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AFRICAN LITERATURE AND CANADA

A Progress Report and One or Two Analogies

If the title of this paper were "African Literature *in* Canada" instead of African Literature *and* Canada", the matter would be rather easily dispatched. Sales of African literary works in this country are very small. The distributors for the Heinemann *African Writers Series*, the major publishers of African writers, tell me that in the past 5 years 10,000 copies (in round numbers) of works in this series have been sold.* If we were to double this figure to allow for sales from other publishers (the Oxford University Press Three Crown Series, or East African Publishing House — editions of the latter almost impossible to obtain here) the number is still small. I recall attending, in fact chairing a panel discussion, four years ago at the annual meeting of the Ontario Council of the Teachers of English on the subject of "African Literature in the Ontario Schools". There were two principal panelists: the distinguished Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence whose novel and stories about Ghana were known to the large audience (though less well-known than her novels set in Canada) and whose commentary on Nigerian literature, *Long Drums and Cannons*, had just been published. The second was Dr. S. O. Mezu, a Nigerian who was then lecturing in the United States, and was the Editor and publisher of the *Black Academy Review* and Black Academy Press; he had published a volume of poetry and a critical interpretation of Senghor. Both were well-informed about African Literature and both generated considerable enthusiasm among the hundred or more teachers present. All but a few of these teachers subsequently wrote to me at York University for the reading list and brief bibliography of support materials to do with the course I taught on African literature. But there seems to have been no significant increase in the sales of these books and this material does not seem to

* see appendix for breakdown of these figures

have found its way into the curricula of English Departments in the Secondary Schools. Not surprisingly, I suppose, since there seems to be little Canadian Literature taught in the Secondary Schools and it is more immediate to our needs than African literature, and – in the circumstances, I suppose – just as exotic.

So African literature is little known as yet to Canadian audiences though the amount is increasing as novels and plays are added to “books recommended” lists in secondary schools across Canada and as universities begin to develop courses under the rubric – not altogether a satisfactory one – of Commonwealth Literature. I suppose, at the university level, the exposure African Literature gets at York University is typical of other Canadian universities who include it in their teaching syllabuses. It is featured prominently in two undergraduate courses in the English Department and in one post-graduate course where admittedly enrolment is small but enthusiastic. Examples of African novels and plays are used as valuable illustrative materials in courses in Anthropology, Sociology, History and Political Science. I have taught over the past three or four years a first year Humanities course in which the enrolment has fluctuated between 40 and 100 students. A rather special definition of “Humanities” obtains at York and so I billed my course as “African Writing, Society and Social Change” to fit the style of the Division and talked more about what authors had to say than how they said it. Students were generally enthusiastic and had the African Studies Programme proposed at York, and accepted by the Senate of that University, but which came a cropper at the 11th hour; had that programme established itself there would have likely been a considerable increase in interest.

So we are placed in the position of talking about what might be gained from the study of African literature rather than about what has or is being gained – African Literature *and* Canada, rather than African Literature *in* Canada. And there is much to be gained from such study and, on a different plane, many parallels between the status accorded African Literature in African Schools and Universities and Canadian Literature in the Schools and Universities of this country, and the historical reasons why this is so. In one sense these are really quite separate things: the first has to do with Literature studies in general,

with the value of such studies. The second has to do with the value of the study of the Literature of one's own country and its importance relative to the amount of recorded literature that is available for study. In another sense these questions or issues are related and in what follows, while I will doubtless be seen by some to "yoke by violence" all sorts of seemingly disparate elements, there are a number of general points to be made and one or two lessons to be learned.

