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THOUGHTS ON THE AFRICAN NOVEL

When I was first invited to this conference* I was asked to speak about the African writer and the English language. I fired back a flat *No!* Then I was asked to say what I should prefer to talk about. I said nothing; I had no idea what I wanted to talk about. Finally I was confronted with a *fait accompli* in the form of a printed programme in which *The African Novel* was put down against my name. I had then to accept, having twice already proved uncooperative.

But as it happened I had just about this time resolved not to make any further pronouncements on the African novel or African literature or any of these large topics unless I dreamt up something really novel and spectacular to say. But perhaps the day-to-day thoughts and worries are just as important, being always with us.

Many years ago at a writers' conference in Makerere, Uganda, I attempted (not very successfully) to get my colleagues to defer a definition of African literature which was causing us a lot of trouble. I suggested that the task might become easier when more of our produce had entered the market. That was ten years ago. I was saying in effect that African literature would define itself in action; so why not leave it alone? I still think it was excellent advice even if it carried a hint of evasiveness or even superstition.

I do admit to certain residual superstitions; and one of the strongest is the fear of names, of hurrying to a conclusion when the issue is still wide open. If I may paraphrase a proverb which seems to me appropriate: *Do not underrate a day while an hour of light remains.* In other words, be careful, for one hour is enough to do a man in.

*A conference on African Literature at Dalhousie University, Halifax, May 1973.

> Edogo's mind was in pain over the child. Some people were already saying that perhaps he was none other than the first one. But Edogo and Amoge never talked about it; the woman especially was afraid. Since utterance had power to change fear into living truth they dared not speak before they had to. (*Arrow of God*)

The world of the creative artist is like that. It is not the world of the taxonomist whose first impulse on seeing a new plant or animal is to define, classify and file away. Nor is it the world of the taxidermist who plies an even less commendable trade.

But I am never fully consistent, not even in my superstitions. I always find thoughts antagonistic to my secure position floating dangerously around it. It is these floating thoughts I wish to talk to you about.

The first is that the African novel has to be about Africa. A pretty severe restriction, I am told. So let us relax it a little. Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape - it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular perspective. This is as close to the brink of chaos as I dare proceed. As for who an African novelist is, it is partly a matter of passports, of individual volition and particularly of sharing in that perspective I have just touched with the timidity of a snail's horn. Being an African, like being a Jew, carries certain penalties - as well as benefits, of course. But perhaps more penalties than benefits. Ben Gurion once said: *If somebody wants to be a Jew, that's enough for me.* We could say the same for being an African. So it is futile to argue whether Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is African literature. As far as I know Joseph Conrad never even considered the possibility. In spite of all temptations he remained an Englishman! And it is not a matter of colour. For we have Nadine Gordimer (who is here today), Doris Lessing and others.

And then language. As you know there has been an impassioned controversy about an African literature in non-African languages. But what about Arabic? What about Swahili even? Is it then a question of how long the language has been present on African soil? If so, how many years should constitute *effective occupation?* For me it is again a pragmatic matter. A language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself.

I fully realise that I am beginning to sound like a bad dictionary. You take a strange word to it and it defines it with a second, stranger word. You look *that* up and it gives you back your original strange word. So you end up with two unexplained words. But that is the reality of our situation, and it is surely more useful to begin to deal with its complexity than propose catchy but impossible simplifications.

At the root of all these strange and untidy thoughts lies a monumental historical fact, Europe - a presence which has obsessed us from Equiano to Ekwensi. For Equiano a preoccupation with Europe was pretty inevitable. After all, he had only just recently freed himself from actual enslavement to Europeans. He lived in Europe and was married to a European. His ancestral Igboland had become a fragmented memory.

