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Review Article

Kofi Awoonor: *The Breast of Earth*

In *The West African Review* for November of 1949 T.M. Aluko wrote an article arguing "The Case for West African Fiction". It was written in response to a "call for Africans to build up their own records and create a native course of West African literature...particularly stressing the need for recording the traditional history and spoken records of the peoples of West Africa" made in the October 1949 columns of the same journal by an Englishman, Mr. A. Williams. The date of the article and some of the claims as well as recommendations of Aluko are interesting. He says, for example, that "much has been written – and more said about the production of literature for West Africa." We wish he had said more on this count since his article is one of the first to appear on the subject of the kind of literature which should be provided for the "millions who will become literate within the next generation or so." He prophesies that "there will be a tremendous demand for books and stories" as literacy grows, and he notes that a debate is certain to arise as to whether or not this writing is to be undertaken in vernacular languages – if it is not done in this way "a great deal is lost in meaning and beauty of expression in rendering African thought in English": so argue the adherents from this camp. "The other camp", he says,

argues that even in the largest tribes the vernacular market is very much limited and that magazines and books written for the interested among the literate few in a few hundred thousands will never pay their way economically. Again, it appears that the authorities have a way of disagreeing as to what shall be the standard alphabet and orthography of the tribe.... Finally, with the gusto of the nationalist this camp argues that writing in the vernacular stands in the way of the unification of the country which unification is prerequisite for an independent, self-governing West Africa.

Aluko identifies three or four areas which were to become central issues in the production of African literature in the next decade or more: the first of these is the question of the choice of languages in which the literature should be produced. So we think of the addition made to the definition by Tom Creighton at the Fourah Bay conference in 1963 when he said that African literature could be defined as "any work in which an African setting is authentically handled, or to which experiences which originate in Africa are integral." This occasioned Achebe's wry

rejoinder that whilst the attempt at formulating a definition was in a good cause (one which Aluko identifies and which much engaged Achebe's concern — the production of a literature with a social purpose — of attending to the needs of Africans with books by their own writers and about their own cultures) it was odd that by this definition Conrad, a Pole writing in English could produce African literature whilst Peter Abrahams, a South African, would not be writing African literature were he to produce a novel based on his experiences of the West Indies. The Fourah Bay definition provoked as well the debate between Obi Wali (whose "Dead End for African Literature" argued for the vernacular as the medium of literary exchange), Judith Gleason, Austin Shelton and Achebe in the columns of *Transition* throughout 1964. Wali said "...until these [African] writers and their western midwives accept that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration." The question is not yet settled. Any why should it be. There is doubtless going to be vernacular writing in Africa as there is, for example in India. And while writing in English seems to exceed that of the vernacular languages (however much it has become indigenized), doubtless if current trends in the production of writing in Swahili, Igbo and Yoruba are in any way typical, there will be a growth of writing in local languages as populations increase and as literacy increases — though Aluko's argument about costs will also prevail.

A recent contribution made by C. Jenewari in *Oduma Magazine* (Volume 2, No. 1) argues the case for the deliberate cultivation of literatures in indigenous Nigerian languages. He writes:

One question which has often bothered the minds of people more or less connected with African literature is the relationship between literary content and medium of literary expression. To the world outside Africa the term African literature is generally associated with the kind of writing done by our elitist artists, expressing an African content through the medium of a European language. But this kind of writing merely constitutes one out of four possible categories of African literature. We have in addition to elitist or modern African literature three other categories namely (1) oral traditional, (2) written traditional whose medium of expression is the native language and (3) popular African literature — the kind of literature one would characterise as "Onitsha market literature". What is common to all four classes of writing is the African content; what distinguishes them is the medium of expression. And it is the medium of expression that makes all the difference in the readership strength and prestige of the different categories of the literature. Of the four categories outlined above the most widely read (and of course the most prestigious) is certainly the elitist writing. But this kind of writing has two disadvantages....The first, is that it does not quite succeed in integrating content and medium....The second involves the language of expression: since the language of expression is foreign, a considerable portion of the in-group from which the writer and/or the content derives cannot read and appreciate the literature.

