Christopher Okigbo and the Psychological Theories of Carl Gustav Jung

Chukwuma Azuonye, University of Massachusetts Boston

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/chukwuma_azuonye/5/
Christopher Okigbo and the Psychological Theories
of Carl Gustav Jung

Chukwuma Azuonye

In two earlier papers (Azuonye, 1979 and 1980), I drew attention to
a number of insights which might be gained from the psychological
theories of Carl Gustav Jung into the nature of reality as experienced in
the poetry of Christopher Okigbo. In the first paper (1979), I argued in
part that a knowledge of Jung’s postulations on the relationship between
certain universal geometrical shapes and the forms of images commonly
encountered in dreams, visions, myths and fantasies is essential for a
proper understanding of Okigbo’s use of geometrical symbols in the
representation of the memories and initiatory experiences of his poet-
protagonist. In the second paper (1980), in which I attempted a
diamorphosis of the mythos underlying the “organic unity” of Okigbo’s
poetry, I demonstrated the feasibility of approaching what Okigbo
himself (1965:1) sees as the central theme of his works—“the fable of
man’s perennial quest for fulfilment”—in terms of the Jungian concept of
individuation, the process through which an individual attains self-
realization through the maximal development and harmonization of the
disparate, often conflicting, components of his personality (Jung 1959b).
What I intend to do in this paper is to present a more comprehensive and
systematic view of the significant points of congruence between Okigbo
and Jung both in the light of the earlier discussions and on the basis of
additional evidence uncovered in the course of further comparative exa-
mination of the writings of the two authors. It is my hope that what I
have to say here will go some way in elucidating the meaning and
significance of some features of theme and symbolism in Okigbo’s poetry
which have hitherto been little understood.

As indicated above, Jungian psychology is primarily concerned with
understanding the structure, dynamics and development of the psyche,
i.e. the totality of the non-physical components of the human
personality. Jung saw the psyche as comprising two distinct but
interacting systems and levels, namely the conscious and the unconscious
(see Jung, 1959c). The conscious is the only part of the psyche which is
wholly known to the individual; it is organized around what Jung terms
the ego, the complex of perceptions, memories, thoughts and feelings
which are bound up with the individual’s total awareness of himself as a
distinctive being. The unconscious occupies a much deeper stratum of
the psyche. It constitutes that part of the psyche of which we are either wholly or partly unaware. Jung makes a distinction between two levels of the unconscious: an outer level which he terms the **personal unconscious** and an inner level which he terms the **collective unconscious**. The contents of the personal unconscious are in the form of repressed or forgotten personal experiences which in given circumstances manifest themselves in the behaviour of the individual as *complexes* (Jung, 1959b). The contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are in the form of primonial images of a kind apparently shared in common by humanity as a whole. These, manifest themselves in dreams, visions, myths and fantasies in certain regularly recurring shapes and patterns to which Jung has given the name, *archetypes* (see Jung 1959a). Jung devoted a great deal of time to the study of the nature and manifestations of the *archetypes*, and much of what we now know as Jungian psychodynamics is concerned with the interaction of the archetypes in the course of the development of the personality.

In many of their details, Jung's postulations on the structure, dynamics and development of the psyche are both controversial and controversial. Nevertheless, they have over the years provided a very useful model for the explication of literary themes and symbols, especially those rooted in folklore and mythology. This is hardly surprising. In the formulation of his theories, Jung made use of evidence not only from psychoanalytic experiments but also from what he saw as a vast reservoir of psychic phenomena faithfully recorded in literature, myth and folklore. He was indeed the first to apply his theories to the study of literature.

The poetry of Christopher Okigbo is pre-eminently amenable to analysis in terms of the Jungian model. It would indeed seem from a careful reading of the poems vis-a-vis the theories of Jung that the poems are conscious attempts to recapture various images from the personal and the collective unconscious experienced by the poet in what appears to be a sustained effort at individuation. In the second part of this paper, I shall attempt to isolate and discuss the forms and manifestations of these components of the structure of the psyche in Okigbo's poetry, and here I shall be looking at the poet-protagonist as a kind of symbolic representation of the psyche in its various aspects. In the third part, I shall deal with the psychodynamics of the poet-hero's journey, paying particular attention to what seems to be the overtly sexual manifestations of his psychic energy (*libido*) and the various ways in which this energy is channelled into creative and spiritual pursuits. In the final section, I shall briefly review the salient features of the most important point of congruence between Okigbo and Jung, namely the process of individuation as manifested in what Okigbo sees as the mythos of his poetry, "the fable of man's perennial quest for fulfilment."
II
What Okigbo says of Limits and Distances in his introduction to Labyrinths seems indeed to apply to his poetry as a whole, for it is "Man’s inner and outer worlds projected, the phenomenal and the imaginative, not in their separateness but in their relationship" (1965:xii). There is here a parallel to the Jungian dichotomy between the conscious and the unconscious components of the psyche, the phenomenal being coterminous with the conscious while the imaginative is coterminous with unconscious both in its personal and collective aspects.