But where to begin? Probably, and I suppose properly, with the expression that the study of literature can always be justified as an end in itself: its basic aim is the study of man and his culture whether in the realm of the material or the metaphysical and at any place in the wide spectrum of concern between these two poles. Great and good literature is that which possesses the unique blending of matter, design and execution which leads a reader on to a new awareness of the greater potentialities of self. As well, and as important to the success of a literary work, is that it is created by someone exceptionally in tune with the historical and social circumstances of his time. The artist's work may therefore look outward and portray his society or look inward and portray his relationship to the society. It may combine both these things. Whatever the case, an artist in his creation of a world, in his choice of themes will be both looking at and analyzing the world he creates. The work of certain individual men and women of genius becomes an expression of the society from which the artist springs. And while literature is open to everyone who chooses to contemplate it, it springs from local soil and is firmly rooted there. Let me extrapolate a few comments from Ngugi's recently published *Homecoming* to make a familiar and important point. He says: "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society.... Literature is of course primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the values governing human relationship".¹

The nature and spirit of this quotation direct me towards the closer comparisons I want to suggest between Canada and African countries in terms of Literature studies. It is here, I suspect, that the yoking by violence will come in. In this discussion I want to focus on the obvious and much discussed colonial problem which African countries and

1. Ngugi, wa Thiongo, *Homecoming*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1972, p. XV

Canada have, in their separate ways, experienced and more narrowly and specifically with the "colonial complex" as it is given expression in literature and what literature can do about it. For if we look at the past record and follow it to the present, Canada has had and continues to have a "colonial" problem as intense (if of a different order of intensity) as any the African countries have experienced. The parallels, then, between African countries and Canada in terms of experience of and reaction to the colonial problem are more of a kind than at first one might suppose.

For me to tell the audience gathered here today what the African Colonial experience has been and what the reaction to it has been, is like carrying palm kernels to Calabar (I hope for the sake of my metaphor that they *do* grow there!). But bear with me a little in this so that I can trace my analogy and draw my conclusions.

Africa experienced several centuries of exploitation by Europe before colonial rule was established. Once this was accomplished she experienced even more intense exploitation. For sixty years, more or less, an alien code comprising government, church and economic system was placed like a blanket over Africa. The results were mostly disruptive. Then Independence was achieved — from 1957 forward to 1963-64 (although some African countries are still in the grip of European powers). Listen to Ngugi's brief survey of the colonial period and its legacy in contemporary times. (I choose Ngugi's words because in his new volume of essays he gives, with perhaps greater intensity of concern, expression to ideas which are expressed by other writers in both imaginative and non-imaginative forms. The intensity of the language secures the intensity of concern.)

There is no area of our lives which has not been affected by the social, political and expansionist needs of European capitalism: from that of the reluctant African, driven by whips and gunpowder to work on the cotton plantations of America, the rubber plantations in the Congo, the gold and diamond mines in southern Africa, to that of the modern African worker spending his meagre hard-earned income on imported cars and other goods (razor blades and Coca Cola even), to bolster the same Western industries that got off the ground on the backs of his peasant ancestors and on the plunder of a continent. Yet the sad truth is that instead of breaking from an economic system whose lifeblood is the wholesale exploitation of our continent and the murder of our people, most of our countries have adopted the same system.

Today, in Africa, we are harvesting the bitter fruits of capitalist and

colonialist policy of divide and rule, and those of the colonial legacy of an uneven development, i.e. the current murderous suspicion and hatred between the various national groups and regions. It is easy to see how these elitist-created feuds come about. There has been no radical change in the inherited structures and in our priorities, too few openings in the business, civil service and professional hierarchies, and the competition for these few openings becomes very fierce. An alliance of business, civil service, professional and political elites of each linguistic group feel their positions threatened and jeopardized by their counterparts in other national groups. The top few quickly identify their interests with the interests of the whole cultural linguistic group and cry wolf! The wolf here is another tribe or a supposed combination of other tribes. Yet a cursory glance around would show there are no tribes in Africa – the economic and social forces that gave rise to various nations in pre-colonial Africa have collapsed. What is left is only a linguistic cultural superstructure into which Western education aided by the colonial spiritual police (i.e. the missionaries) have made many inroads.

