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SIERRA LEONE POETRY IN ENGLISH

by Dr. E.J.T. Palmer,  
Department of English, Fourah Bay College

English original

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## SIERRA LEONEAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

Dr. E. J. T. Palmer  
Senior Lecturer  
Department of English  
Fourah Bay College

Although Sierra Leone had a flying start in the field of education over most West African countries she has lagged behind in creative output. Sierra Leone's early writers like Africanus Horton, Edward Blyden I, A. B. C. Sibthorpe and Wallace Johnson preferred to channel their formidable intellectual energies into the fields of journalism, history, criticism, politics and anthropology rather than creative writing. Nevertheless, Sierra Leone has always had an interesting Literature going much further back than is commonly supposed. The pioneers of Sierra Leonean literature - Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Crispin George, Jacob Stanley Davies and Gladys Casely-Hayford - were all writing well before the upsurge of literary activity in Africa in the fifties. It is particularly in the field of poetry that Sierra Leone has made and continues to make its most significant contribution to African Literature. I propose in this paper to consider the development of Sierra Leonean poetry from the early pioneers Crispin George, Jacob Stanley Davies and Gladys Casely-Hayford, through the writers of the middle period - Delphine King and Abioseh Nicol - to more modern figures like Syl Cheyney-Coker, Dominic Ofori and Gaston Bart-Williams.

The poetry of Crispin George and Jacob Stanley Davies reflects their Christianity and their religiously inspired education. Both were great churchmen, Crispin George being, in fact, a chorister for most of his life. His only collection of poetry, Precious Gems Unearthed By an African was published privately in 1952.<sup>1</sup> The nature of his education, an inadequate exposure to the range of modern poetry and a thorough acquaintance with hymns probably furnished him with a very limited conception of form in poetry. His poems are written in a limited range of metrical forms, with a certain archaic diction and almost always in rimes. Many of them read like hymns or metrical psalms. Here is a stanza from '

"Let Wisdom and Modesty Guide Us:"

Be not so foolish as to boast,

Save only on his Might;

He only is the Lord of Host

Who doth all things aright.<sup>2</sup>



The desperate striving after acceptable rimes, even occasionally at the expense of the sense, has unfortunate consequences, impeding the flow of the thought, creating a constricting atmosphere and leading unintentionally to a comic or even pathetic effect. On the rare occasions, however, when he chooses to write in blank verse, Crispin George is at his best for then he is liberated from the constricting effects of the rime. "Ingratitude", one of his best poems, benefits from this liberation; it is a tour de force of declamatory grandeur, with well-chosen images and analogies reinforcing the effortless flow of thought:

The basest forms of vices that we know  
Seem chaste, compared with base Ingratitude,  
That freakish, misbegotten child of pride  
Seduced by basest treachery, void of all  
extenuating pleas adduced by vice.<sup>3</sup>

It must not, however, be supposed that Crispin George is incapable of employing rime schemes successfully. In a poem like "Right Shall Vanquish Might" which is written in stanzaic form with riming couplets, he exercises perfect control over all the elements of the poem. Unlike a good many of the other riming poems there is here no awkwardness, no ineptitude, and no suggestion that the sense is struggling against the metre and the rimes:

This Heaven's gift of charm-diffusing circlet that we scan  
Whose distance shames the eye-destroying glare contrived  
by man,  
This Alpha and Omega of that splendour known as light,  
Is God's own token of that day when Right shall vanquish  
Might.

It should be obvious from these few quoted lines that Crispin George was a profoundly religious moralist with a great faith in a divinely and justly ordered universe. He was very much a child of his age reflecting the attitudes of his generation and his Christian oriented milieu. The realities of life are for him a revelation of God's existence and love, and an assurance of heaven; and he advocates the virtues of tolerance, patience, love, honesty, humility, justice and gratitude. Very few of his poems reveal that specific pre-occupation with the African condition which now occupies the attention of more modern African writers. One such is "Homage to Mother Africa" where he asserts his love for the continent; but even here he contrives to bring in the religious theme. His optimism, which borders at times on sentimentality, might seem a bit facile, but taken as a whole his work is a not unimpressive expression of the corporate attitudes of his class and generation.