The case that Jenewari makes for the cultivation of the indigenous literatures in indigenous languages is summed up thus:

....literature written in the native language...gives satisfactory and adequate expression to the poignancy and richness of the traditional themes, the subtleties of the language and the thought process. It is also general enough for every literate person within the in-group to read and to enjoy. It must be realised that it is only when we attempt putting the native language to all types of uses – poetry, drama, etcetera that we can properly assess its artistic potential and expressive power....Indeed there is much the native speaker can benefit from the native language and there is much he can do to develop such a literature.

At about the same time an Igbo university teacher in the U.S., Ihechukwu Madubuike, made this contribution to the discussion of the language, the definition and the content of African literature when he said that

The present label “African literature,” was chosen by Europeans, not Africans, at a time when Europe regarded Africa as her possession.* But even then it was a misnomer in Europe, literature was national, and the nation from a literary point of view was equivalent to the area where the language was spoken. No European language is used by *all* Africans nor can it be proved that (geographically or otherwise) the African content is the equivalent of the nation. But the language alone can no longer determine the identity of a literature or what label a creative writer should wear. If it did, all writers who write in English would perforce belong to the English literary tradition. It is common knowledge, however, that American literature declared its independence of English literature after the Civil War when some of America’s authors revived the language of the pioneers of American history and expressed the nascent American consciousness in their idiom. Today American literature – still written in English (or is it American?) – cannot be confused with English literature! And even Canadian literature possesses its own, distinct identities.

In the end perhaps D.I. Izevbaye’s definition of African literature which appears at the conclusion of his summary article in *Ibadan Studies in English* and entitled “African Literature Defined: the Record of a Controversy” is the most satisfactory one which not only makes the case for the language in which imaginative writing is produced but the varieties of responses to the creative impulse that will occur. Izevbaye says:

The answer to the question, ‘What is African Literature?’ is simply, “the literature of Africa”. This is not merely begging the question – it reflects the prevailing attitude: African literature includes Equiano writing in the eighteenth-century, and Fagunwa writing in the twentieth; but it is taught in English and French for the sake of the large majority of students who do not speak the languages of Mofolo and Alexist Kagame. The fears of a return to the use of the vernacular have some justification: the Hausa-Fulani has not really abandoned his vernacular, and in the Western State of Nigeria, Yoruba

*This is not quite the case since the contributors to the discussion at Fourah Bay were as much African as European and it was at Fourah Bay that the first distinct formulation was made.

strips are getting as popular as the native drama which inspired them; and abandonment of the official language of the indigenous has a precedent in British history, and this drama is currently being re-enacted in India. There seems to be some sort of inevitability about the process....So when an African vernacular does emerge as the language of African literature, the literature will be taught in that language. But the time for such an emergence can hardly be determined by literary decrees, because that is in control of forces beyond the critic, the literature teacher or even the writer himself. It is connected with factors which are social and economic in nature, sometimes even political. These factors can sometimes *bend* government policies, and the critic is a much smaller man than a national government.

The definition seems simple enough and satisfactory. Yet nothing in literary matters is simple. A definition of literature does not exist: as Izevbaye suggests implicitly, attempts at making a definition derive from the function one attributes to literature, to social and economic factors more powerful than the creative one.

Aluko, in 1949, identified this problem as well. For the question about the purposes which African literature should serve became a major issue – and, as with language, still goes on. In 1964 Achebe said at Leeds that art mattered but so did the social purposes which his novels served – of reuniting the African with his past, of showing that there was order and dignity and beauty in African society before the advent and activity of colonialism. So many African writers and commentators have written about the relationship between the art and the society in which it exists and which it serves, that it is important to record their responses, if only in a cursory fashion.

In Nairobi, for example, the study and the criticism of literature, in the university at least, is seen as assisting in the creation of general literacy in the country and thus in the creation of

...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 society based on cooperation 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 served to contribute something truly positive and original to the modern world.

And so here the evaluation of literature has a functional dimension – good literature is that which has an ability to alter people's lives. (One is reminded of Robert Frost's rejoinder to the student who said that literature should be full of content, that it should prompt people to action: Frost asked: "How Soon?"). So Ngugi and his colleagues at Nairobi shifted the periphery to the centre and placed the contemplation of Africa at the centre of the syllabus of literature studies in Nairobi (which is in Africa). "We want", he writes,

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.