'Tribe' is a special creation of the colonial regimes. Now there are only two tribes left in Africa: the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. What goes for tribalism in Africa is really a form of civil war among the 'haves', struggling for crumbs from the masters' tables. The masters sit in New York, London, Brussels, Paris, Bonn and Copenhagen; they are the owners of the oil companies, the mines, the banks, the breweries, the insurance institutions – all the moving levers of the economy. It is this situation that has given us *A Man of the People*, *Song of Lawino*, *Voices in the Dark*. It is this that is behind the critical selfappraisal and the despair in much of the current African literature. Few contemporary novels can match the bitterness in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*:

So this was the real gain. The only real gain. This was the thing for which poor men had fought and shouted. This is what it had come to: not that the whole thing might be overturned and ended, but that a few blackmen might be pushed closer to their masters, to eat some of the fat into their bellies too. That had been the entire end of it all.²

Consider this sort of statement and compare it with the expression of concern over similar issues in the national press and other communication media of Canada, alter the form a little, correct the seasoning in the diction and a measure of the parallel I am suggesting will be plain. The salutary difference is that we have not got in this country *A Man of the People*, a *Song of Lawino*, a *Voices in the Dark* or *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Or have we?

But my proper concern is with literature and I want to narrow the discussion further and focus the broad social comment suggested by Ngugi to the realm of literature, its production, the purposes it can serve and the means by which it is judged in Africa with the hope of

2. *Ibid.*, pp. XV - XVIII

learning a lesson in this. The question of the criteria or internal norms by which individual and general literary achievement is judged — implying the development of a critical system centred in African writing but as heterogenous as all such systems—is given precise summation by R. C. Nturu in a recent edition of *East Africa Journal*. Nturu has the advantage of time and the production of a sizable canon of literary works when he addresses himself to a discussion of “The Notion of Modernity in African Creative Writing”. Thus he is able both to summarize African literature over the past 15 years and also to offer certain judgments about the uniqueness of African literature in terms of its relation to the societies which have produced it and to admit to the danger that in deriving criteria from the local scene one opens that literature to the charge of parochialism. Also important, he is able to comment on (without any hope for the time of resolving) the dichotomy which exists between the notion that literature should perform a ‘universalizing’ function and the possibility (or impossibility) of it doing so in East Africa. Nturu concludes his article in this way:

The burden of this inquiry has been to try and indicate aspects of African writing which evince signs of modernity. The word ‘modern’ itself, we have admitted, is capable of analytical treachery and indeed some of this inquiry must exhibit effects of this. Sometimes, and necessarily, the appellation has operated on a partial, local and internal level. For instance, some of the thematic evidence for modernity, like the status of the individual in society, would not be valid if this inquiry was exposed to a ‘universal’ literary tradition because this is what the development of the European novel was all about in the nineteenth century.³

What are the terms of Nturu’s enquiry? His article, once he summarizes the achievement of African literature production over the past 15 years, becomes a plea for the production of sustained criticism. There is, he says, a “glaring lack of critical writing which has traditionally given impetus to creative writers” and he cites Iconoclastes writing in *Ghala* (in July of 1971) who puts the case in this way:

We would like to suggest that the time has now come for the establishment of a local critical tradition, to develop alongside our creative literature. This tradition must be based on the conviction that literature has an important place in our culture, that honest and intelligent criticism of locally produced works is essential, and that the critic’s job is not to destroy, or to create reputations out of a vacuum, but rather to collaborate with the creative writer in forming literary sensibility. Ideally, the serious critic should be familiar with the writer’s cultural milieu, even if he is not of it, and he

3. Nturu, R. C., “The Notion of Modernity in African Creative Writing”, *East Africa Journal*, Vol. viii, No. 10, (Oct., 1971), p. 33 (see also essays by Abiola Irele and D. Izavbeye in Heywood, Christopher (ed.) *Perspectives on African Literature*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1971 pp. 9-30.

should interpret his role very largely in terms of nurturing both the literature he is criticising and the reading public.⁴

Nturu centres his discussion in his conviction that

The key-word in the consideration of the modern trends in African writing is disenchantment, or disillusionment. In this respect, there are very few African writers of whom we can say: this one is modern, this one is conventional or unmodern. I have already indicated that more or less the same creative minds still hold sway. Any attempt, therefore, to delineate what is modern in African writing must be prepared to bear in mind certain phases in the development of the same writer. Thus Soyinka, Achebe, Lo Liyong, p'Bitek, and others simultaneously exhibit conventional and modern aspects in their writings. Their modern confluence covers a number of areas.⁵