Although Jacob Stanley Davies was less prolific and versatile than

Crispin George, his work displays less sentimentality and greater rigour of thought. And he is at least the equal of George in his ability to maintain perfect control over the elements of the poem. Jacob Stanley Davies never published his poems which were written primarily for the satisfaction of members of his family and circulated among them. Several of them, however, have been published in anthologies.<sup>4</sup> Like Crispin George's work many of his poems exude a religious aura and similarly show the influence of the hymn and metrical psalm. This is particularly the case in "A Negro's Prayer" which has a highly conventional metrical scheme and a very archaic diction. Nevertheless, there is little awkwardness, and the sentiment, though commonplace, is dignified. Like Crispin George Davies displays great pride in and concern for the moral purity of his race.

"Even There", which is possibly his best poem, effectively exposes the absurdities of racial discrimination. This poem must surely rank as one of the most brilliant satirical poems written in Africa before Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation". Using the Community of ghosts, angels, devils and skeletons in the other world, Davies imaginatively creates the perfect situation for making discrimination appear ridiculous. There is consternation when the white skeletons refuse to mingle with the black ones, the white angels with the black angels and the white devils with the black ones.

There was a great commotion in the cemet'ry last night  
Skeletons in alteration! 'Twas a grisly sight.'  
Said one, 'I'll have you know, sir, though in this lev'lin' place,  
You're not my equal here, Sir, you're of a different race.  
Prevent your Nigger worms man, from capering round my bones  
I'll never fester with you here, man, our skins were different tones

.....

There was a great dissension 'midst t'angels up in heaven  
Because an equal brand of crown had to them all been given;  
The white ones said, 'By right of race we should have crowns of gold  
While crowns for natives all should be quite of a different mould.  
They shall be made to doff their crowns when one of us goes by  
And if they don't we'll take our crowns and dot them in the eye!

There is here a perfect correlation between message and technique. The exact choice of words, the quality of the humour, the delightful imaging of the situation all tend towards reinforcing the moral point. The tone is beautifully modulated, the metre well-chosen and the whole poem perfectly structured and controlled. There is also a satirical detachment which helps to suggest that unsentimentality and toughness which one misses so often in Crispin George. Though Jacob Stanley Davies



Gladys Casely-Hayford, daughter of Adelaide who was herself one of the pioneers of West African writing, is still remembered in Freetown as a most remarkable woman. Although largely educated in the British tradition and belonging to the privileged Creole elite whose life-style was distinctly anglicised, her work is notable for its demonstration of the beauty and dignity of the black race. This is most marked in the poem "Rejoice" where she calls out rousingly to her fellow Africans to rejoice in their blackness. The poem is not entirely successful since the metaphors are hopelessly confused in the middle, and the naive religious optimism is rather embarrassing; but the sense of rejoicing is accurately captured by the rhythm and diction. In the poem "Nativity" she takes the very bold step of regarding the birth of Christ in purely black terms. It was a bold step not only because it amounted to a historical distortion; but because her very westernised milieu would have raised their eyebrows at it. The Christ child is a black babe born in a native hut to a black mother and father; he is wrapped in "blue lappah" and laid in his father's "deerskin hide".

Another poem, "Freetown" shows that although Gladys Casely-Hayford shared the naive optimism and sentimentality of Crispin George and, to a limited extent, of Jacob Stanley Davies, she was capable of greater metrical sophistication than both of them:

Freetown, when God made thee, He made by soil along  
Then threw the rich remainder in the sea.  
Small inlets cradled He, in jet black stone.  
Small bays of transient blue he lulled to sleep  
Within jet rocks, filled from the Atlantic deep.<sup>5</sup>

She was also one of the very first, and still remains one of the very few, to have written poetry in the Krio Language. This, at a time when members of her social class frowned on the use of Krio even in their homes, was another sign of her independence of spirit and adventurousness.

