

TONE IN LAMENTATION POETRY AS A COMMUNICATIVE DEVICE FOR EMOTIVE EVOCATION

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Abstract

The study of tone in poetry is often carried out as part of the general critical exercise of poetic analysis where it is taken as a stage in the process that culminates in meaning. This way, tone is considered an integral part of the literary appreciation, with the pair – tone and mood – serving as an interpretative bundle. However, this interpretative practice hardly goes beyond identifying the poem's tone alongside its other prosodic elements, such that the study of tone is more or less exhausted in its ornamental significance in the poem. Since tone is a feature of poetry and an essential feature of lamentation poetry per se, it remains to be understood the extent to which the power of lamentation can be said to depend on its tone. This need arises given that in written discourse, the kind at issue here, words leave the oral space as well as the modulation of the speaking subject and render themselves the property of the text. Hence the question: how does a written lamentation, devoid of oral performance, attain meaningfulness by virtue of its tone? This calls for a holistic approach to the study of tone in lamentation poetry, taking into account the diction, cluster of imagery, rhythm, connotation and so on by means of which tone is made manifest in poetry. Actualising this target using the selected poems of F. U. Okoro and F. O. Orabueze is the main thrust of this paper.

Keywords: Poetry, lamentation/lament, tone, modulation, emotion, invocation, revocation

Introduction

In one prominent analogy by F. U. Okoro, poetry is compared to an elephant seen by nine blind men. The analogy at once brings into perspective the vastness of poetry and the perspectives from which it has been conceptualized. It also shows that poetic representation can take shape in different forms, all of which make up the human activity known as *poiesis*. One of these forms is lamentation. Though it is less formal in features because of its association with elegy and dirge (threnody), it is distinctive by virtue of its more defined poetic forms. Lamentation is traditionally distinguished from other poetic forms by its thematic preoccupation and tone. Earlier on, it was popularly understood as a poem that expresses sad feelings or grief, used to mourn the death of someone or loss of something, with elegy and dirge as its dominant modes of expression. But lamentation, as it is to be grasped here, is not just about death or great loss, but of an existential anguish which is as primordial as man. It bewails the menace of human existence and addresses

itself to the deep recesses of human feelings to mediate man's ceaseless need to cope with the dynamics of suffering. In lamentation, as Frances Klopper would say, "tears become ideas and emotions communicative" (2008:126). This tends to approximate Okoro's view that poetry, by which is meant here as the lamentation type,

dwells more in the depth of our sorrow than at the edge of our mirth;
more in the swan song than in the clucking between mouthfuls; more in
the tears rolling down somber cheeks than in the eyes twinkling with
satisfaction. The rhythm acquires more life if it issues from a bleeding
heart. (Preface, *When the Bleeding Heart Breaks*, 2006:xi)

Seen this way, lamentation is the cry of the dispossessed, the agony of abandonment, the bitterness of getting old, the tears of misfortune, the pain of unbelonging, the trauma of an earthquake, the misery of war etc, all of which are unsettling existential realities, the response to which produces nothing but poetry in the lamentation sense of the word. One is, in this case, reminded of Christ's cry of abandonment on the cross, of Isaiah finding his sinful being before the holy throne, of an early man in the earth of barren land, of a baby's first appearance in the world, or, in the more familiar sense, of an average Nigerian faced with the injustice of "kwuredible eleshon", of a graduate haunted by the reality of unemployment, of a youth jilted by a lover, of an old man plagued with all the mistakes of his life on his dying bed, and so on. This is to say that lamentation has pushed back its frontiers in terms of its thematic concerns, and also in terms of its tone, if by tone is apprehended the attitude of the speaker to his subject matter and internal audience.

For I. A. Richards, tone is simply the expression of a literary speaker's "attitude to his listener" (*Practical Criticism* 1930:182). However, in a more complex definition, Volosinov notes that tone is "oriented in two directions: with respect to the listener as ally or witness and with respect to the object of the utterance as the third, living participant whom the intonation scolds or caresses, denigrates or magnifies" (*Freudianism* 2013:104-105). If lamentation enacts man's disquiet towards existential realities, it does so in a tone more sullen than jocular, more plaintive than festive, more resilient than elegant, more discomforting and disparaging than unruffled and subdued. In fact, the tone of lamentation has expanded from its usual mournfulness to incorporate that of resignation, protest, regret, disappointment, complaint, subversion, despondence etc. These different tones can exist singly in a lament, or in combination, but a lamentation does not always have one fixed, unalterable tone. To determine the tone of lamentation, therefore, one is to rely on the diction and such devices as rhythm, imagery, connotation etc.