Soyinka, Taban, Okot, Achebe, Rubadiri, Serumaga and Kibera have all written books which in various ways and treatments describe or dramatize the hopes experienced by Africans at the time when an independent policy and possibility is achieved and their disillusionment when these hopes are lost. The process by which these writers arrive at their contemporary disenchantment is summarized thus by Nturu (note how he identifies the writer as the spokesman for the *individual* in African society):

The progression towards the modern status of the individual can be apprehended in five phases. Before the colonial period, the social order may be unjust, but it is stable and guarantees human dignity as it was understood and defined. With the advent of dominating foreigners, the attitude, 'collaborators' notwithstanding, is to hang together in the face of a common enemy who threatens their common interests, values and rights, including life. At the dawn of independence and the period roughly coeval with the first legally constituted generation of leaders, the feeling is one of the blinding euphoria followed by a desire not to 'wash our dirty linen in public'. All these three phases we have lived through. The contemporary phase is the one I described earlier as the phase of disenchantment as the emissaries to whom we entrusted our fate fail to deliver the goods. The last phase – the phase that signals social cataclysm – is one in which the individual does not see society as any more capable of guaranteeing his basic rights than himself on his own.⁶

Recognition of the developing general social situation has caused writers to react in a variety of ways and produce works of different approaches and tones. Nturu calls this body of writers anti-nostalgic or anti-romantic. Soyinka and Okot, for example, write books which satirize or bring into contempt "the automatic and uncritical aping of

4. *Ibid.*, p. 26

5. *Ibid.*, p. 27

6. *Ibid.*, p. 30

foreign ways by Africans". Nturu lists other writers – Taban, Achebe, Rubadiri – who reject via their work what Dr. Ras Makonnen has identified in modern African society as “bourgeois form without bourgeois content”. The confused form of modern African society, the paradoxes it contains, is nowhere better summarized (nor the form more precisely and suitably evoked) than in the passage Nturu cites from Kibera’s *Voices in the Dark* which can usefully be reproduced here. (He notes the subtle and effective way in which the form of the passage reflects the situation the passage describes.)

Little ethnic groups with big minds and big ethnic groups with small minds professing, individually, to hang together for security so that they might not swim separately when the rains at last fell. Little institutions with big clauses and big institutions with little constitutions all of which contributed vigorously to charity. Little groups of white women with uncertain histories who still walked their masculine puppies on Public Streets and gave freely to the poor. Little groups of black toffs who played cricket with white men on Sunday mornings and gave large tips to the attendants. Little groups of everybody who was nobody and big sister groups of nobodies who were everybody’s important nobody son all sticking out their necks for promotion and stone houses.... Little groups of advisers who sought big advice on how to give little advice that the ultimate advice output, to speak business, was no more or less than the initial input, only contradictory. Big people who fooled everybody. Everybody who hated Catholics. Protestants who contradicted Catholics. Catholics who contradicted both Protestants and Methodists alike but all of whom vigorously misunderstood Moslems.... Misdirectors who directed. Directors who did not even misdirect. Everybody who loved everybody and everybody who hated nobody and all the little nobodies who so righteously hated nobody except everybody’s dirty fingernails and smell of pepper. Clergymen and other fishermen. Makers of history. Small hats and big hats. Sub-editors who edited and editors who subtracted. Large groups of goldfish in the affluent family pool which refused to bite.... Them enemies. Them enemies.

And so it came to pass that from their little wood beyond the little bridge no group was spared.⁷

Nturu contends that African society has not decayed into the fifth stage described above, and thus the African “creative model, with respect to the individual, has been different from the European model...to the extent that the African writer still believes in the organic unity of a society of mutual social obligations.” Modern African writing reveals elements of revolt and of surrender where the literature encompasses “reaction to, or revolt against, stagnant or repugnant moral and political miasma”, but the recognition of

7. cited in Nturu, *Ibid.*, p. 26

collective obligation is reflected in the writing and offers future hope.