The work of these three pioneer poets is characterised by simplicity of style and clarity of meaning. Their models were not contemporary English poets who were already writing in a slightly more modern idiom, but the poets and hymn writers of the Victorian era. In them we see little density of texture, little verbal dexterity and little experimentation with language. The two poets of a later generation whom I wish to discuss here - Abioseh Nicol and Delphine King - permit themselves greater fluency and freedom, having largely liberated themselves from the constricting effects of rhyme and regular metrical form. But they still lack that predilection for linguistic gymnastics and the deliberate obscurity which marks the poetry of the modern school. They therefore act as a convenient bridge between the pioneers and the moderns.



It is with the work of Abioseh Nicol that Sierra Leone poetry begins to come to terms with those issues which have preoccupied the attention of most contemporary African writers - issues such as the alienation of the African intellectual from his traditional culture and the beauty and dignity of African traditional life. Abioseh Nicol's work has often been discussed within the context of negritude, an ideological concept which hardly touched Anglophone Africa. Like Senghor, he has been said to glorify the African past and African culture; certainly his statements about negritude have been much kinder than those of most other Anglophone writers. And yet it would be much too simple to say that his poetry reveals the glorification of African life one finds in the poetry of the negritude school. The glorification is only partly there in his most famous poem, "The Continent That Lies Within Us" or "The Meaning of Africa" as it is styled in some anthologies. If the first part seems like an idealisation of Africa it is only because Abioseh Nicol is presenting the rose-tinted picture of Africa held by the African student in Britain who is fed up with the monotony, artificiality and mechanisation of the life he sees around him. The beautiful description of an African scene is typical of this idealisation:

The hibiscus blooming in shameless scarlet,  
And the bougainvillea in mauve passion  
Entwining itself round strong branches;  
The palm trees standing like tall, proud, moral women  
Shaking their plaited locks against  
The cool, suggestive evening breeze.<sup>6</sup>

The poem then moves on to a comic presentation of the quality of English life which makes the student think of Africa with nostalgia. The language is still simple but effective, and the change of tone from the near reverence of the first part to the sarcasm of this section is striking. Back in Africa the poet leaves the sophistication of the cities and goes up country to see the "real Africa". Now the contrast between the imagined splendour and the actual drabness registers and is effectively enacted in the verse. This disappointing picture cannot be the real Africa, certainly not the whole of it. The poet resolves the difficulty by suggesting that the vastness of Africa makes it impossible for anyone to say what the real Africa is. For each of us, it is a concept which we fashion in our minds to fit our own special needs. Thus far, the poet sounds convincing. In the last section, however, he asserts, but fails to enact poetically, that only those who have done their work to their heart's satisfaction can really say: "This is my Africa". and he comes to the conclusion that Africa means happiness, contentment and fulfilment. Surely this is a rather forced conclusion which is not warranted by what the poem has enacted thus far.



Abioseh Nicol's other famous poem, "African Easter" consists of three individual poems which are like variations on a theme. Of these the most significant is the last, "Easter Morning". Here the poet gets down to the theme of cultural conflict using the framework of the resurrection to examine the implications of Easter and of Christianity in general for the African intellectual. Having abandoned his relentless, unforgiving, traditional gods for the Christian God of love, the intellectual is still unhappy about Christian practice. This accounts for the sarcasm and humour which pervades part of the poem:

I am a good churchman, now.  
Broadminded which means past caring  
Whether High or Low...  
A tenth of my goods  
I give to the poor  
Through income tax.<sup>7</sup>

Yet in spite of the doubts the poet comes to the conclusion that the real Christ has always been there and is an admirable object of worship for Africans. "African Easter" is an honest attempt by Abioseh Nicol to present the confusion facing the intellectual as he ponders which of the three competing religions - Christianity, Islam and traditional religion - must command his endorsement. Its simplicity of language and imagery, its grace, lucidity and elegance give Abioseh Nicol's poetry an almost prose-like quality; it is poetry, moreover, which is almost completely free of obscurity. He has not produced much poetry in recent years and he does not really belong to our modern generation of poets; but his urbanity and sense of humour contrast refreshingly with their terrible earnestness. His achievement remains solid.