Abiola Irele, in a paper given at Ife and published in the Heywood volume of those proceedings, is somewhere near Ngugi's approach when he describes a critical system which depends upon what he calls the "sociological imagination" and which can be summarized in this way:

Literature takes place within a cultural setting, and no meaningful criticism is possible without the existence of a community of values shared by the writer and the critic which the latter can, in turn, make meaningful to the writer's larger audience. Furthermore, the stream of communication which is established across the line of common relationships in which the critic is a kind of middleman, constitutes an important current in the cultural life of the community.

So for Irele criticism exists in and for the society which produces it, just as does the work of imagination, whatever wider references and influences they may have. Irele says:

The critic of African literature thus has a double responsibility: to show the literary work as a significant statement with a direct relevance to the African experience; and related to this is what I call the educative role of criticism in the present context of the literary situation in Africa. We have a duty not only to make our modern African literature accessible to our people in terms they can understand, but also in the process, to promote an understanding of literature, to widen the creative (as well as the responsive) capabilities of our people — the two essential elements in a fruitful literary life.

Irele's countryman, Izevbaye, views the function of literature and thus of criticism in a different way. He notes that the first and most effective form of criticism directed to African literature was influenced by non-literary interests — "the most important of which was nationalism or the desire to create an indigenous tradition that would be more or less independent of foreign models." One of the problems arising out of this sort of approach to evaluation was that it often praised an author for the wrong reason, thus enhancing the literary stature of a writer every time he wrote on a topical matter. Another consequence of this sort of criticism was that it brought about the rejection of non-realistic literature before it had been properly considered. But, says Izevbaye,

with...the suppression of the social reference of literature as a significant influence in criticism it may be possible for critics to pay greater attention to the literary work itself. But the influence of the referential element on African criticism has not really been an intrusion. The social factor was important only because the literature itself was largely sociological. As the literature becomes less preoccupied with social or national problems and more concerned with the problems of men as individuals in an African society, the critical reference will be human beings rather than society, and the considerations which influence critical judgements will be human rather than social ones.

Sunday Anozie's Genetic Structuralism is another example of the kind of theoretical criticism which is being articulated in relation to African literature. Anozie, the editor of *The Conch* — a "Sociological Journal of African Cultures and Literatures" — in the Third Volume (No. 1) of this journal, defines Genetic Structuralism as

an attempt to explain in terms of natural laws of growth and adaptation to milieu the causes of the dynamic changes, such as are taking place within the West African novel considered as an organism. As envisaged, however, by its chief modern exponent, the French Professor Lucien Holdmann, himself also a disciple of George Lukacs, genetic structuralism is much more complex: it involves the problem of epistemology or the sociology of knowledge.

Aluko closed his 1949 article by saying that

...we shall want stories and novels written by African writers with an essentially African background and atmosphere, and for an essentially African reading public; stories in which the characters will have familiar African names — Ajayi, Codjoe and Momo Kano; and in which the places are familiar West African towns and villages, with the names of well-known streets in say Ibadan or Kumasi coming in. Who can doubt that it is Africans and only Africans who are best suited to this job?

(The terms of Aluko's argument finds a familiar echo about a dozen years later when Taban Lo Liyong enters a similar plea on behalf of the production of a distinctive East African literature in an article entitled "Can We Correct Literary Barrenness in East Africa" in the *East African Journal* in 1966). Aluko mentions no writing or writers specifically in his article: his own *One Man, One Wife* was not published until ten years later (and was subsequently reprinted in the African Writers Series of Heinemanns in 1966).

Davidson Nicol surveys the contribution of British West African Writers in an essay called "The Soft Pink Palms" published in 1956 in *Presence Africaine* (the English edition, volumes 8-10 pp.107-121). His survey mentions such now well-known figures as Ignatio Sancho, Dr. Edward Blyden, James Africanus Horton among prose writers. But among contemporary writers he is able to mention only Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi as novelists, himself among the poets and short story writers and a handful of others who have either written some imaginative work or have assisted in promoting its growth and development — those working for British Broadcasting Overseas Services, and Margaret Rutherford, Langston Hughes, Ulli Beier, as examples. And while his essay is meant only to "outline trends which modern writing from West Africa is taking.." it is certain that if there were more to mention at the time Dr. Nicol would have mentioned it.