In our own time a preoccupation with Europe has seemed almost equally inevitable despite the passage of nearly two hundred years. In the colonial period and its aftermath the preoccupation took the form of protest. Then a bunch of bright fellows came along and said: "We are through with intoning the colonial litany. We hereby repudiate the crippling legacy of a Europe-oriented protest. We are tough-minded. We absolve Europe of all guilt. Don't you worry, Europe, we were bound to violence long before you came to our shores." Naturally Europe which was beginning to believe the worst about itself is greatly relieved and impressed by the mental emancipation, objectivity and sophistication of these new-comers. As if any intelligent writer of protest had ever taken a starry-eyed view of Africa or doubted the reality of evil in Africa the present anti-protest, broad-minded writer will now endorse the racist theory that Africa *is* evil, *is* the heart of darkness, *is* bound to violence.

It is this illusion of objectivity, this grotesque considerateness, this perverse charitableness which asks a man to cut his own throat for the comfort and good opinion of another that I must now address myself to.

Quite often this malady (for it is indeed a sickness) shows fairly mild symptoms and afflicts most of us. At other times it comes in its virulent forms. But mild or severe it manifests itself as self-disgust and an obscene eagerness to please our adversary.

There is a Nigerian academic who went to study in Britain in the late 1920s and decided to become an Englishman. So he settled down in Britain after his studies, married and raised a family and by all accounts was a perfectly happy man. Forty years later, as a result of an unhappy conjunction of events he found himself appointed to the highest position in a Nigerian university. To his first press interviewer he boasted that he spoke no Nigerian language. He cannot recognize Nigerian food, let alone eat it. Given a chance he will appoint a European over a Nigerian to teach at his university; his argument: a *university*, as the name implies, is a *universal* institution.

But fortunately, this man is not a writer. For wouldn't it be awful if writers - those bright hopes of our society - should become afflicted with such a warped vision; a vision which creates a false polarity between an object and its abstraction and places its focus on the abstraction? Personally I am no longer entirely optimistic. Let me present two short passages of the kind that has been causing me great discomfort:

> This is the confrontation which *The Interpreters* presents. It is not an 'African' problem. Events all over the world have shown in the new generation a similar dissatisfaction ... Thus Soyinka, using a Nigerian setting has portrayed a universal problem. This is what makes both this novel and the whole corpus of Soyinka's work universally valid. (Eldred Jones - *"The Essential Soyinka."*)

Before I go on, let me make two points. First, I am not in disagreement with Professor Eldred Jones' evaluation of Soyinka but with the terms he has chosen for that evaluation. The second point is that I regard Eldred Jones as our finest literary scholar, a man of great sensitivity and perception, whom I should have much preferred not to disagree with. But the dogma of universality which he presents here (I believe, absent-mindedly) is so patently false and dangerous and yet so attractive to callow minds that it ought not to go unchallenged. For supposing "events all over the world" have *not* shown "in the new generation a similar dissatisfaction..." would it truly be invalid for a Nigerian writer seeing a dissatisfaction in *his* society to write about it? Am I being told for Christ's sake that before I write about any problem I must first ensure that they have it too in New York and London and Paris?

What Professor Eldred Jones is proposing is that I renounce my vision which (since I do not work with the radio telescope at Joddrel Bank) is necessarily local and particular. And I declare my total and unconditional rejection of that proposition.

Not so long ago a similar proposition was made to me, an attempt to discredit my vision and the absolute validity of my experience. But it came from "expected quarters". At the end of the war in Nigeria (in which, you may know, I was on the wrong side) I had an invitation to visit New Guinea and Australia. But some official or officials in Lagos saw to it that I did not get a passport. When I protested to the Commissioner for External Affairs, he wrote me a nice, intriguing letter with words to this effect:

> Dear Achebe,
> Thank you for your letter in which you complained about difficulties which you thought you had with my officials etc.

You can see, can't You; the close kinship between that letter and the propostion by Eldred Jones? Once you agree to "clear" your vision with other people you are truly in trouble. Now let us look at another short extract from the same essay written by Eldred Jones in a book called *Introduction to Nigerian Literature:*

> When Wole Soyinks writes like this his audience is not a local one, it is a universal one. Indeed at this point he widens his immediate range of reference by making the Court Historian invoke the precedent of the Trojan War.