Delphine King's collection of poems Dreams of Twilight was published privately in Nigeria and aptly described in a forward by Chinua Achebe as "intensely personal without being private".<sup>8</sup> They convey tremendous depth of feeling, but there is no ambiguity or obscurity. In so far as artistry is concerned she stands midway between the pioneer poets and Abioseh Nicol, for some of her early poems convey a naive sentimentality couched in archaic rimes and diction. However, in poems such as "Reunion Sweet", "What is This Thing Called Love?" and "Destiny" she soon permits herself the freedom and fluency we have noted in Abioseh Nicol's poetry. The process culminates in the brilliance of "Lost Innocence", one of her most intensely personal poems. It is about the loss of virginity and it communicates intense feeling, powerfully recreating the actuality of the experience by means of realistic images and diction, and the headlong rhythm:

Suddenly without a sign, a hint  
It struct  
Its cruel pointed horns  
It dug, dup deep



Until the blood  
Fresh red blood  
Did stream mercilessly, ceaselessly  
from the vicious wound dug deep  
So deep, its horns, pierced right through  
Into the vital organs, the heart, too.<sup>9</sup>

This poem and others like "Emotion" and "Magic" demonstrate that even when Delphine King is describing powerful feeling and is liberated from the constricting regularity of rime and metrical form, she is capable of exercising perfect control. She writes about a variety of themes; there are poems about betrayal, the failure of love, despair, isolation and restless unfulfilled searching. But there are also poems about acceptance, resignation, recovery, faith and optimism:

I will laugh again,  
The hand of time will wipe away my tears  
And in the distant days ahead  
I know I'll laugh again.<sup>10</sup>

Several of her poems, like "The Child", are about pride in blackness, about the hypocrisy of Africans trying to behave like white men, about pan-Africanism and misguided nationalism, some, like "The Elite" consist of social satire directed against snobbery and corruption. It is precisely her African consciousness and social conscience together with the fluency, metrical freedom and lyricism she eventually achieves which put her in the same class as Abioseh Nicol.

It is with the work of the younger generation of Sierra Leonean writers in general, and poets in particular, that that Sierra Leonean literature really begins to fall within the mainstream of African and modern literature. The fluency and clarity of Abioseh Nicol and Delphine King give way to the almost deliberate obscurity, concentration of thought and personal symbolism of Syl Cheyney-Coker, Lemuel Johnson, Muctarr Mustapha and Dominic Ofori. Modern Sierra Leonean poetry, like much modern African poetry, is characterised by concentration of thought, disregard for the more formal properties of poetry and a reliance instead on linguistic dexterity, densely-packed, encapsulated images, private symbols leading occasionally to obscurity and liberties with syntax and vocabulary. Unlike much modern African poetry, however, Sierra Leonean poetry makes few concessions to the African tradition. Our poets have so far shown very little interest in images or techniques drawn from indigenous traditional poetry and none of them can be said to have discovered an 'African poetic medium'. Perhaps this is the place to raise the whole question of the authenticity of African poetry and whether it ought to be evaluated by the critical criteria that have developed alongside modern poetry in general. The practice of poets like Okot P'Bitek has demonstrated that it is possible to



write modern African poetry in English using traditional forms; and yet most of our poets continue to ape the forms and techniques of western modern poetry. Some of them give the very plausible excuse that the conventional educational process exposed them only to English and American poetry and it was therefore natural for them to turn to these models when they commenced their writing careers. However, the problem is that in their search for the most abstruse images, in their almost deliberate obscurity and in their verbal gymnastics, modern Sierra Leonean poets outdo modern western poets who quite often affect a touching simplicity. The cosmopolitanism of the techniques of most of these poets makes Sierra Leonean poetry among the most difficult in the whole corpus of African poetry:

