall loll in the laps of damsels;/ I shall not be diverted from bottle, bosom and prattle,/ Till white hairs and wilted limbs/ Compel it" (lines 20-24). The wry wit here on choice Epicureanism is accentuated by the underlying laconism.

"Professor Derrida Eshu" finds the poet at his sarcastic best. His wit, armed with wry and laconic barbs seem aimed at the Nigerian Nobel Laureate in Literature, Wole Soyinka with whom he had had literary spats. He caustically and severely critiques Soyinka's poems as obscurantist among other negativities in his *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* and this link is played upon by adding Jacques Derrida's surname. Derrida is the Algerian-French philosopher whose theories (especially literary) are regarded as difficult to understand. The "Eshu" surname is a

reference to a Yoruba god of mischief; and this is a more concrete connection to Soyinka's person through his ethnicity. The first lines present poetry as stuff not meant to be enjoyed: "It is not a thing for enjoyment, my dear boy./ It is complex, uncommon stuff…" (lines 1-4); comparing it to some sort of radioactive physics: "(probed) with seismoscopes and diving rods./ It must then be packed in heavy water" (lines 5, 6), to be ultimately "fed into computer banks" (line 11) for further processing. All the later analysis according to the Professor Derrida Eshu, "Must be solemnly interpreted by holy mouths/ When they gather in solemn conclave/ In some dark, unlit cave./ That's how it is done, my boy". He ends it in the professor's own words: "If you, or just anybody can understand it/ It isn't a poem at all – declared the Great/ Professor Derrida Eshu" (lines 13-20). Another biting and witty attack is directed at monks and nuns and their vows of chastity and celibacy and in a wry, laconic manner concludes the six line poem with the question, "But will somebody please tell me/ Why nunneries, monasteries and orphanages/ Are so often found together? (62). A deft blow is aimed at erstwhile colonizers of the African continent and their self-serving logic in the couplet "Colonizer's Logic"; and it simply goes: "These natives are unintelligent - / We can't understand their language" (63). The laconism above is admirable as the absurdity of the logic and mindset is laconically reduced with accompanying wit for effective pungency in delivery.

Comments and Conclusion

For the mettle of his person and contributions of his academic enterprises (albeit almost always controversial and thought-provoking), and for someone who after a disagreement with his dissertation committee of the State University of New York at Buffalo, walked out on them, got his manuscript published as *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite*, came back to SUNY armed with the book a year later, demanded for and was awarded his PhD in Political Science in 1976, at least an aspect of his literary prowess requires study – as he dominated an era of Nigerian (and African) literary criticism. His influential *Toward the Decolonization* marked him as a literary force and his two poetry collections attested to that; with the second, *Invocations and Admonitions* winning the 1985 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Poetry Prize. In spite of all these, there is scant critical material on his poetic oeuvre and this is regrettable given his unique style as has been seen.

The uniqueness of his style and expression could be attributed to percolated condensations of elements from his areas of academic training: the broad thoughtfulness of philosophy, the symbolic and cryptic praxis of mathematics, the enviable access to and bulwark of information of journalism, and the fervent

indignation at the core of black orientalism – all these accentuated by his natural eccentricity. The results will naturally tilt to curt acerbities but when gilded and marinated in wit individuated with wryness and the legendary terse brevity associated with the historical Laconians and ultimately poeticized in verse, it becomes really worthy of critical stylistic interest.

This perspectival article adopts a close textual reading that highlights select instances of foregrounded applications of wryness, wit, and laconism either singularly or in any type of mix, in some of Chinweizu's poems. They have been seen in their roles in portraying and accentuating his style of expression and his views and handling of certain conventional myths; mostly debunking them. He plays down on emotions and brings up to scrutiny a myriad of thorny issues through wit for closer inspection with a more sober and balanced view. He largely succeeds in this and we plough through the verses smiling wryly for the greater part of the experience.

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