I have cited Nturu's article at length here because it seems to me to be one of the most impressive commentaries yet to be published both in its summary of the themes and patterns of modern African writing (with the focus mostly on writing from East Africa), and for the judgments it offers on artistic achievement in relation to thematic material.

....African writers will do well to re-examine their conception of literature. The poets will need to accept the realistic present in order to outgrow their divided loyalties so they can move from the pastoral, pseudo-epic dramatic monologue. The novelists will need to modify their pastoral vision and redirect their sensibility to accommodate the city which affects the whole of the national life directly or indirectly to a considerable degree. The short story writers will need to move from sketches of bad picaresque novels in order to master the art of the significant emotional moment. And the dramatists — in many ways the most effective of writers with the greatest potential audience — will need to modify many of the traditional myths and legends that form the sounding board of their plays to give dramatic expression.⁸

Ngugi, writing out of the same cultural ethos, echoes these sentiments but is much harder hitting in the proscriptions he offers. For Ngugi, the study of literature is broadly interpreted in educational and social terms as assisting the creation of general literacy in the country — it also assists, might even be in the vanguard of creating

....a revolutionary culture which is not narrowly confined by the limitations of tribal traditions or national boundaries but is outward looking to Pan-Africa and the Third World and the needs of man. The national, the Pan-African, and the Third World awareness must be transformed into a socialist programme, or be doomed to sterility and death. Any true national culture....that nurtures a society based on co-operation and not ruthless exploitation, ruthless grab-and-take, a culture that is born of a people's collective labour, such a culture will be best placed to contribute something truly positive and original to the modern world.⁹

We can narrow the discussion still further by considering the function of Literature within African society (in at least one African country) and this devolves very precisely about what should be taught, what should comprise a literature syllabus. Until recently, in the English-speaking universities of Africa, the contact has been almost entirely with the literary tradition of England, and the emphasis was more on the historical development of the tradition than with the question of literary criteria *qua* criteria. The syllabus in English

8. *Ibid.*, p. 33

9. Ngugi, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20

Literature at Makerere University College, the paramount East African institution of higher education at which until recently all East African candidates attended, was locked into the London University English studies curriculum as tightly as was, say, that of the University of Ibadan, and was eventually seen to be in large part irrelevant to the needs of African students. (One must, I suppose, face the fact that in Nigeria the Ibadan department produced Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo — to name but three of the most prominent African writers. But it is a moot question as to whether these writers became what they are because of their exposure to that particular syllabus, or because of the genius which caused them, after experiencing it, to surmount it and bend it to their wills.) The English Departments of Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam, because they were founded much later than that of Makerere (in the early 1960's) fared rather better in deriving courses structured to suit local needs, but even they had to go through serious revisions before they were seen to begin to fulfill the function which ought to be their ideal. The controversy which broke out at the then University College of Nairobi in 1968 (it became autonomous on 1 July, 1970) forced practical steps to be taken to alleviate symptoms which, in the new College, were in danger of becoming entrenched. Ngugi summarizes the cause for the controversy in an article entitled, "Towards a National Culture"¹⁰ where he writes:

....a group of lecturers questioned the validity of an English Department, the only department concerned with literary studies, which continued teaching only British literature in the heart of independent Africa. The chauvinistic, basically colonial approach to the study of the humanities was justified on the grounds that people needed to study the historic continuity of a single culture! British of course! Underlying this was an assumption that the British traditions and the emergence of the modern West were the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage. Retorted the lecturers:

Here is our main question: If there is need for a study of the historic continuity of a single culture, why can't this be African? Why can't African Literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it? The aim in short should be to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be seen and considered in their relevance to our situation.

Towards this end, they demanded the abolition of the English Department and the setting up, in its place, of a Department devoted mainly to African Literature and Languages. The Department of Literature would teach modern African writing in English and French, Afro-American and Caribbean Literature and a selected course in European literary traditions. But at the

10. *Ibid.*, p. 15

core of such a Department would be the study of oral tradition in African literature. Such a study would be important both in rehabilitating our minds, a recourse to the roots, but also in helping African writers to innovate and break away from the European literary mainstream.