it is poetry which is constantly in need of elucidation. If our poets had used African traditional forms and techniques, then they could reasonably have demanded that their poetry be evaluated by traditional African criteria. Anglo-Saxon poetry is a useful example to illustrate the point. With its special rime-scheme, rhythm and images it would be disastrous to evaluate it by using modern critical criteria. Its criticism has therefore always taken into account its special form. But poetry which is written in modern western forms and manipulates language in a modern western way, can hardly expect to be judged by any criteria other than those which are used in the evaluation of modern western poetry.

Most of our modern poets spent long periods in the western world where they were exposed, among other things, to the rigours of racial discrimination. Most of them are Creoles who have been forced to re-examine the causes and consequences of their ancestry. Inevitably, therefore, racial discrimination, the plight of the black race in general, cultural disorientation, the role of the developing countries, the influence of tradition on the individual, religious disenchantment and other themes dear to the hearts of modern African writers, feature prominently in their works.

Syl Chyney-Coker, who has published two collections of poems - The Road to Jamaica and Concerto For an Exile - is probably the most important Sierra Leonean poet writing at the moment. The slave trade and its consequences is his dominant theme. He sees it as the root cause of his alienation from his ancestral roots and in poems like "The Traveller" and "Hydropathy" he explores this theme using appropriately violent imagery to bring out the devastation and the cultural and spiritual alienation caused by the slave trade. In "Hydropathy" which is among his most successful poems, he sees the transplantation of his people as a monstrous rape resulting in pollution and corruption and a complete distortion of the African personality:

One summer's rape gave me life  
the sperm in the grass stinks of my filth  
behind that grass fiery with occult  
three women of neurotic sex  
splashing their cunts with the licentious blood  
of female copperheads pissed on my soul.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the poem Cheyney-Coker continues to talk of his 'foul geneology', his 'polluted streams' and 'negralsed head', and he piles on filthy images of rape and pollution, cumulatively suggesting disgust and disillusionment.

Inevitably his disenchantment with his ancestry leads to disgust with himself. This appears in poems such as "The Masochist", "Horoscope", "Monologue", "Absurdity" and "The Caner". In "Horoscope" the poet's disgust with himself and his ancestry leads to a longing for self-abasement and self-punishment; he refers to himself as a 'paradigm of sorrow' - the quintessence of the pathetic implications of his disgusting ancestry. In "Monologue", which has even more violent images of self-abasement and self-punishment, he talks of his 'alcoholic head' and the mucus which comes gushing out; the disgust inevitably leads to a longing for death and destruction. In "Absurdity" he sees himself as an absurdity, the curse of his people, the foul progeny of his race, a thing so vile that even the vultures will be afraid of his corpse

Inevitably, Syl Cheyney-Coker's analysis of the plight of the black people in general and his ancestry in particular, broadens out to include an attack on Christianity. Cheyney-Coker can hardly mention Christianity and Christ without a touch of abuse. Christ is often 'the Eunuch' who lied to him at Calvary, who did not die to save the world 'but to make it a plantation where my people sweat!' He ironically asks for a pangolin to be put inside his belly 'to eat there the bread of deliverance so that 'I'll be saved from this sour passover that warms by bloated throat'. And he sneeringly refers to the sacrament of Holy Communion as a sumptuous feast cooked with blood of his Creole ancestors.

It is the poem "Misery of the Convert" which most forcefully demonstrates the poet's fierce antagonism to Christianity. The poem is a passionate tirade playing around with the ideas of chastity, rape and sex. The poet sets the church's endorsement of the doctrine of chastity and its adulation of Mary the virgin of saints against his own spiritual rape which leaves him spiritually sterile and dispossessed.

I carry the blessings of your rape

I was a King before they nailed you on the cross

Cheyney-Coker sees the church as a wealthy landowner which is largely indifferent to suffering and to the plight of the black peoples. Under the pretext of containing the so-called communist threat the church has allied itself with the imperialist oppressors of his race.