In 1959 at the Annual Conference of the West African Library Association held at the University College, Ibadan, papers were read by Janheinz Jahn and John Ramsaran and published together in a pamphlet entitled *Approaches to African Literature* by the Ibadan University Press. This was one of the first statements about Modern African writing in English. Jahn theorized on the uniqueness of this new literature in terms of its debt to the cultural traditions out of which it sprang and thus in relation to the use it was making of the English literary traditions in which most of its practitioners were trained. He discusses the writing in Bantu

languages by such people as Mfolo, Dhlomo, Dube, Furze, Molema, A.C. Jordan, Vilikazi; the work in Swahili by Shaaban Robert, Shele Kibwana, John S. Mbiti. And he comments on the nature of Negritude writing from French-speaking Africa. Ramsaran, whose contribution to the understanding and criticism of African writing has never been paid sufficient tribute, surveys English writing in West Africa and whilst this comprises mostly a survey of what has come to be called expatriate writing – writing by the likes of Mary Kingsley, Joyce Cary, *et al.* – he enters a plea that all materials relating to Africa should be collected and preserved thus providing a foundation on which criticism can be based. Remembering that he is addressing a conference of librarians and mindful of their special concerns and the difficulty of their tasks, he says that what is “urgently needed is a general bibliography of African literature, that is, literature written in any language by anybody so long as it deals with Africa.” This definition has since been superseded – it is more comprehensive and generalised than is Creighton’s which provoked the controversy mentioned above. But Ramsaran, while noting the publication of Ekwensi’s first novel and the imaginative writing which had appeared in publications like *Presence Africaine*, *Black Orpheus*, sounds very much like Aluko and Nicol when he ends his brief paper in saying that

...one important thing must be encouraged if West African literature, whether in European or African languages is to make a substantial contribution to world culture. There is need for a self-conscious society of authors and their readers to express themselves through their own journals and little reviews. These will provide writers with a new vehicle of expression for their creative work and for critical appraisal of one another’s works. The little reviews, if they perform their tasks efficiently, will attract the attention of critics from outside West Africa who will help to foster an unprejudiced and objective criticism, as far as it is possible to do so....

Ramsaran’s plea for a disinterested criticism doubtless did not meet with the acceptance of African writers who have been quite vocal in the intervening years in saying that African literature has got too much into the hands of the expatriate or colonialist critics who lack ultimately the competence to make right judgements about it. His suggestion that in attracting the attention of critics outside of Africa one would see the cultivation of the highest standards of literary appreciation gradually established among West Africa writers and critics is not as paternalistic as it might sound given the fact that the universities, with only a few exceptions, have been central in the creation and criticism of literature. Izevbaye in *African Literature Today*, No. 7, identifies two “aesthetic emphases in modern African criticism. The attempt at an objective evaluation [which] belongs to the new university-based criticism. The older affective theory [which] is at the heart of Negritude aesthetics which rejects ‘objectivity’ and ‘disinterestedness.’ ” And Irele specifies the importance of Western education, that is the secondary schools and especially the universities, to this process when he writes that

In this respect the role of educational institutions has been determinant in producing writers as well as in creating a public for them. More lately, educational courses, putting African literature courses in the curricula, are

also training critics. The special contribution of the institutions of higher learning, both in Europe and abroad, has been to present models in European literature and to create an intellectual disposition towards written expression. The local universities have also served specifically as centres of cultural awareness and it is significant that many African writers began their careers by contributing to student journals such as *The Horn* at Ibadan.

(To this list one might add such titles as *Ghala*, *Busara*, *Penpoint*, *Dar-lite/Umma*.) This view runs counter to that put forward by Obi Wali when he said that "...African literature as now understood and practised is merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature." Ramsaran was aware of the way things were going to develop (his experience and appreciation of the growth and development of West Indian writing no doubt shaped his prophetic view) and so his plea for a gathering of all the materials relevant to the task of creation and criticism was not out of place.