Thus in the first extract Eldred Jones praises Wole Soyinka for not writing about an African problem but a universal one; and in the second for not writing for a local but a universal audience! Surely, African criticism must be the only one in the whole world (or perhaps universe) where literary merit is predicated on such outlandish criteria. But I don't really believe that Jones is serious. I think what has happened is that he did not really think about this one. Which I must say is most unlike him. Perhaps I should point out in fairness that in the first extract he did put *African* in quotes. Now it is not clear to me exactly what the quotes are supposed to do. Perhaps they hint at a distinction between *real* and *so-called* African problems. This may redeem the situation somewhat, but not very much. For *real* and *so-called* Africa are metaphysical retreats for all kinds of prejudice. Like the critic who

said of Ekwensi's *Burning Grass,* "At last Ekwensi has drawn real Nigerian characters... " She did not say what *unreal* Nigerian characters looked like. But what she meant was that a Lagosian or an African from Nairobi was less real (or *authentic*) than a Masai or a Tuareg, which is surely a matter of taste and not reality.

I shall look at one other aspect of the same problem and I shall be done. In our discussion yesterday Professor Emile Snyder reminded us that politics was always present in literature and gave examples from Dante to Eliot. Why, he asked, do we get all so worked up about it in discussing African literature? Of course the reason is clear. We are late starters. I mean really late - after the track judges have all packed up their things and gone home. Such late starters are usually extremely conscientious. They will cut no corners even though the last prizes had long been given out.

That is why, for instance, we must now have a debate on art for art's sake. That is why we must have pundits decreeing to us what is or is not appropriate to good literature and even tell us what social or political roles artists may (but more usually, may *not*) perform. Thus in a curious novel entitled *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* Ali Mazrui has a poet tried in the hereafter for throwing away his life on the battlefield like any common tribesman. There is no condemnation of war as such, only of poets getting involved - for "some lives are more sacred than others." In the words of one leading character (an African Perry Mason clearly admired by Mazrui):

> a great artist was first of all an individualist, secondly a universalist, and only thirdly a social collectivist.

Since these roles and attributes are not known instinctively by the artist in question (otherwise how would Okigbo not know what was legitimate activity for him?) it stands to reason that he requires some one like Mazrui to tell him (a) the precise moment when he crosses the threshold of mere artist and becomes a great artist and (b) how to juggle with his three marbles of individualism, universalism and social collectivism.

What I am saying really boils down to a simple plea for the African novel. Don't fence me in.

I dare not close without a word of recognition for that small and proprietary school of critics who assure us that the African novel does not exist. Reason: the novel was invented in England. For the same kind of reason I shouldn't know how to drive a car because I am no descendant of Henry Ford. But every visitor to Nigeria will tell you that we are among the world's most creative drivers!

Only fifteen years ago a bright, sceptical academic at a Nigerian university could raise a laugh by saying: *That would be the day when English literature is taught from Chaucer to Achebe.* Today, I much regret to say, that same academic makes a living teaching African literature in some cozy corner of the globe, presumably teaching more Achebe than Chaucer. So it will be with the others.

In conclusion all these prescriptions and proscriptions, all these dogmas about the universal and the eternal verities, all this proselytising for European literary fashions, even dead ones; all this may in the end prove worse than futile by creating needless anxieties. For as everybody knows anxiety can hinder creative performance from sex to science.

I have no doubt at all about the existence of the African novel. This form of fiction has seized the imagination of many African writers and they will use it according to their differing abilities, sensibilities and visions without seeking any one's permission. I believe it will grow and prosper. I believe it has a great future.

Recently one of my students pointed to a phrase on the cover of Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King* and said "Do you agree with that?" It was a comment credited to my good friend, Ezekiel Mphahlele, to the effect that this was "the great African novel." I told the student that I had nothing to say because I had an interest in the matter; and I'm glad the joke was well received. Actually I admire *The Radiance of the King* quite a lot; still I do hope that the great African novel will not be about a disreputable European.