One of the recurrent motifs in Cheyney-Coker's poetry is the figure of the Argentinian woman who features as a symbol of disillusionment in Love. In most of the poems in which he explores this theme he sees the history and plight of Argentina as being similar to Sierra Leone's; indeed, he had hoped that his love for the woman would help to bring the two continents together, serve as a common means of salvation and become a symbol of faith in a future regeneration. Consequently the betrayal of this love has a profound effect and the theme of disillusionment in love is linked with disillusionment with his race, his ancestry and himself. This is obvious in poems like "The Crucified", "My Soul O Oasis" and "Concerto for an Exile". In the title poem the poet's distress and agony are immediately associated with the devastations of the revolutions in both Argentina and Sierra Leone: the bullets and the reverberations echo in his soul and he holds the dead in his head. All three ideas are rused in the same stanza. In the next stanza the striking juxtaposition of the warring factions in Sierra Leone with those in Argentina suggests the chaos caused in both countries and leads to the poet's own sense of paralysis caused by the betrayal of his love.

...but in speaking of those revolutions a savage bird entered my soul to sing me a concerto for pain my lady sang me a concerto of betrayal that senorita's sex too sweet too vicious to my soul!<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, it is in his "social comment" poems that we find the passion we would have expected to find in Cheyney-Coker's love poems. Here he is in profound sympathy with the plight of the toiling masses and exposes their exploitation by their new rulers. This is the theme of several poems like "myopia", "Peasants", "Storm" and "Toilers". The last poem, which is possibly his most impressive, moves from a demonstration of the arduous but hopeless endeavour of the farmer and his wife as they battle against aridity and sterility, to a vicious denunciation of the indifference of the government and the bourgeoisie who, living in opulence and luxury, are insensitive to the people's plight. Cheyney-Coker emerges from these poems as a prophet of doom forecasting the storm when the peasants, no longer able to bear oppression, rise against their oppressors.

If Cheyney-Coker's poetry does not always generate the effect desired and leaves the impression of artificiality, of insincerity of feeling or of a man consciously adopting a pose, it is probably due to his technique. His images, most of which run like motifs throughout his poetry, are drawn for the most part from the more repulsive elements of nature. His poems largely depend for their effect on the cumulative effect of these images which are not so much encapsulated as piled on top of each other. Where the images are relevant and related to each other as in "Hydrophathy" and "Toilers" no problem arises, since the cumulative effect is part of the meaning. Where they are neither relevant nor related to each other.



as in "Nodal" the poet merely seems to be using obscure images for their own sake and the whole exercise becomes unspontaneous and raises the question of sincerity. In some of the love poems, for instance, the dominant impression is not of spontaneous depth of feeling which involuntarily suggests the images to convey it, but of an author deliberately choosing a set of ready-made images to convey what he thinks is the right feeling. Cheyney-Coker also seems to find difficulty in keeping proper control over his longer poems like "Misery of the Convert". A multiplicity of themes appear, and though these are in a sense interrelated, their interrelationship is not demonstrated in the context of the poem. The poet merely seems to add one idea to another. Following his Latin-American models Syl Cheyney-Coker ignores punctuation. This, together with his disregard for syntax and word-order, leads to an obscuring of the units of meaning in his poetry as in:

Twenty-five drops of my blook Pedro da Cinta  
1462 means nothing to me the sea to rock the belly<sup>13</sup>

Syl Cheyney-Coker's achievement is uneven, but he still remains Sierra Leone's most significant poet.

The young poet Dominic Ofori is an astonishing example of untutored poetic development. His formal education has been rather more limited than that of the other modern Sierra Leonean poets, yet his poetry falls squarely within the modern tradition. Unlike Cheyney-Coker, he makes some concessions to the African tradition by stipulating an accompaniment of African musical instruments such as the Kongomah and Shegures for some of his poems, thus creating a synthetic musical/poetic experience. The subjects of his poetry which include an African fetish mask, an African warrior chief, an African poet and African womanhood, are also very African. Consequently, his poems exude much more of an African aura than Syl Cheyney-Coker's. Due to a certain linguistic innocence which leads at times to a wrong choice of words, he is not, at his best, as powerful as Cheyney-Coker. But he does have very successful moments when he emerges as a competent poet who is capable of exercising control over all the elements of the poem.