Yet in his check list, appended to the pamphlet, of English Writings — Recent, under the sub-headings of Anthologies, Periodicals; Fiction — excluding West Africa; Fiction — West Africa; Africans and West Indians in England and Miscellaneous — only a few African names appear, and these are mostly South African names. There is no classification at all for East African writers. To Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) have to be added three of his subsequent works: *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), *Simba and the satyr of the dark jungle* (1955) and *The Brave African Huntress* (1958). *People of the City* is mentioned and we see *Things Fall Apart* listed and Achebe's name entered on the rolls. Again we can say that the list is selective and yet we have to note that were there titles by Clark, Soyinka, Nzekwu they would certainly have been listed.

It was with the publication of *Things Fall Apart* that things really got going in modern African writing. *No Longer at Ease* appeared in 1960 and the first work of Clark and Soyinka in the next year or two. The first books of criticism followed hard on the heels of this writing. Jahn's *Muntu* (which provoked a great deal of stormy response from some African writers) appeared in its English version for the first time in 1961 and Gerald Moore's *Seven African Writers* (and there were not many more at the time) appeared in 1962 as did Mphahlele's *The African Image*. Since that time there has been a continuous stream of imaginative writing and criticism of it. Readers who wish to know how the systematic criticism of African literature has developed would do well to look at the most recent number of *African Literature Today*, No. 7, (mentioned above) edited by Eldred Jones at Fourah Bay College, an issue devoted to "Criticism" and especially to the article by Dr. D.I. Izevbaye who writes about "The State of Criticism in African Literature". Izevbaye's checklist, at the close of his article, lists 32 book-length studies, collections or anthologies of critical opinions which have been published since 1966; of these 20 are by expatriate critics and the remainder by Africans. To this latter group may be added Achebe's recently published *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, a volume, which like Ngugi's *Homecoming*, and Lo Liyong's *The Last Word* are collections of various critical essays, letters and conference papers written over a span of a dozen years. There are only three or four book-length treatments — two

of these are monographs – Eldred Jones's *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* and Sunday Anozie's *Christopher Okigbo*.

So the book before us, Kofi Awoonor's *The Breast of Earth*, is the most ambitious and comprehensive survey of the history, culture and literature of Africa yet published. Because it deals with everything South of the Sahara it sets its reach higher than its grasp, and so we must judge the measure of magnificence it achieves in failing to be as comprehensive as its sub-title claims for it. Awoonor is a poet and fiction writer, a teacher and broadcaster who now lives in the United States. He tells us in the Preface that his book in its "selection of themes and authors represents a broad spectrum of ideas and sensibilities" which he hopes fit into the general thematic framework of the book. More than this "there are certain subjects which I had to avoid for lack of space, certain ideas I barely skirted for lack of firsthand or adequate knowledge. There are some writers I have not included whom many readers would have wished me to discuss." But there is a larger purpose behind the book. It "constitutes my personal testament of and salutation to that spirit of Africa that continues through strife, tribulations, and dramatic upheavals to seek her own true self." For Awoonor recognizes as does everyone who is in any way concerned and experienced with things African that

Africa's problem today is still the problem of poverty, disease, and illiteracy. Living on one of the richest continents in the world, our per-capita income remains a paltry ninety dollars per annum. The southern half is locked in embattled enclaves of racial bigotry and white supremacy regimes. Our mildly progressive governments continue to be victims of concerted interference by the developed world and, at times, subjected to dramatic coups d'etat that promise much but are short on delivery. But the continent plods on, seeking, at times, very painfully, ways of growth and survival. And in this search, it adapts, adopts, changes, borrows, discards, and continues to build what in essence will be its own true personality.

Literature has its own unique contribution to make in describing this process, and Awoonor's book records something of that process. His book has three Parts and eighteen chapters together with Notes, Bibliography and Index. Part One, entitled "Africa and her external contacts" has four chapters which deal with a brief history of precolonial Africa, the arrival of Europe and the impact of Christianity and indirect rule in the assimilation process, the penetration of Islam and the moves towards independence. Part Two with three chapters is called "Traditional Africa" and outlines traditional African society and its philosophy, her "art, music and languages", her "oral literature: Ritual drama, prose narrative, poetry". Readers unfamiliar with Africa who come to this book as an introduction to modern African literature and society will find these chapters useful (and doubtless it is in this way their author intended that they be treated). And even for the so-to-say specialist in some areas of African things there will be much general use in this matter since Awoonor writes in a high and entertaining style; the comprehension of his materials is presented in an engaging and lively fashion. And while he is in large measure objective in recording the events of history and in describing the origins, nature and functions of indigenous African arts, he has his

own distinct point of view about the various subjects he treats — it is that of the African setting the record straight and though he says almost nothing directly about the contribution of expatriate critics to the understanding of African writing it seems plain from the tone of the volume and the paucity of reference to expatriate critics in the bibliography (not in the text where the author depends on his own judgements) that he holds them in slight regard.