In his conscious orientation towards the world, Okigbo the man seems to differ diametrically from his poet-hero. He was unmistakably the extroverted, thinking-and-feeling type9 whose conscious orientation was towards the external, objective world. Contrarily, his poet-protagonist is essentially an introverted sensing-and-intuiting type whose conscious orientation is toward the inner, subjective world. Jung paid some attention to the nature of this kind of relationship between an artist and his work. As summed up in Jacobi (1942:23):

> Often one and the same artist is an extrovert in his life and an introvert in his work, or the other way round. In this they follow the law of psychic complementarity, which seems particularly applicable to those artists who represent in their works what they themselves are not. In other words, their complement.

Prior to Path of Thunder, Okigbo seems to have been primarily concerned with representing in his works an area of experience which to the outsider would seem to be totally out of keeping with what, from the attestation of his close personal friends (e.g. Anozie 1972:6-11), was his remarkably extroverted nature. Thus, his poet-hero appears to project not the ego of Okigbo the man but that of an alter-ego, totally different in his functional and attitudinal orientation from the poet himself.

Yet it is possible to isolate in the poems certain conscious perceptions, memories, thoughts and feelings which bear the unmistakable imprint of Okigbo’s conscious ego and which, on that count, can properly be regarded as autobiographical (see Azuonye 1980). The picture of the degenerate exile wallowing in shame and degradation in the “Debtors’ Lane” (Four Canzones) is evidently drawn from life, not from the repressed contents of the personal unconscious but from what Okigbo in full wakefulness remembers of Lagos life in the late 1950’s (see Anozie. 1972: 26). The same is true of the ghastly picture of the mindless destruction of the shrine of the water-goddess, Idoto, by a section of the Ojoto community in 1926 which Okigbo has deftly woven into section X of his Limits (see Azuonye 1980)10. What we have here is the feeling-and-thinking Okigbo, responding, from the perspective of a cultural nationalist, to the destruction of a potent symbol of the traditional religion of his native culture by alienated converts to the Christian faith,
who, in fits of anomie, act as agents of the imperialist predator. The same voice of the angry young man responding to the post-independence decadence of Nigerian politics can also be heard in Silences, the two sequences written in response to "the events of the day", specifically in response to "the Western Crisis of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba", as well as "the imprisonment of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the tragic death of his eldest son" (Okigbo 1965:xii). Indeed, Silences ends with words ("Lament of the Drums", section V) which seem to presage the platform rhetoric of Path of Thunder, the final sequence of poems, in which the poet—completely divested of the introverted orientation towards the inner world—now appears in person as "Okigbo, town-crier" with his "iron-bell" ("Hurrah for Thunder") to forewarn his countrymen of the "thunder among the clouds" ("Come thunder").

Faced with such overwhelming evidence of the active projection of the conscious ego in the poems, it would seem that the Jungian law of psychic complementarity does not apply to Okigbo. His poet-hero is not just an alter-ego but Okigbo himself, so inseparable from the man that it is difficult to understand him fully without reference to Okigbo's life and personality. The truth of what actually happens inside the poems lies somewhere in Okigbo's own confession that his works represent "man's inner and outer worlds projected . . . not in their separateness but in their relationship" (1965:X). The introverted sensing-and-intuiting poet-hero who finds strength in "the solitude" of orangeries, woods, groves, seashores and secret chambers as well as in the realms of dreams represents a conscious effort on the part of the extroverted, feeling-and-thinking Okigbo to achieve a unification of opposite tendencies in himself towards the attainment of that psychic balance which Jung refers to as individuation. The law of psychic complementarity thus operates in Okigbo's poetry. By consciously seeking the inner world, "where solitude weaves her interminable mysteries under the lamp" (Transition) Okigbo is able, through the poet-hero, to activate what Jung calls "the eternal symbols of mankind which lie dormant in the conscious" (see Jacobi 1942:24). These symbols which are ultimately shaped by the conscious mind and elaborated into the finished work of art are largely of the order of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, but they also include other symbols which are related to the complexes of the personal unconscious—the repressed and half-forgotten feeling-toned memories and ideas tied up with the poet's personal experience of life.

Jung defines complexes as "psychic entities that have escaped from the control of consciousness and split from it, to lead a separate existence in the dark sphere of the psyche, whence they may at any time hinder or help the conscious performance" (see Jacobi 1942:37). Each of such psychic entities comprises two elements, a "nuclear element" and its "manifold associations". The nuclear element is essentially an associated
group of feelings, thoughts and memories in the unconscious, the origins of which can be traced to certain traumatic events in the past life of the individual. Jung used the word-association test which he had devised for the purpose to identify such associated groups of feelings, thoughts and memories: "Any word that touched upon a complex would cause a delayed response" (see Hall and Nordby 1973:36). Something similar to the effect of the association test appears to occur in certain sections of Okigbo's poetry where the choice of certain words or images has the effect of reawakening certain groups of feelings, thoughts and memories about traumatic past experiences associated with such words or images. A typical illustration of this will be found in Heavensgate II.