Ofori's themes are typically African - the spiritual dilemma of the African who is torn between traditional religion and acceptance of Christianity, the beauty and ambivalence of the black woman, the horrors of war, the influence of tradition on the individual and the African's neglect of his heroic ancestors and betrayal of his culture. The theme of spiritual and cultural alienation is successfully treated in "Apocalypse":

The purity of my obeahman infected Soul  
Manifested in the sweet tonic of bitter herbs  
and thudding drums erupting like volcanoes  
Demanding me, me prodigal.<sup>14</sup>



After years of alienation and exposure to an alien religion the speaker returns a prodigal and is intoxicated - 'infected' with the beauty of his own traditional culture, the pull of which he cannot resist because it is the essence of his whole being: "How can I turn from my mother and live?" "Apocalypse" is not a simple poem, but it succeeds because the images are crisp, clear and relevant. "Recession" is another remarkably well-controlled poem in which the poet effectively communicate the experience of sinking into nothingness. "Fire Eater" seems on the surface to be merely an account of a magician's activities until closer reading reveals that the fire represents tradition which is going to have an enlightening and inspiring effect on the poet. The fire is an 'eternal flame' which is also the 'ashes of my fathers and tabernacle of my gods'.

Due largely to his use of images some other poems are not as effective. Like Cheyney-Coker's, his images are much too densely-packed and he leaves the impression that he has a ready-made store house of them and must use as many of them as possible on every occasion without much thought for their relevance. A sad consequence of this is that the metaphors in some of his more ambitious poems like "Bai Bureh" and "Night's Image" are hopelessly mixed and the poems confused. Ofori's attitude to syntax and vocabulary is due not so much to poetic adventurousness as to linguistic innocence which mars otherwise effective poems like "Nigger God" and "The Aladuras Pray". Nevertheless his achievement remains significant and we can certainly look forward to much more from him.

After the almost deliberate modishness Cheyney-Coker and Dominic Ofori, the simplicity, unpretentiousness and complete absence of affectation which characterise the poetry of Gaston Bart-Williams are absolutely refreshing. But its simplicity should not blind us to its artistry and effectiveness. Though not as prolific as Cheyney-Coker, his performance to date suggests that he is potentially the most versatile Sierra Leonean poet and he shows the greatest ability to exercise control. Without rising to the stridency of Cheyney-Coker his comments can be just as devastating.

All these features are clearly discernible in the poem "God Bless US". The title itself suggests not just silly punning, but real intelligence. The effortless simplicity of the first two lines:

Dreaming

I saw a butterfly in the night

Yellow bright and beautiful.<sup>15</sup>

is quite deceptive, for it leads to the violence of the next line. "I watched you call it red and watched you crush it". The religious overtones of "yellow bright and beautiful" suggest that the butterfly is one of God's creatures and reinforce the heinousness of the act of crushing it. The butterfly is in fact, an image of a human being, an



Asian who has been branded a communist by the Americans and must therefore be destroyed. We now see the full ironic implications of the title. The poem turns out to be a savage indictment of irrational American anti-communism and her depredations in South East Asia. The crushing of the yellow butterfly, which is called red in the face of all the evidence is linked with the killing of the Vietcongs in the second stanza. But the most savage criticism is reserved for the black American who, oblivious of the racial discrimination to which he himself is subjected at home, massacres his fellow coloured people - the Vietcong - in the name of America and is proud to call himself American. It is the black American's total lack of comprehension of his own situation and his own identity that is so startling. The satire is all the more devastating because of the quietness of its tone.