Parts One and Two take about a third of the total number of pages of the book — 125 of its 352 pages. Part One sets some of the myths of history, of the European connection with Africa, to rights. His assessment, on pages 21-32, of the dependence of the imperial nations on the propagation of the Christian faith to assist them in securing their power is familiar stuff to specialists in the history of the expansion of Europe into Africa; but in a book like this which will be used by non-specialists and be read by new readers this analysis will carry considerable impact. So, too, will his careful analysis of the antipathetic nature of Christian and African religious thought, beliefs and practices.

The whole of the section which deals with the arrival of Europe in Africa is informed by a bitterness which gives bite to his analysis (it is a bitterness reminiscent of that of his countryman Kwei Armah). Note these closing words to the section:

The search for democracy in Africa today becomes a stupendous alibi for political subservience to empty Western Slogans. Revolution and socialist programmes degenerate into shouting matches where new catch phrases are proclaimed to disguise corruption and political thuggery. Neocolonialism, which some African scholars naively believe was a figment of Nkrumah's imagination, is the real monster in post-independent Africa, manufactured in the political enclaves of Europe and America and wheeled into African existence by a conspiracy of big business, international capitalism, and expansionist political systems. It still terrorizes and holds to ransom the whole of the African continent. The recent succession of rapid military coups is only a visceral manifestation of a more deep-seated malaise — the inability of Africa to reconcile herself and to search through the debris of her history for the pieces with which to build that true self in her own image.

Religion and the rise of African neo-colonialism!

A like number of pages deal with the history of Islam in Africa and Awoonor is able to say that "to a large extent Islam was able to acclimatize itself in Africa more successfully than Christianity. Its egalitarian nature and its combination of orthodoxy and new ideas — e.g. its allowing local religions to continue their practice, its acceptance of polygamy (thereby maintaining the traditional family and clan structures), and its encouragement to the giving of alms — enabled it to maintain a communalistic system based on public feasts and celebrations not too different from the indigenous system. Its theology was much simpler for the African to grasp than Christianity as it avoided tangled theological quibbles. Above all, its religion was a way of life, a social and political institution, with the rituals that brought it closer in form to African religious systems." For all this, however, Awoonor is forced to the conclusion that the impact of Islam has been minimal and this is because "...it has lacked an internationally oriented, politically backed power

base and a concerted sociocultural program of indoctrination and control.”

In discussing the traditional African arts — music, verse and drama but as well carving and sculpting in various bodies — in chapter 5, the first chapter in the Second Part of the book, Awoonor attempts to explain “somehow, the very complex interrelationship and interdependence between *things* (material and matter) and *spirits* (gods and deities), to show how objects and things become objects of essentialist or metaphysical system without losing their rationalist functions.” More often than not Awoonor, as well as defining the function of art in African society — though not all art is functional: there is decorative art as well — is concerned to correct the misunderstanding, often the naive enthusiasm of Europeans for African art which characterised the responses of such as Vlammick, Picasso, Braque in the 1920s.

Turning to a consideration of “oral literature, ritual drama, prose narrative and poetry” in chapter 7 of the book, the longest chapter in it, Awoonor discusses the “large body of material which can have its total integrity, impact and realisation only within the scope of performance, transmission and occasion,” the various forms in which one finds oral literature (as indicated in the subtitle to the chapter) and the various types — folk tale, myth and legend (“the fact that myth and legend may become ingredients of history does not invalidate historicity of the material contained in that history”) and offers long and very careful discussion of African poetic forms — e.g. the Yoruba *Ijala*, Zulu praise poetry and Ewe poetry (that written in the author’s own language) — in attempting to create a typology of African poetry.