The memories, thoughts and feelings in Heavensgate II are the direct consequence of the poet-hero's encounter with the cross (the Christian church) in the first strophe of Heavensgate I so soon after his homecoming and rapprochement with the goddess, Idoto, long forsaken in his exile from his ancestral roots. This encounter with the cross first awakens an impassioned memory of "Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong" (presumably Mrs Anna Okigbo, Okigbo's own mother), one of the irretrievable victims of the cultural imperialism represented by Christianity. Then comes the trauma of Okigbo's own conversion through Christian education in a primary school, where the "half-serious half-comical . . . school teacher" Kepkanly like his kind elsewhere uses the whip (hyperbolically termed "the blade") to inflict the "cross" like a scar on the minds of defenceless youngsters (see Heavensgate II, strophe i, lines 1-13). This emotion-toned remembrance of the cross becomes here the nuclear element of an antichristian complex which subsequently dominates the poet-hero's consciousness. Associated with this are Okigbo's uncompromisingly violent reaction against the materialistic culture introduced in the wake of Christian domination of Africa (Heavensgate II, strophe i, lines 26-34) and the rape of African culture, especially its sanctuaries, by agents of Christian iconoclasm (Limits X).

Complexes may also manifest themselves in the form of a strong pre-Occupation with something. Thus Hall and Nordby write:

When we say a person has a complex we mean he is so strongly pre-occupied by something that he can hardly think about something else. In modern parlance he has a "hangup". A strong complex is easily noticed by others, although the person himself may not be aware of it (1973:37).

Jung was also concerned with complexes in this sense. He observed that "A person does not have a complex; the complex has him" (Hall and Nordby 1973:37). In this connection, Jung speaks of the artist's "ruthless passion for creation." The artist, he writes, "is fated to sacrifice happiness and everything that makes life worth living for the ordinary human being." In the early phase of his career, Okigbo projects this kind of
strong complex for perfection through his poet-hero. In his passionate pursuit of beauty, represented by various female and feline images, the poet-hero is content to lead a life of “anguish and solitude”, to submit himself to “shadows distances labyrinths violences” (Distances, VI), and to suffer a series of deaths. In this early phase of his work, Okigbo the man did not go as far as his hero. But in the strong complex of his hero, there always lurked something of himself which in the end he proved unable to contain. “The complex,” as Jung says, “must . . . be a psychic factor, which, in terms of energy possess a value that sometimes exceeds that of our conscious intentions” (Jaciobi 1942:37). In Path of Thunder, Okigbo shows an awareness of the danger into which his personal identification with the poet-hero could lead him:

If I don’t learn to shut my mouth I’ll soon go to hell,
I, Okigbo, town-crier, together with my iron-bell
("Hurrah for Thunder")

He does indeed “go to hell”, when in the wake of the Biafran struggle he becomes so fully identified with his hero that he finds himself attempting to perform in real life feats of heroism of the kind envisaged in the imaginative world of his poetry.

While the complexes of the personal unconscious clearly play an important part in the experience of Okigbo’s poet-hero, it is mainly from the deeper stratum of the unconscious—the collective conscious—that much of what we perceive as images and symbols in the poems seem to emanate. The collective unconscious, according to Jung, is a reservoir of latent images, usually called primordial images:

Primordial means “first” or “original”, therefore a primordial image refers to the earliest development in the psyche. Man inherits these images from his ancestral past, a past that includes all his human ancestors as well as his pre-human and animal ancestors. These racial images are not inherited in the sense that a person consciously remembers or has images that his ancestor has. Rather they are predispositions or potentialities for experiencing and responding to the world in the same ways that his ancestors did. Consider, for example, man’s fear of snakes or of the dark. He does not have to learn these fears through experience with snakes and the dark, although such experiences may reinforce or reaffirm his predisposition. We inherit predispositions to fear snakes and the dark because our primitive ancestors experienced these fears for countless generations. They became engraved upon the brain. (Hall and Nordby 1973:39-40).

In the last forty years of his life, Jung spent much time studying the nature and manifestations of the primordial images under the new name “archetypes” which he had coined for them. “Among the numerous archetypes that he identified and described are those of birth, death, power, magic, the hero, the child, the tricker, God, the demon, the wise old man, the earth, mother, the giant, many natural objects like trees, the sun, wind, rivers, fire, and animals and many man-made objects such
as rings and weapons” (Hall and Nordby 1973:40). Jung wrote, “There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into the psychic constitution, not in the form of images filled with content, but at first, only as forms without content, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action” (Hall and Nordby 1973:41-42).

From among the numerous archetypes studied by him, Jung selected and paid a great deal of attention to five which he considered to be of the greatest importance in shaping human personality and behaviour. These are the persona, the anima (in men) or the animus (in women), the shadow, the wise old man (in men) or the great mother (in women), and the self.

These five archetypes appear rather clearly in Okigbo’s poetry marking significant stages in the poet-hero’s quest for fulfillment as, in Jungian theory, they mark significant stages of individuation.

The persona is the mask through which we seek to carve a favourable image in our social relationships. It is essentially the predisposition to play up to appearances, the urge to behave according to the demands of a particular social role which comes from the depths of the unconscious. Okigbo’s poet-hero in his conscious orientation towards the inner world projects an almost monomaniac mask of a contemplative, solitude-seeking and far-seeing man, clearly anxious to be identified as poet, prophet and priest.

