Kofi Awoonor. 2004  
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The 297-page volume, *The Promise of Hope: New And Selected Poems, 1964-2013*, is authored by Professor Kofi Awoonor, but it is published posthumously after his untimely and senseless murder at a mall in Nairobi, Kenya on September 21, 2013. The first recipient of the Kwame Nkrumah Chair in African Studies and University of Ghana’s English Literature Professor Emeritus Kofi Anyidoho – who is himself a distinguished poet and author in his own right – edited and provided the book’s well-written detailed introduction (xvii-xxxii); while the piercing foreword to the book (pp. xiii-xiv) was written by Kwame Dawes, himself a poet, actor, editor, critic and a musician, who formerly served as Louis Frye Scudder Professor of Liberal Arts at University of South Carolina and, currently, as Professor of English at University of Nebraska, Lincoln.  

Indeed, Professor Awoonor’s book creates various memorable anecdotes, including the fact that if protégés get created, there are always possibilities that – with infirmity of death or as the hymnist says, eternity’s shortness – they can stand in good stead for their mentors. In that light, Professor Kofi Anyidoho, who made sure that the book was published with distinction after the murder of Professor Awoonor, was inspired by the elder deceased Kofi Awoonor as a poet and scholar. Ewe cultural aesthetics particularly its poetics might have created a bond between them. Their poetry is almost so much on the same wave-length that it was not surprising, therefore, that he played the major role in editing and providing the introduction to what is seen as Professor Awoonor’s last collection of poetry: *The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems, 1964-2013*, published as part of the African Poetry Book Series of the publishers.  

When Professor Awoonor died in Nairobi, where he had gone to participate in the Storymoja Hay Festival in September of last year, a female Nigerian poet wrote to say that her whole day had been shattered, and that “Awonnor’s death wounds me badly.” The same week, the winner of Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Prize for Literature (worth $100,000) decided to use the money to establish a library in his home town in memory of Awoonor. What, in fact, fascinated these poets – particularly, Nigerians in their numerous obituary articles, and other Africans, including his fellow Ghanaian writers – was what Awoonor’s generation did: a very responsible management of oral traditions of their grandmothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, making them into a modern poetry transition. They maintained (notwithstanding their training in mostly
European and American universities), the sense and sensibilities of their elders. Professor Awoonor, just like J.H. Kwabena Nketia before him (in praise poetry whether of the palace type of Asante influence or the poetic music of women ensemble or later by Anyidoho) took after Ephraim Amu of getting to the roots; these elders were not formally lettered in the new calculation of literacy, but they held in their attic minds the treasures of the ancient past.

In The Promise of Hope however, there are over 150 poems, about 60 of them previously unpublished as a collection but now under the sub-title of Herding the Lost Lambs (2013) and Latin American and Caribbean Notebook (1992). Otherwise many of the remaining poems are from previous collections: Until The Morning After; The House by the Sea; Ride Me Memory; Night of Blood and Comes the Voyager at Last: A Tale of Return to Africa. Professor Awoonor provides a lot more in this book, indeed of the preservation of traditional Ewe poetry dealing with life’s cruelty, clan pride, wars of redemption and “ancestral veneration” but also a cosmopolitan outlook of urbanity and its troubles. There is, as well, the poetry of nature in our sphere, themes and observation that inspire the Romantic poets or tradition of England centuries before, but which hunt all poets, irrespective of geography; of ambition of conquest, interconnectedness as by-products of slavery, colonial experience and dilemmas of the post-colonial stance.

It is important to point out the fact that, for now, it is the second part of this book that will re-define Professor Awoonor’s career. It is older as well as being more familiar, have clear identity, been taught in schools over the years and written at a period of a “renaissance” in African literary thought of the 1960s and 1970s. It will be a while as it is with all literary works for the newer part of this collection to make their impact. V.S. Naipaul, who is now an octogenarian Nobel Laureate, has argued convincingly that writers of substance are defined by the first two decades of their writings. There is as much truth in this as it also does not measure their full stature.

Professor Anyidoho, inter alia, writes in the Introduction: “However, it is important to note a fundamental difference between the funereal voice and mood in these last poems and what we find in the early ones. These are not typical songs of sorrows. Rather, they demonstrate a mature reflection on life, a philosophical balance sheet carefully drawn to weigh life’s gains and losses, with the final balance showing an impressive credit in favor of hope and promise of hope.”

There is the intriguing sense, at least to me, of a craving for sorrowful poetry whether of dispossession like Awoonor’s, Mahmoud Darwish’s After the Last Sky or By the Rivers of Babylon. Is sorrow out of desolation, an inevitable nemesis of many poetic outcomes? In the British tradition, for example, the mourn-