Although tone contributes to the overall meaning of a poem, it cannot itself be said to be the meaning of the poem. Hence the target here is not just to characterise by means of tone the kind of poetry understood as lamentation, but also to account for the movement of meaning and emotions in lamentation poems, with a focus on Okoro's "I'll Try to Forget" and Orabueze's "Job". In everyday conversation, the way of speech reveals, by subtle clues or cues, one's concept of, and attitude towards the things being talked about, "our personal relationship to our auditor, and also our assumptions about the social level, intelligence, and sensitivity of that auditor" (Abrams 2012:287). This, as always, is conveyed in our voice modulation, bodily gestures and in the words we employ. But in written discourse, tone escapes the control of the speaking subject and renders itself the appurtenance of the text, leaving words to do the modulation.

Tonal modulation in lamentation poems: Okoro's "I'll Try to Forget" and Orabueze's "Job"

The poem "I'll Try to Forget" thematises the experience of the speaker with his lover, the wrack that becomes his lot following the lover's pretentious affection and the flashes of insight that result from their lopsided relationship. In a similar vein, "Job" plays up the anguished feeling of loneliness in the wake of the speaker's abandonment by his companion. For these thematic concerns, "I'll Try to Forget" and "Job" can both be read as laments.

Set off by a slow, dragging rhythm which is signalled in such recurrent heavy vowels as "I'll, try, night, coast, passionate, dreams etc, "I'll Try to Forget" resonates with different tonal modulations that correspond to the flicker of insight that comes to the speaker in his experience with the lover. The tone in the opening stanza is that of resignation mixed with regret, as the speaker recounts the pleasant moments he once shared with his lover: "I'll try to forget this long night/of passionate dreams/This long night by the coast of Tantalus." However, by going further to dwell on these happy, irrecoverable moments, to the point that he is almost reliving them, the speaker leaves us with a hint of ironic tone. For one can see the dissimulation of feelings embedded in "I'll try to forget the shout of my nerves/as they heard your voice", and the false consciousness that pervades the repetitive "I'll try to forget." It is important that he is just trying to forget, not that he has actually forgotten, and this is reinforced by his allusion to "the coast of Tantalus", which, being the mythical space within which the poetic experience is localised, constitutes the dynamic of desire and its unfulfilment taking place in him. One would say that, literally, the speaker is tantalised by his lover; thus he is unable to come to terms with the reality of their scotched togetherness.

This inability to come to terms with the unsettling reality that results from the loss of one's companion is the fate of the speaker in Orabueze's "Job"; a poem whose allusive title does not only contextualize its event, but invests it with the elegiac tone that hovers around each line. The opening line of the poem already locates it in the "subjunctive" (Akwanya 1991:5), that is, outside the communicative function of language. For we read that "He sails away like a cloud," a comparison which signals us to the world of poetry, wherein *significance* results from such contradictory attribution. The question as to whether the cloud sails and how it does so does not arise here in that it is in the very nature of poetry to "present men 'as acting' and all things 'as in act' . . . [] every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualized" (Ricoeur 1977:48). In the language of discursive thought, "he" can be a proper logical subject of "sail" when it is understood as a means of changing one's location, in the manner of moving from point A to B. But in the poem, there is no direction of the sail, if anything, it is non-directional like the cloud's. So the amorphous shape of the cloud seems to have been imparted to "He", to the extent that one cannot help thinking of "He" as already de-humanised, rendered *unperson*, as it were, the upshot of which is seen in the disappearance, "He's" death.

In "Job", it is as if a voice is recounting in a sombre tone an unpleasant experience as it occurs, just like we find in "I'll Try to Forget", but the following line already implicates the first line with certain intentionality: "He sails away like a cloud/Leaving me empty without hope." This tends to make the sail a purposeful one: he sails away to plunge