The desire to be identified as a poet is particularly strong. Thus the poet-hero’s persona embodies such traditional symbols of the poet as the sunbird:

> Me, to the orangery
> solitude invites
> a wagtail, to tell,
> the tangled-wood-tale;
> a sunbird, to mourn
> a mother on a spray (Heavensgate 1, 1:6-11)

or as a bird that must sing, tongue-tied,

> without name or audience,
> making harmony among the branches (Siren Limits III)

But the persona in the long run is only a mask. Beneath it is the shadow, our darker side which we generally do not wish to be identified with but which though repressed remains within us, occasionally breaking through the mask to dominate our behaviour often to our embarrassment or frustration. Beneath the poet-prophet persona of Okigbo’s hero is a degenerate shadow-archetype, properly identified throughout the poems as the “prodigal”. This shadow-archetype is essentially like the figure of the prodigal in the Bible. This darker side of
the pet-hero is first revealed in Four Canzones, but in Heavensgate, there is a sustained attempt to contain its negative effects through the distillation of a proper persona. But again and again the Shadow keeps breaking through the mask taking more sinister forms. For example, in Limits I-IV, soon after the regeneration at the end of Heavensgate, the shadow breaks through the mask once again in the guise of Ahab the hero of Melville’s Moby Dick. Here, the poet-hero’s unbridled pursuit of the “white elephant” through “Banks of reed” and “Mountains of broken bottles” turns out to be no less destructive and illusory than that of Ahab’s monomaniac pursuit of the “white whale”. The Ahab-image is here compounded with that of another famous literary manifestation of the shadow archetype, namely Enkindu, the primitive alter-ego of Gilgamesh in the ancient Babylonian epic. Thus, at the close of Siren Limits the poet-hero, bursting as it were with primitive energy, throws himself against the inscrutable “oblong-headed lioness” (section IV) only to become “drowned”, like Enkindu his Babylonian counterpart, “in the unconscious”.

But, perhaps, of all the five major archetypes, by far the most highly developed in its manifestations in Okigbo’s poetry is the anima. The anima is the primordial image of woman in man, a counterpart of the animus, the primordial image of man engraved on the mind of woman. The anima appears in dreams, visions and fantasies as in literature and myth in the form of the mother, the loved one, the goddess, the siren, the prostitute and enchantress, the femme fatale. The impact of these latent images of woman can be as destructive to the psychic health of the man who projects them as they can be beneficent. They often give rise to an obsessive pursuit of the elusiveness and the intractable. This is exactly what happens inside Okigbo’s poetry where the poet-hero’s efforts are pointedly directed toward one goal, union with the anima in one of its most ethereal manifestations, a goal which is ultimately realized at the close of Distances. Thus Okigbo says in his introduction to Labyrinths:

Distances is . . . a poem of homecoming, but of homecoming in its spiritual and psychic aspect. The quest broken off after ‘Siren Limits’ is resumed, this time in the unconscious. The self that suffers, that experiences, ultimately finds fulfilment in a form of psychic union with the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative. The process is one of sensual anaesthesia, of total liberation from all physical, and emotional tension, the end result, a state of aesthetic grace. (1965: xi-xii)

This union with “the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative takes place after a long series of gruesome encounters with various forms and manifestations of her image, both negative and positive, in the preceding sequences.

In Four Canzones and Heavensgate, she appears as Idofo, “the water spirit that nurtures all creation” (Okigbo 1965:xi). In these two
sequences, especially in the latter, she is identified as the mother to whom the shadow-dominated hero (the prodigal) must return for psychic regeneration:

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal
leaning on an oilbean,
lost in your legend (Heavensgate I)

The anima, according to Jung, is “projected not only on to a pagan goddess” (as here, in the case of Okigbo, on to Idoto), she also represents the totality of man’s age-old experience with women; “Every mother and every beloved is forced to become the carrier and embodiment of this omnipresent and ageless image” (Ibid: 53). The image first takes the shape of man’s mother and then acquires the qualities of “various women who attract a man in his life time” (Ibid). Later, she becomes etherealized, imbued with a “timeless quality” looking rather young and beautiful though “there is always a suggestion of years of experience behind her.” (Ibid: 54).

There is a hint of the projection of the anima image on to Okigbo’s own mother, Mrs Anna Okigbo, in the two invocations of “Anna... of the panel oblong” in Heavensgate I and V. But the dominant forms in which the anima shows up are essentially ethereal: goddess, watermaid, lioness, and white queen. Okigbo’s watermaid is essentially the same as Jung’s “mermaid, water spirit, or nymph, who entices a man under the water where she lives so that he must love her forever or be drowned” (see Fordham 1957:54). In Heavensgate III, the first vision of the watermaid engulfs Okigbo’s hero in a vortex of violence:

now breaks
salt-white surf on the stones and me
and lobsters and shells
in iodine small.

Later in the same section of Heavensgate, the anima appears in another ethereal form:

Bright
with the armpit-dazzle of a lioness

wearing white light about her

But then she proves as elusive as she is alluring:

So brief her presence
match-flare in Wind’s breath
so brief with mirrors around me
Downward . . .
the waves distil her;
gold crop
sinking ungathered.