And to their brief Ngugi, Taban and Owuor-Anyumba added this important comment:

One of the things which has been hindering a radical outlook in our study of literature in Africa is the question of literary excellence: that only works of undisputed literary excellence should be offered. (In this case it meant virtually the study of disputable 'peaks' of English literature). The question of literary excellence implies a value judgement as to what is literary and what is excellence, and from whose point of view. For any group it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated 'classics', either of their own or of a foreign culture.¹¹

Turning to Canada, I find I've not left myself much time. It is as well this is so since, to my shame (which I'll do much to ensure is not eternal), I know less about Canada than I should. There are, as I've suggested, analogies between Canada and Africa and they work themselves out in terms of similarity in dissimilarity. They are these. We do not have an Arcadia to look back to and which can provide us with a jumping off point to the future. Africa did. Achebe has described the contemplation of the past as the short-cut to the future. Cosmo Pieterse describes as one of the first two impulses in Modern African Writing to be the Arcadian – literature dealing with the recreation of traditional African societies, the pre-colonial past, the Old Empires. Ngugi points out that African writers may have “gazed at the ruins of yesterday” at the expense of the present, but he does agree that in attending to the past the African novelist has restored the African character to his history, giving him the will to act and change the scheme of things, “re-asserted the character's vital relationship with [his] social and economic landscape”. The situation in Canada is different. Canada had no system of control – political, economic, general cultural – placed on her as Africa did. These things were imported and their local definitions evolved out of a settler community, basically French and British in the beginnings, which came, saw and stayed. As time went on numbers of people were added from all parts of the world who brought (and continue to bring) with them awareness of and attachments to the cultures of their countries of origin. This makes for richness and suggests the source of a strong culture. But it also suggests the problems

11. *Ibid.*, p. 749

attendant in unifying these elements under a set of common proscriptions. The fact of these disparate cultures in the context of the size of Canada, and in regard to the relatively small numbers of peoples occupying the vast space, made in the past for regionalism and a mutual exclusiveness not yet overcome by the fact of the 401 which has been recently added to the triumvirate of unifying agents, the C.P.R., the C.B.C. and Air Canada. It was circumstances such as these which, I suppose, prompted E. K. Brown, a distinguished Canadian man of letters, to write in 1943:

I give this as a fact:....most Canadians continue to be culturally colonial, that they set their great good place somewhere beyond their own borders.... Our colonialism in relation to the United States is unavowed, but it is deep. The praise of a couple of New York reviewers will outweigh the unanimous enthusiasm of Canadian journals from coast to coast. There is every reason to suppose that as Canadian feeling becomes more and more friendly towards the United States, as it has done during the past quarter century, our cultural dependence on the Americans will grow. If it does, our literature may be expected to become emphatically regionalist....¹²

The problems Professor Brown identified grew and the Federation survived rather than flourished, subject to pressures created by its own colonial-mindedness so that even as recently as 1964, a concerned Canadian was moved to conclude an address to a gathering of international scholars of Literature studies (one can mitigate the charge of possible hyperbole as an expression of consummate concern for the country.) He said:

....the essential problems remain, worsening every year, worsening indeed every month. Canadians play a blind game of ring-around-the-rosy, moving in endless circles. The Canadian press is as bad as any press in the world. It refuses to talk about the basic problems of Canadian language and culture. It only, for instance, turned its attention to the French-Canadian problem when the bombs began to explode. Canadian journals are generally monstrously dull. They refuse to talk about the basic problems, which are problems of political sovereignty, of economic sovereignty, of sovereignty to think freely and to propagate Canadian ideas and Canadian interpretations of world events. They refuse to talk about the matters of the gravest concern to the nation because they fear for their bread and butter and they fear that the immense U.S. interests will brand them communist. So they avoid issues or pretend they are too irrelevant for consideration. Canadian politicians resolutely refuse to deal with the problems for the same reasons, and because they know who pays the costs of their election campaigns. Every few years the subject is breathed in politics because it swells up from an underground feeling of concern among the people. And just as quickly a campaign is launched which assures the Canadian people that their nation will be