the speaker into a state of despair. After all, being left empty is possible only where there is some claim to being fulfilled, where the necessity of a fullness exists, so that if the things which *occupy* us, which reassure us of certain wholeness of our being “sail” in the manner of detaching themselves from us, our life “tumbles” (Camus 2013). So in the poem, one can invariably say that “He” has been part of the speaker before the eventual sail, the speaker’s boon companion, so to speak, whose leaving shatters the speaker, with the result that his mind does no longer properly contain itself, or perhaps, that his consciousness becomes pluralised in such a way that contradictory events can simultaneously take place within it. However, what the speaker does not make clear is the kind of relationship that holds between him and the “He” that sails, why, perhaps, his sailing away has to make him so mournful, so atrophied: “I can neither see nor feel/A deaf hearing neither sound nor echoes.” This is equally the case in “I’ll Try to Forget” where who Katty is to the speaker is left to be guessed by the reader from the facts of experience he recounts. The image we have of her is as painted by the speaker, in whose description she is nothing but a ruthless, shrewd and pernicious lover, who having played upon his emotions now walks away when the tide is in their favour. But it cannot even be said that the speaker has reconciled himself with the reality of their separation, as his present consciousness is haunted by the past memories, even if it is only to recall them as a way to move on with time, in spite of himself of course; for the “full ocean has coursed down the narrow river”, while the sun is being “frogged” to “bed too early”. In this indifferent flight of time is, however, the speaker’s sudden illumination that

the time and the tears
the passion and parcels
the lines and the lyrics
the rhyme and the rhythm

Were all a mountainous heap of waste.

But his is a knowledge of hindsight, which always comes with a regretful look at the wreckage one is leaving behind.

Such knowledge from experience only comes to the speaker in “Job” in the last stanza, wherein he is rather shattered by his sudden awareness that he has always already been alone in this “lonely path in a lonely world”. Here it is the consciousness of discovering oneself alone in the midst of the world, of standing in the space where nothing can take hold of one’s mind. Being caught up in such a world of indifference, the speaker is unhinged by the dread it opens up, which imparts to the tone a plaintive twist. Thus the “He” that has gone and the speaker that stays are one and the same in the loneliness, for the same fate attends both, “He” having taken to the lonely road where he is deprived of any companion save the “dutiful termites”: “He embracing the embalmed coldness/His only companion on the lonely road/The dutiful termites?” But “He’s” situation is better off than the speaker’s, for at least “He” has got some company, even if termites that will end up making a meal of his body. In the same mournful tone, the speaker goes ahead to remark that he is “stranded/At the cross-road of existence,” and like Job, he has nobody to keep him company. We pointed out earlier that the poem’s allusive title serves to contextualize it. As an allusion, it carries with it the associative echoes from the Christian tradition; hence we are reminded of the fate of Job in the Bible. Being at the crossroads of existence, Job finds himself in a situation in which he has to make the most important decision of his

life: either to renounce God who seems to have “sailed away” from his life, or to keep hoping in him against the advice of friends who are to later abandon him. But our speaker is not hemmed in any kind of dilemma; at best he “remember[s] only one thing:/He sailed out of my silent path,” an action which he can only look upon and lament about the wreck it has brought on his life.

But the speaker in “I’ll Try to Forget” does not just bemoan the pretention and the shoddiness of his lover; he is prepared to gird himself for any future eventuality, and more importantly, to build his life again from the ruins that became of his past. This resolution is immediately reflected in the tone, which has shifted from its resignation in the opening stanzas to become quite resilient, determined: “But I will make this waste the manure/with which to plant my tomorrow.” The irruptiveness of these lines, which is fronted by a fast, spirited rhythm in the stanza that follows, is, however, short-lived, as the speaker sinks back into the mires of past reveries. Thus we read:

Together we drank nectar from Golden cups
Buried sorrow in Rocky Mountains
And dragged time by its tail on our way
to the orchard of flowers

The lines are weighted with wistful tone, as if the speaker wishes to recreate this lived experience whose memorability is facilitated by its reappearance in his dream: “For every dream is a dream of you/And all dreams of you are sweet!” However, the sweetness of the dream is quickly aborted by its content, which is “full of mad cows and angry masquerades”, such that the dream, in the final analysis, is anything but sweet. This underscores further the ironic tone that runs through the poem. And quite significant is the interchange between reality and dream which approximates the oscillation of the speaker’s consciousness as he regresses every now and then into the past, only to be wrested away, out of sheer effort of will; and as a parallel, we see the modulation in tone from its regretful, resigned beginning to a more agitated, impassioned tone of the later stanzas.