The end result is a feeling of total frustration and disillusionment:

And I who am here abandoned,
count the sand by waves abandoned,
count her blessing, my white queen,

But the spent sea reflects
from his mirrored visage
not my queen, a broken shadow,

These tantalizing appearances and disappearances of the anima awaken in the poet-hero a consuming desire to capture her. But when she reappears in *Limits IV*, it is in the destructive form of the “oblong headed lioness” that wounds and destroys the quester’s second self. In certain respects, these images of the distractingly beautiful but elusive female figure that occasionally responds to the hero’s consuming passion for her may have been reinforced by Okigbo’s encounter in real life with women. It is difficult to assert with certainty; but one gets a hint of a difficult relationship with a particular woman in the poet’s life in the confession that “*Limits* was written at the end of a journey of several centuries from Nsukka to Yola in pursuit of what turned out to be an illusion” (1965:xi). Nevertheless, in its vital essence as “gold crop”, the anima figure is “the treasure hard to come by”, in the search for which the romantic hero must submit to a long series of ordeals and display the patience of the alchemist. Even before the final consumation, (section II), the anima appears to the hero in one of her most formidable forms, as “Death herself”:

anguish and solitude . . .
smothered, my scattered
cry, the dancers,
lost among their own snares,
the faces, the hands held
captive; the interspaces reddening with blood;

behind them all,
in smoke of white cotton,
Death herself,
the chief celebrant,
in a cloud of incense,
paring her fingernails . . .

At her feet rolled their heads like cut fruits:
about her fell their severed members,
numerous as locusts,
Like split wood left to dry, the dismembered joints of the ministrants piled high.

She bathed her knees in the blood of attendants;
her sock in entrails of ministrants . . .

This appears to be the last terrifying hurdle, for after this the hero passes through the great archway on which he sees the largest mandala in the poems, a magic circle which here, as in Jungian psychoanalysis, anticipates the “state of aesthetic grace” and “total liberation from all physical and emotional tension” that follows the invitation of the goddess:

come into my cavern
shake the mildew from your hair;
let your ear listen:
my mouth calls from a cavern . . . (Distances VI)

The archetype of the *wise-old-man*, associated with the occasional feeling of godliness in men, is not so clearly manifest in Okigbo as the other four Jungian archetypes, but it seems to underlie the false sense of “divine rejoicing” with which the hero dares approach the queen in *Limits I*. This kind of inflationary attitude does not, however, run counter to the hero’s more positive identification with great heroes such as Christ (Heavensgate and Distances), Gilgamesh (limits), Palmarus, Tammuz and Aeneas (Silences), etc., for these are mythological symbols of self-realization—archetypes of the kind of fully individualized *self* which the poet-hero seeks to attain.

That Okigbo’s poetry is so richly dominated by the archetypes of the collective unconscious is by no means surprising, especially in the light of the universality of its mythos, “the fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfilment”. As Jung says in his essay “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetic Art” (See Jacobi 1942:24),

He who peaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices.
He enthralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is trying to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, thereby evoking in us all those beneficent forces that have enabled mankind to find refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night. That is the secret of effective art.

It is also, essentially, the secret of the effectiveness of Okigbo’s poetry.

III

If Okigbo’s poet-hero is a large and complex symbol of the psyche in its conscious and unconscious aspects, his progression through *Four Canzones*, through *Labyrinth*, through *Path of Thunder*, and even through the occasional poems, especially *Dance of the Painted Maidens*
and *Lament of the Masks*, may be described as symbolizing the dynamics of the psyche, i.e. the character, values and directions of flow of the energy (Libido in Jungian terminology) by means of which the psyche operates.

It would appear from a careful analysis of Okigbo’s poetry that the psychic energy which propels the poet-hero is fundamentally sexual in character.²⁰ The relationship between the hero and the anima is thus often portrayed in sexual images, both of desire and of consummation. Many readers may not be fully aware of the sexual undertones of the opening lines of *Heavensgate*:

Before you, mother Idoto,

naked I stand,

before your watery presence

a prodigal

leaning on an oil bean

lost in your legend

The sexual implications of the words “naked” “watery” and “lost” here can only be fully realized if we understand what the “oilbean” on which the hero is leaning really is. In fact, the oilbean here is *Ukpakaoto*, in the mythology of Okigbo’s hometown, Ojoto, the consort of the goddess Idoto.²¹ There seems to be something magical about the poet-hero’s posture here. Leaning on the oilbean seems to be a way of acquiring the conjugal powers of *Ukpakaoto*, i.e. by the law of contact in sympathetic magic (see Frazer 1963:14-15). The consequence of this sexual union with the goddess is unique secret knowledge of the world and human behaviour. It is the *word* or “divine logos” that transforms the “dark waters of the beginning” into the created world.

At the end of the second strophe of *Heavensgate I*, we have another sexual image, that of the young bird

On one leg standing

in silence at the passage.

This image may be ambivalent, but one meaning certainly is the idea of the young cockerel standing on heat on one leg as it approaches the hen. In a similar setting—in the “solitude” of the beach in *Heavensgate III*—the hero feels the thrill of sexual consumation as he contemplates a vision of the anima:

Maid of the salt-emptiness.

sophisticreany,

whose secret I have covered up with beachsand .

Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach

Shadow of rain over man with woman.
The strong sexual energy of the hero is generally channelled positively throughout the poems as a vehicle for the attainment of creative and spiritual goals. Thus, as the hero’s quest comes to its end in *Distances*, he experiences the bliss of sexual union with the goddess, in her bridal chamber:

I wash my feet in your head, o maid . . .
I have entered your bridal chamber; and lo,
I am the sole witness of my homecoming (*Distances VI*)

But this is the final spiritual-creative transformation of an instinctual sexual energy. When overcome by the shadow, as in *Limits I*, what we see is the spontaneous outpour of pure animal sexuality:

Emigrant with airborne nose,
The he-goat-on-heat.