Part III has at its beginning a linguistic map of Africa and the first chapter (8) surveys briefly literature in African languages (“which received orthographies as a result of missionary work on the realisation of the need to translate the Bible and other holy works of Christian dogma and teachings into African languages”) and offers samples of works in Sotho, Xhosa, Ewe, Hausa and Swahili. Chapter 9 surveys writing in the received languages of Europe, takes its first reference from Jahn’s “generally intelligent” *History of Neo-African Literature*, the name of Antur who wrote romances in Arabic and died in 615, and leads us through the periods of “exploration”, trade (both slave and legitimate), imperialism, colonisation and African nationalist movements. The principal attention is given to Negritude with its defiance of the alienation and dispersal which resulted from slavery and colonization and its eventual racial assertion of blackness, its essential aspect. For Awoonor:

Negritude was a legitimate revolt, a meaningful assertion of the black self. Its ontological system was an expected response to centuries of European racism and downright arrogance. Yet there was something elegantly dilettantish about it, its contradictions exposed in the political sterility of Senghor as President of Senegal, where French commercial and cultural power is mounted. In these contradictions are revealed the basic emotional nature of Negritude — the eternal exile’s designation of himself. Non-rationalist philosophy has to admit as its basic antithesis a rationalist outlook which was responsible for pragmatic solutions to simple questions of survival, shelter, food, and politics in the African world long before the European presence. Neo-symbolism and surrealism are elegant literary concepts that may have nothing to do with the black man’s *real* estate in our times.

Harsh words and as good an accounting for the fate and fact of Negritude as any of those currently offered.

Chapter 10 looks in detail at the works of the major Negritude poets – Césaire, Senghor, David Diop and Tchicaya U Tams'i. Awoonor looks at the poetry as poetry, as art, in terms of its affinities with "sound, rhythm and the music of the word" which

celebrate[s] at a primary level the mysteries of language and symbolism shared by the very essence of African artistic expression. It strives to achieve a unity of being through the invocation of smell, suggestion of movement and gesture form, texture, and the very life force of the total African mythic landscape.

And whilst the four poets under review – how many more were major Negritude poets anyway? – vary enormously in their technique and accomplishment, and judged – with perhaps the exception of U Tams'i – more for the general social than the aesthetic importance of their views, it is according to these criteria that Awoonor judges them, thus adding a new dimension to the critical literature on the negritude poets and on the philosophy of Negritude.

Chapter 11 deals with the first wave of poets from English-speaking West Africa, now generally called the "pioneer poets", and who number among them Benibengor Blay and Michael Dei-Anang of Ghana, Crispin George of Sierra Leone, Roland Dempster of Liberia and Gladys Casely-Hayford of Ghana and Sierra Leone. The work of these poets is for the most part derivative of the English tradition as it came to Africans through missionary teaching. The style is (and was when written) archaic. This work represents a false start in Africa so far as poetry in the English language is concerned, mostly because the motivation of the poets was political and nationalist – motives laudable enough in themselves – and because they failed to see or, seeing, refused to tap, their own oral traditions for poetic forms, imagery and elements of style.

Chapter 12 of the book launches us into the legitimately contemporary scene; that is, to a consideration of representative African poets – Kunene, the Zulu poet; Okigbo, the Biafran hero and Awoonor himself, a contemporary Ewe poet – who find their inspiration and authentic voice by matching western forms of verse to African backgrounds and experiences. Thus the Zulu tradition is made new by Kunene, Awoonor produces a new original Ewe poetry, and Okigbo puts classical training in the University of Ibadan to the service of making a new Igbo poetry.

The chapters which follow this one – Chapter 13 on Amos Tutuola, 14 on Achebe and the rise of modern African fiction, 15 on James Ngugi, Ferdinand Oyono and the anti-colonial novel, and 16 on the modern drama of Africa – follow much the same pattern as Chapter 12; that is, they trace the growth of Western forms as native African genius puts them to appropriate use and in authentic voice.

The sixteenth chapter on the modern drama in Africa has, necessarily, to deal almost exclusively with the work of Wole Soyinka, though mention is made of the Ga writer Saka Acquaye, and Nigerian Kole Ogunwola and Duro Lapido, whose *Oba Kosa* and *Oba Waja* are discussed at some length.