The poem thrives on this alternation of tones, with each tone reflecting the interplay of emotions and reasons in the speaker’s consciousness. As he wanders off into the past to relay his experience with the lover, emotion intensifies, holding him in its sway; but the call of reason launches him back into the present, within which he can look upon the future in an imagined self-understanding. This draws attention to the movement of time in the poem, which is grafted onto the boundless temporality of past, present and future towards which the speaker’s life gravitates. The past as seen in the poem is what to break loose from its clutches because of the sad memories it offers; hence the attempt is more like to jump out of the past into the present, and consequently, into the future. However, since the past does not have any objective existence outside the speaker, but exists just in him, such attempt is frustrated by the fact that the speaker is always already in time; thus, jumping out of the past is like running away from oneself, the impossibility of which is evident in his constant lapsing into the past. This back and forth movement of the speaker in time correlates with the movement of tone in the poem, which dangles from the regret of the past, to the determination of the present, to anticipate the hopeful, promising tone of the future. But overlying all this, in fact, trailing as well as fronting them, is the ironic tone strongly embedded in the repetitive line, “I’ll try to forget.” One could even say that these tonal modulations, which are brought to light in the stanzas that follow below, correspond,

not only with the slow, dragging, bumpy, jerky rhythm of the poem, but also with its physical appearance on the page, the alternation between long and short lines, not only with the discordant, concordant sound of the diction, but also with its visual and auditory imagery:

Along that slippery edge my pluses have become minuses
 my minuses by millions multiplied
 and the multiples divided up by your many zeroes
 leaving me as empty as Baghdad
 at the dawn of its liberation

.....
 But I'll make it out of this bunker
 through the rough,
 down the fairway
 into the cup

You would have had your touchdown
 But I will have my homerun

.....
 I hear in the distance
 the euphony of the dawn
 the symphony of the noon
 the cacophony of the dusk

But behind every storm
 there is the sun

And after every rain
 there will be shine

Seen in the stanzas above is a cluster of imagery, drawn separately from different areas of life, and capturing at the same time the range of experiences to which the speaker and his lover are exposed. In the first of the three stanzas quoted, the speaker conjures up mathematical imagery, toggling arithmetic signs to play out the losses he has recorded in the hand of his lover. But in the second stanza, the switch to the imagery of golf game positions the speaker and his lovers as both players, with the former, who before now has played the victim, hitting a homerun. The table turned, the speaker thus begins to look at the prospects there still are for him in life, reverting now to nature's imagery, which winds up the last stanza in a quite optimistic tone.

But this optimistic tone cannot easily be ascribed to the speaker in "Job"; if anything, the tone is resigned, as he is enveloped in a sense of abandonment which destabilizes his ego, thus making him bored, if by "boredom" is understood in Heidegger that "our unease [] does not allow us to find anything that could grip us, or even to let us be patient" (1995:137). This is especially the case as Heidegger's interpretation of the third form of boredom is grounded on the two structural moments and their unity: "being left empty and being held in limbo" (137). This emptiness occasioned by boredom is what becomes of the speaker in "Job". For he is in the midst of what in Heidegger are called "beings": deep waters, thorny shrubs, desert, tidal waves, ice-boulders, high-peaked mountains etc, but none of these could "grip" him. In boredom, beings become indifferent to us, refuse to accept us, as it were. But the speaker is not bound up in such a profound

boredom that is anchored in mutual indifference of beings, why, because, in his case, he still yearns to be heard, to be kept company, only that in spite of his “scream and shout/No one answers back.” Thus is the existential anguish the consciousness of this plunges him into, with a consequent shift in tone from the elegiac opening to lament. But the indifference and the loneliness in the face of which the speaker laments have always already been properties of his world, as implicated in these lines: “Loneliness seeking for a companion hugs me/And like a lodger erects his tent..../He embracing the embalmed coldness.” It is a world in which such abstract notions as coldness and loneliness have become not only substantial and spatial, but also humanised, and thus capable of desire. No doubt this is a world turned upside down, and only come by through the power of insight. However, not being aware of this can be the very impulse that generates the sequence, if by contemplating it the speaker comes to terms with the order of his world, just like Job in whose case injustice emerges as an inescapable part of existence. The tone of such realisation can only ring with helplessness.

Conclusion

As pointed out in the introduction, lament, just by broadening the horizon of its themes, has at the same time widened the range of its tone. This we could see in the tonal modulations that undergird the thematic preoccupations of the poem, “I’ll Try to Forget” and “Job”. The analysis of the two poems has the humble gesture of suggesting that lament, which has hitherto been identified with elegy and dirge, can actually be characterised as a poetic form by means of its tone, and a proud gesture of re-emphasising tone as a fundamental element of poetry.

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