Another aspect of Jungian psychodynamics which may throw some light on the nature of the experience of Okigbo’s poet-hero is the idea that the natural movement of the Libido is both forward and backward, like tidal waves. The forward movement which Jung calls *progression* satisfies the demands of the conscious while the backward movement, *regression*, satisfies the demand of the unconscious. This aspect of Jungian theory has been succintly summed up as follows in Fordham (1957:18-19):

Progression is concerned with the active adaptation to one’s environment and regression with the adaption to one’s inner needs. Regression therefore, (contrary to some points of view) is just as normal as a counterpole as sleeping and waking, as long as the Libido is functioning in an unhindered manner, i.e. according to the law of enantiodromia, when it must eventually turn over into a progressive movement. Regression may even mean, among other things, a return to a dreamy state after a period of concentration and directed mental activity or it may mean a return to an earlier stage of development but these are not necessarily ‘wrong’; rather they can be looked upon as restorative phases—‘reculer pour mieux sauter’

In Okigbo’s poetry switches from *progression* to *regression* are sometimes clearly marked. As we are told in the introduction to *Labyrinths*, “the quest broken off after ‘Siren Limits’ is resumed (in *Distances*), this time in the unconscious.” This transition from active adaptation to the outer world to the inner world is clearly marked at the end of *Siren Limits*. The hero addresses the image, as he submits to her power:

Distances of her armpit-fragrance
Turn chloroform enough for my patience—
When you have finished
& done up my stitches,
Wake me near the altar,
& this poem will be finished . . .
Some of Okigbo's poems are dominated by regressive movements (e.g. Distances) while others are dominated by progressive movements (e.g. Limits V-XII). But the pattern of progression and regression is discernible in the internal dynamics of particular sequences. Heavensgate, for example, begins with a progressive movement, an invocation to the water-goddess, Idoto, in which the returned prodigal attempts to adapt himself to his long-abandoned home, to reidentify himself with his roots. There follows, in the second strophe of the first section, a regressive movement both of introspection and of a kind of return to the very origins of creation, the "dark waters of the beginning". In the third strophe, the poet-hero wakes again as it were from his withdrawal into his inner world and comes face to face with the Christian Church, the external enemy against which he must define his positives.

The second part of Heavensgate begins with a regressive movement, this time with what Fordham describes as a "return to an earlier stage of development", in this case to significant childhood experiences stored in the depths of the personal unconscious. These memories assert themselves compulsively on the poet, reinforcing his dedication to the pursuit of excellence through poetry. In Heavensgate III, the regressive movement continues, but this time in the deeper stratum of the collective unconscious where the poet-hero encounters some of the most powerful ethereal manifestations of his anima — the watermaid, the lioness, and the white queen.

Finally, in sections IV and V, the hero returns to the progressive active adaptation to his socio-cultural environment, first through the sacrifice for rebirth in "Lustra" (section IV) and subsequently through the celebration of the arrival of a child in the extended family in "Newcomer" (section V), an even which he treats here as an objective correlative of his own rebirth.

For Jung, writes Fordham (1957:19), "Libido is natural energy, and first and foremost serves the purposes of life, but a certain amount in excess of what is needed for instinctive ends can be converted into productive work and used for cultural purposes. This direction of energy becomes initially possible by transferring it to something similar in nature to the objects of instinctive interest. The transfer cannot however be made a simple act of the will, but is achieved in a roundabout way. After a period of gestation in the unconscious a symbol is produced which can attract the Libido, and also serve as a channel diverting its natural flow. The symbol is never thought out consciously, but comes usually as a revelation or intuition, often appearing in a dream."

It seems that the female image in Okigbo's poetry represents such a symbol. It is a symbol which, as we have seen above, has the potential of attracting the strong sexual drives of the poet-hero and converting them into a means for the fulfilment of creative and spiritual yearnings. There is an interesting dramatization of this canalization process in
Heavensgate III where, as noted above, the sexual image of “shadow of rain over man with woman” appears. Here, the hero is discovered on a seashore burdened with a secret which, after a traumatic encounter with the anima (manifested in the figure of the “watermaid”), he plants “into a dughole”. The sexual undertones of the expression “dughole” may not be immediately obvious except to those who are conversant with the Nigerian undergraduate slang (“hole” = female sexual organ). Heavensgate was composed at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and it is not unlikely that, in the expression “dughole”, the sexual implication of the “hole” slang is combined with the traditional Igbo image of the “dog” as a symbol of sexuality. The “dughole” into which the hero’s secret is whispered is thus, most probably, a symbol of the female sexual organ, and the secret itself, as I have shown elsewhere, is poetic truth, the seed out of which “the ears” grow in the second strophe like the reeds that grew out of the hole into which King Midas’ barber subconsciously whispers the truth of his privileged knowledge that the “king has asses’ ears” (see Azuonye 1973, and Graves 1960:11).