12. Brown, E. K., "The Problem of a Canadian Literature", In his *On Canadian Poetry*, rev. ed. (Toronto, Ryerson, 1943), p. 15

politically crippled and economically destroyed if they interfere with the political, and economic exploitation of the country. And so with each passing month Canadians own less and less of their natural resources, their industry, their power to create and propagate ideas. With each passing month the task of maintaining a grip upon the essential germ of Canadian being, upon the Canadian sense of place, becomes more and more difficult.¹³

There is now in Canada a mounting concern with the question of national sovereignty, the uniqueness of Canada, with the legitimacy of being concerned with these things. One can find these things anywhere and everywhere in the national press, in journals, on radio and television, in the formation of such organizations as the Committee for an Independent Canada and in the expressions of concern voiced by at least one major Canadian political party. Raised equally loudly as the voices of concern, are those which cry "chauvinist" or "fascist", which warn solemnly of the dangers of espousing an out-of-date nationalism. One expects to hear these voices from outsiders, both within and without the country. These can be borne. It is less easy to bear these shrill cries from one's own countrymen though considering the intricate network of commitment and mutual obligation which results from the metastasing of multi-national connections (similar in kind though perhaps different in degree to that experienced by African countries) one should expect it. I don't want to press this, but it seems to me that in Canada we have just as much cause and just as much right to make assertions about our national sovereignty and integrity as Africans have and that we might take courage from their example in doing so.

Let me once more and for the last time narrow the discussion to the question of the study and teaching of Literature. I cited Ngugi's views on how the production of literature and its teaching assists in the achievement of the quest for national identity or autonomy. This proceeds from his conviction that

....it is wrong to think of culture as prior to politics. Political and economic liberation are the essential condition for cultural liberation, for the true release of a people's creative spirit and imagination. It is when people are involved in the active work of destroying an inhibitive social structure and building a new one that they begin to see themselves. They are born again.¹⁴

It provides the justification for the assertion of Ngugi and his colleagues at Nairobi who said about their proposal to change the nature of the English Department:

13. Mathews, R. D., "The Canadian Prolem" in *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1965, p. 166

14. Ngugi, *op. cit.*, p. 11

This is not a change of names only. We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the department. This, we have argued, is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literature, things must be seen from the African perspective. The dominant object in that perspective is African literature, the major branch of African culture. Its roots go back to past African literatures, European literatures, and Asian literatures. These can only be studied meaningfully in a Department of African Literature and Languages in an African University.¹⁵

Could one make a case for the centrality of Canadian Literature studies in the English Departments of Canadian universities? Will my analogy stand the strain I place on it? In a perfectly cowardly fashion I will dodge the answer and offer the following as modifiers to the general proposition. To take a radical pedagogical stand of this kind is to take a risk of a kind suggested by E. K. Brown in the article I cited above.

Autonomy almost always breeds chauvinism, and usually brings as an immediate consequence an unwholesome delight in the local second-rate. Its advent opposes strong obstacles to international currents of art and thought. This is to be set firmly against the notion that out of autonomy all good things soon issue. Still it must be appreciated just as clearly that dependence breeds a state of mind in which great art is unlikely to emerge or to be widely recognised if it did. A great art is fostered by artists and audience possessing in common a passionate and peculiar interest in the kind of life that exists in the country where they live. If this interest exists in the artist he will try to give it adequate expression; if it exists in the audience they will be alert for any imaginative work which expresses it from a new angle and with a new clearness. From what was said a moment ago it will be obvious that in a colonial or semi-colonial community neither the artist nor audience will have the passionate and peculiar interest in their immediate surroundings that is required.¹⁶

African countries, or at least some of them, have taken the risk and won the day. Perhaps we in Canada ought to try it since literature has, traditionally, played a vital role, has always had as one of its primary commitments the formulating of the values of a society and has been both a reflection and criticism of those values. It creates a sensation of the life of the society and the peoples it evokes and as such forms part of the total cultural accretion of that society.