It ought to be clear that Bart-Williams' poetry depends not on verbal density or concentrated images, but on subtle irony, humour and sarcasm even while maintaining the quietest of tones. He seems to be obsessed with the predicament of the black race - with racial discrimination, oppression, black hypocrisy, the possibility of harmony between white and black and inevitably, American brutality not just to the blacks in America, but to other coloured people throughout the world. "Letter to Mother From Her Black Son in Vietnam" is a companion poem to "God Bless U S" dealing with almost the same theme. Unlike the latter, however, this poem is a monologue whose artistry is notable for the brilliant irony with which the author exposes the simple-mindedness, hypocrisy and lack of self-knowledge of the black American G.I. speaker. The nonchalance with which he says:

Dearest mother  
I've just finished off a few Vietcongs  
thank god  
the white captain  
told me I was brave  
in fact heroic<sup>16</sup>

says much more than Cheyney-Coker can get into a whole page of much more concentrated writing. It is a pathetic comment on the American situation that this black G.I. has to strive after white respectability and white recognition to the extent of wearing wigs, bleaching his skin, wearing gold incisors and having a nose operation. In "Piano keys" Bart-Williams uses the symbolism of the relationship between the black and white keys of the piano to convey the experience of black and white in love, the necessity, possibility and beauty of such harmony and therefore the hypocrisy of racial discrimination:

Yes people listen  
As your snow-white key  
And my lamp-black key  
Strike the notes of harmony.<sup>17</sup>



For the poet the love of black for white is a vital experience which could enrich the whole world. In "Despondence Blues" Bart-Williams effectively imitates the rhythm and language of gospel blues to portray suffering, despondence and loss of faith in God. The first three stanzas record the sufferings of the black man while he is searching for signs of a benevolent God: the fourth is a plea to God for deliverance; the last is virtually an ultimatum:

If you don't come and free me Lord  
Do you know what am gonna do?  
Am gonna paint your picture  
The picture of your loving grace  
A picture of a hangman the picture of his ghost  
A picture of a horror monster with a hard and cruel face.<sup>18</sup>

Though he does not have Cheyney-Coker's rage of themes, within his limits Gaston Bart-Williams shows greater mastery of technique and much more competent control and is well placed to become Sierra Leone's most successful poet.

It is hoped that this survey has shown that even if our achievements with the Novel and Drama have been modest, our poets can be unashamedly discussed on the same terms as their African counterparts anywhere.

NOTES

1. Crispin George, Precious Gems Unearthed by an African (Arthur H. Stockwell, Ilfracombe, 1952).
2. Precious Gems, p.35.
3. Ibid., p.34.
4. Two of them - "A Negro's Prayer" and "Even There" are to be found in our Poets Speak, ed. D.St.John-Parsons (London University Press, London, 1966), p.3 and pp.36-7 respectively.
5. Gladys Casely-Hayford, "Freetown", in West African Verse, ed.D. Nwoga (Longmans, London, 1967), p.6.
6. Abioseh Nicol, "The Continent that lies Within Us", in The African Assertion, ed.Austin Shelton (The Odyssey Press, New York, 1968)
7. "African Easter", 111 "Easter Morning", in West African Verse ed. Donatus Nwoga (Longman, London, 1967), p.27.
8. Delphine King, Dreams of Twilight (Nigerian National Press, Apapa, 1962).
9. Ibid, p.24.
10. Ibid, p.35.
11. "Hydropathy" in Concerto for an Exile (Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1973), p.3
12. "Concerto for an Exile", in Concerto for an Exile op.cit.p.16.
13. "The Traveller", in Concerto for an Exile, p.1.
14. Dominic Ofori, "Apocalypse", Poems (Published by Fourah Bay College Bookshop), p.1.
15. Gaston Bart-Williams, "God Bless U S", Poetry from Africa ed. Howard Sergeant (Pergamon Poets, Pergamon Press, London, 1968) p.34.
16. Ibid. p.29.
17. Ibid. p.28.
18. Ibid. p.37.