This symbolic representation of the canalization of excess sexual energy for cultural purposes is all the more remarkable, in so far as Okigbo’s relationship with Jung is concerned, for its congruence with the example of canalization cited by Jung in his essay on “Psychic Energy” (see Fordham 1957:20). Jung cites “the spring ceremony of the Watschandis, who dig a hole in the earth, surround it with business in imitation of the female genitals, and dance round it holding their spears in front to simulate an erect penis. ‘As they dance round, they thrust their spears into the hole, shouting ‘Pulli nira, pulli nira, wataka.’ (Not a pit, not a pit, but a cunt!) During the ceremony none of the participants is allowed to look at a woman. The dance, which takes place in the spring, is charged with extraordinary significance. The dancers, through their movements and shouting, arouse themselves to ecstasy; they are sharing in a magical act, the fertilization of the Earth woman, and other women are kept out of the way so that the libido shall not flow into ordinary sexuality. The hole in the earth is not just a substitute for female genitals, but a symbol representing the idea of the earth woman who is to be fertilized, and is the symbol which transmutes the libido” (Fordham 1957:20).

IV

When Okigbo describes the central theme of his poetry as “the fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfilment” he is stating in the language of a poet-critic something parallel to the central concern of Jungian psychology, the development of personality through the harmonization of the disparate but interacting contents of the psyche. To achieve a fully individuated personality, every individual must strive to activate and understand the contents of the inner state of his psyche, to reach an
accommodation both with the complexes of the personal unconscious and the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The contents of the collective unconscious must be made conscious and brought into harmonious coexistence with the conscious.

As we have noted, accommodation with the archetypes of the collective unconscious is particularly important in the individuation process. In fact, the individuation process begins with an encounter with the shadow and the containment of this darker aspect of our inner selves in such a way as to be able to distill a proper persona suited to the total environment in which we find ourselves. This Okigbo does in *Four Canzonas* and *Heavensgate*. He contains the prodigal in him, discovers an inner strength in the life of contemplation through poetry and so distils the proper persons suited to this role in his poet-hero. Through the poet-hero, he overcomes the negative and destructive aspects of the anima as well as the tendency toward inflation, the wise-old-man in him. Battling through various obstacles—labyrinths, mazes and distances, and with the aid of traditional magic circles or mandalas, he finally arrives at the state of “aesthetic grace” described in *Distances*. The inner and the outer worlds have been traversed through a long series of progressions and regressions. Now, the unification of the inward and the outward attitudes has become possible. Thus, in *Path of Thunder*, the extroverted “Okigbo, town-crier” is able to take the “forum” and speak with the voice of the conscious “mythmaker” about the events of the day with the subjective strength of the poet-hero who has, in his “journey of several centuries”, shouldered his way “through a mass of ancient nights to chlorophyll.”
NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented at the Fifth Annual African Literature Conference, University of Ibadan, July 29—August 2, 1980.

2. It is in fact very likely that Okigbo was familiar with the writings of Carl Jung, and there are traces of Jungian terminology in his introduction to *Labyrinths*, notably in his description of *Distances* as "a poem of homecoming in its spiritual and psychic aspect. The quest broken off after 'Siren Limits' is resumed this time in the unconscious." Be that as it may, there is no attempt in this paper to argue that Okigbo's poetry was directly influenced by Jungian psychology. The argument is rather that there are patterns of congruence in the works of both men which illuminate each other and which seem to vindicate the claim of each to a universal vision of reality. In fact, the less evidence there is of any direct influence on Okigbo by Jung the more significant these patterns of congruence will be.

3. This dimension of the congruence between Okigbo and Jung is not discussed further in this paper except in a footnote (17 below).

4. For earlier comparative studies of Okigbo's poetry, see Egunu (1971), Anozie (1972) and Maduakor (1977).


6. The fact of the existence of the "archetypes" is perhaps the most widely disputed aspect of Jungian psychology, one at which literary scholars have often scoffed (see, for example, Kirk 1970: 175-280). But it seems rather clear from Jung's constant use of the term "motif" to denote the "archetype" (e.g. in his essay, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious", 1959) and from Jacobi's comparison of the idea to "the Gestalt" (1971: 53-55) that it is indeed true—to use the words of Kirk himself—that "all human beings possess similar inborn tendencies to form certain symbols, and these manifest themselves through the unconscious mind in myths, dreams, delusions and folklore" (1970:275).


8. Anozie (1972:77) appears to be of a different opinion although he recognizes the relationship between Okigbo's concern in his poetry and some aspects of Jungian Psychology.

9. Subsumed here is the Jungian theory of the "psychological types" including four function-types (thinking, feeling, sensing and intuiting) and two attitude-types (extroversion and introversion) which cut across the function-types. But, as Jung insists, no one individual belongs exclusively to only one or the other of these types. This will explain the use in this and subsequent
paragraphs of the terms “extroverted, thinking-and-feeling type” and “introverted, sensing-and-intuiting type.”

10. That the shrine of Idoto was destroyed is a little known event recently discussed in a newspaper article (Maduekwe, 1980). I have elsewhere (Azuonye, 1980) attempted to show that the scenes of Christian Imperialist destruction evoked in ‘Fragments out of the Deluge’ (Limits V-XII) include some allusions to this event.

11. “By its theme and craft,” writes Anozie (1972:174), “Path of Thunder differs from the poetry written by Christopher Okigbo up to and including the first half of December 1965.” It is essentially the type (in this case the committed poetry of the negritude class) which Okigbo describes in one of his interviews as “platform poetry” (Whitelaw, 1965:29). Anozie (1974:174) explains: “This is so because in it Okigbo makes, for the first time ever, a forthright and direct political statement which undisguisedly defines the poet’s own revolutionary option”.