Literature can make a contribution to the human factor in social

15. *Ibid.*, p. 150

16. Brown, *op. cit.*

development and this involves two notions of the function of the writer and teacher, a relationship which is mutually supporting. The first is the educative role in which each is involved. The second role is perhaps the more important. The writer (and ideally and by implication the teacher through his discussion of the writer's work) is especially equipped to know in a sensitive way what is prominent in the minds, what are the most pressing concerns of the people of and for whom he writes. He takes as his responsibility the synthesizing of these values and interprets them both to students and to a general readership.

The poet, (or the novelist or playwright) has traditionally been the best guide of the generality of people to the understanding of his contemporary society, and of his obligations to his society. He helps to establish values and often assists a generality of people in making a single choice from the many open to them. He can sometimes be a propagandist and his work is overtly political and therefore narrow in its recommendations as they appear in imaginative form. Often his art suffers as he declares to people what course of action they should follow rather than assists them with the bases on which to make their choice. These dangers are always present and their possibility should be taken into account. What is important despite all this is that whatever the limitations in his sensibilities may be, some sense of values will be implicit in his writings. The concept of literature as a criticism of life is more than ever applicable in Canada, and the objectivity and the conscious sense of the continuity of history is valuable and necessary.

I suppose what I am suggesting we contemplate is a shift in the emphasis which currently exists. Let us shift the periphery to the centre. I suspect that the English syllabuses of Canadian Universities will remain literally "English" syllabuses. I suspect this is quite correct and that to make them anything else would be to impoverish them. The problem in the end can I suppose be resolved in simple terms: time spent against value gained. What should be studied that will, out of the great store of recorded literature, be of the greatest benefit? I think it is true to say that the intrinsic worth and the development of a Canadian tradition can be focused and enriched by contrasting and comparing it with the longer literary tradition of England. I think it equally true to suggest that it can be elaborated and enriched by adding to our

syllabuses examples of the literatures in English from countries other than those we dwell on – from Africa, the Caribbean, India, Australia and New Zealand – literatures with which we have much more in common than might at first be supposed. The more credit we extend to our own literature the more benefit we will receive by attending to others. There is only so much time. How do we make our choices?

APPENDIX

In rounded figures the sales of African Writers Series books look as follows:

Abrahams	<i>Mine Boy</i>	1200
Achebe	<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	3000
	<i>Arrow of God</i>	1300
	<i>No Longer At Ease</i>	1100
	<i>A Man of the People</i>	300
Kwei Armah	<i>The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born</i>	1000
Ngugi	<i>Weep Not Child</i>	3000
	<i>A Grain of Wheat</i>	500
Soyinka	<i>The Interpreters</i>	300

(There are sales of other volumes in the African Writers Series but they are minimal and do not approach the sales of the titles listed above.) Universities in Canada which make use of these books include York, Dawson College, McMaster, Queens, University of Toronto, Simon Fraser, Windsor, Prince Edward Island, Carleton, Western Ontario. General retail sales are concentrated mostly in Toronto and Montreal.

ADDENDA

The Representative of Bellhaven House who has been over the past five or six years most involved in the promotion of the Heinemann African Writers Series (and related books) gave me these few general observations about the response to and use made of books in the series which may be of interest. His comments may be summarized as follows:

1. The use made of the African Writers Series has not been great in Canada. (see appendix)
2. Experience has shown that promotion of the material for use in combined studies has been more successful than as examples of literature *per se* in English courses. For example, a growing number of teachers from East Africa, India and the Caribbean have entered the profession in Canada. More often than not they teach subjects other than literature and make use of materials from their own countries.
3. A number of titles in the AWS are included in "recommended" reading lists especially in schools in Alberta, Quebec, and Scarborough, Ontario.
4. The most popular texts are Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* and Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy*. The sales of these books far outnumber those of any other single volume.
5. There is a growing market in the school systems for this material and it is persistently and sympathetically promoted. The publisher reckons there will be a steady growth in sales on the basis of a discernible increase in interest over the past four or five years.