12. These lines from the original version of Heavensgate are omitted in the final version published in Labyrinths.


14. The presence of the shadow-archetype of the Prodigal in this early sequence is one of the indications of its organic relatedness to the subsequent sequences in Labyrinths (1971).

15. See Cirlot (1962:190), under the entry, Lion: “For Jung, the Lion in its wild state, is broadly speaking an index of latent passions; it may also take the form of a sign indicating the danger of being devoured by the unconscious” (Italics added).

16. This is probably Okigbo’s wife, Sefi, before he married her in 1964. As we are told in Anozie (1972:9). Okigbo was passionately in love with Sefi, but “Although they had a daughter, Ibrahimat, they never lived happily together under the same roof for any length of time.”

17. Okigbo’s work is indeed both a ritual re-enactment of an intense personal religious experience and an alchemical work in which is described a passionate quest for the great treasure hard to come by, the opus magnum of the alchemist. It will be an illuminating line of research to investigate, in the light of the works of Cirlot (1962); Jung (1953, 1956, 1959), de Rola (1973) and others, the significance— as symbols of alchemical transformation— of various colours, metals and the geometrical forms in Okigbo’s poetry.

18. The magic circle, better known by its Sanskrit name, mandala, “includes all concentrically arranged figures, all radial and spherical arrangements, and all circles and squares with a central point. It is one of the oldest religious symbols (the earliest known being the sunwheel), and is found throughout the world” (Fordham 1959:57). Discussed at length in my study of geometrical symbolism in Okigbo’s poetry, the mandala is essentially “the visual plastic expression of the struggle to achieve order— even within diversity and the longing to be reunited with the pristine, non-spatial and non-temporal Centre as it is conceived in all symbolic traditions” (Cirlot 1962:201). Not surprisingly, the spiritual homecoming of Okigbo’s poet-hero, in Distances, is anticipated by a vision of the following mandala:
a triangular lintel
of solid alabaster
enclosed in a square
inscribed in a circle
with a hollow centre
above the archway
yawning shutterless
like celestial pincers
like a vast countenance

one can indeed see the vast countenance (the face of God, perhaps) in a simple diagram of this mandala.

19. The poet-hero’s self-identification with Christ in the closing lines of *Distances* (“o maid.../I have entered your bridal/chamber”) is so wrapped up in an allusion to Catholic thought that most readers may not be aware of it. But Jung’s comment in his autobiography (1963) is highly revealing: “In the realm of Catholic thought the Mother of God and Bride of Christ has been received into the divine thalamus (bridal chamber) only recently, after centuries of hesitancy, and thus at least been accorded partial recognition” (1963:227). Jung’s secretary Aniela Jaffe explains in a footnote: “This refers to the Papal Bull of Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), promulgating the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This new dogma affirms that Mary as Bride is united with the Son in the heavenly bridal chamber, and as Sophia (Wisdom) she is united with the Godhead. Thus the feminine principle is brought into immediate proximity with the masculine Trinity.” See also Jung’s *Answer to Job* (in Campbell, 1971:635-6).

20. Here Okigbo is much more comparable to Freud in his earlier writings than to Jung: “In his earlier writings Freud used the term ‘libido’ to denote sexual energy; but when he revised his theory of motivation, libido was defined as the energy of all the life instincts” (Hall, 1954:59).

21. The oilbean tree in Okigbo’s poetry is probably *Ulpaka-otọ* (lit. Oilbean tree of *Otọ*) which, in the mythology of the poet’s hometown *Ojo-ọtọ* (lit. the Place of *Otọ*), is the consort of the water-goddess *Ido-ọtọ* (lit. the river of *Otọ*). I am indebted to Dr Zed Chukwuama of the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Enugu, for this information.

22. e.g. the idiom *ọ na-ara kà nkita*, “he fucks like a dog”. The phrase “dug-hole” is thus a pun on the sexual connotations of “dog” and “hole” in the collocation “doghole”. Okigbo is fond of puns and *double entredres* of this kind. Thus, for example, the word *iron* in “Thunder Can Break” (*Path of Thunder*, p. 63) refers simultaneously to the “iron chapter” of Nigerian history represented by the military coup of January 1966 as well as to the new military Head of State, General *Ironsi* (nicknamed *Iron*-sides) and to the ironic imprisonment of the heroes of the coup (“Iron” birds/Held-fruit-of-flight—tight) by the new incumbent who did not share their revolutionary ideals. See also *Heavensgate III* where the word “ear” in “ears of the secret” refers both to the reed that sprouts from the hole into which King Midas’s barber whispers the secret that the king has ass’s ears and to the ears of the king himself—the secret (poetic truth)—and the consequences of its exfoliation (see Azuonye, 1973, and Graves, 1960:83f).
REFERENCES


1958. 'Answer to Job'. Ibid. Vol. II.


1959b. 'The Concept of the Collective unconscious' Ibid.

1959c. 'Consciousness, Unconscious and Individuation' Ibid.,

1959b. 'A Study of the Process of Individuation'. Ibid.


1961-62. Limits. Ibid.

1962-64. Silences. Ibid.

1964. Distances. Ibid.


SERUMAGA, Robert. 1965. “Interview with Christopher Okigbo”. *Cultural Events in Africa* (Supplement) 1-IV.