Colonialism brought Western drama into Africa, says Awoonor. And of course it also brought Western poetry and fiction writing styles and forms. In Francophone Africa writers turned to the symbolists and to surrealism in deriving new modes. In Anglophone Africa, after the false start described above, poets turned to Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Imagistes. And the continued influence in Anglophone writing from African countries comes, as we noted above, through the academics.

Chapter 17 is an agglomeration of comment on a wide range of contemporary art forms, but it reveals what has emerged as the author's characteristic approach to analysis; that is, he seeks to reveal what experiments in the synthesis of European (or imported or received) and indigenous art forms produce. And this is discussed as it relates to music, sculpting, carving, painting as well as to drama, poetry and the novel. The art remains functional despite the danger of its becoming commercial, that is, merely decorative or entertaining. In this regard Izevbaye has noted that "many African speaking writers [who] accept the notion that African art is functional, and that therefore the concept of art-for-art's sake should not be allowed to take root in African thought" are "crying wolf when there is none, since pleasure itself is an artistic function..."

Awoonor's criticism does not demonstrate a systematic philosophical criticism: for this sort of approach we must turn to D.I. Izevbaye in various places but especially in Heywood's volume of papers from the Ife Conference, to Abiola Irele's essay on the "sociological imagination" in the same volume, to Sunday Anozie's "Genetic Structuralism" as expounded in *The Conch*. One looks also to Achebe, Soyinka, Lo Liyong and Kamenju to see the spectrum of critical attitudes which have developed and are being refined. Awoonor's approach is that of the eclectic critic who brings experience, sensitivity and concern to bear on a careful exposition of a whole range of subject matter relating to Africa as it bears on her literature and art.

The book is very wide in its appeal in selection of subject matter and authors it discusses and there is likely something for the initiate as well as the reader new to modern African literature and the arts and looking for some critical and interpretative guidelines. Much, so far as the non-African reader is concerned, can only be taken at face value and compared to other writings on the same subject. The expatriate reader simply adds to his understanding of traditional African things by reading Awoonor and by accepting him as a trustworthy witness. Debate about the rightness of his claims will have to be undertaken, in the first instance at least, by his fellow Africans. But in regard to his opinions on the work of writers and books which appear in what Awoonor calls the "received languages of Europe, namely English, French, Spanish and Portuguese" the case is different. The forms and the models are European, recognizably and deliberately so, and yet African in content. More than this there is a growing body of critical literature on these writers and their works. The expatriate critic has a function here and so can enter the debate with confidence.

It's a book for all seasons for the reader, teacher and — in relation to many of its parts — scholar of African writing and the arts in general. The index is reliable and the notes complete — Awoonor does not rely much on the opinions of others in

composing his text. He makes quite considerable use of the major philosophical work in this field by his countryman W.E. Abrahams, *The Mind of Africa*, and while, as the index and notes reveal, his range of references to European authors, artists and thinkers is wide — Sartre, Schoenberg, Pound, Cezanne, for example — these references are allusive and not dependent or integral. The bibliography is highly selective and while it might serve the needs of a beginner who wants more information about the authors who engage his attention, it will be of little use to anyone who has contemplated the field at all. These readers should look at — indeed probably already are using — the *Africana Library Journal* or the annual bibliographies in the African sections of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

The final chapter of the book offers a forecast for the future, but it might also be construed as an *apologia pro suo vita* by the author and in light of the almost constant debate about authenticity in regard to African scholarship about who is entitled to write criticism of African literary works, Awoonor's statement and stance are important for their assertions and qualifications. Awoonor's Africanness is as unquestioned as is his concern for his country and his continent — not all natives necessarily care about their countries, especially those in countries which in subtle ways remain colonised. He may even be called an Africa-firster. But this paragraph from his last chapter is important in specifying his kind of Africanness. He says that an attitude which

...presupposes that the only authentic Africans are those in the rural countryside, beating their rhythmic drums, and performing long rituals... denies the importance of cultural contacts with other cultures which have expanded as well as changed the continent's personality. But no nation is an island. Cultural "purity" is a dangerous myth that can arrest a people's growth and impose false ideas of superiority on them. Africa herself has suffered too long from European ethnocentrism to turn around to proclaim her own brand.

In this regard the book becomes a testament to the integrity of the craft of criticism; it reveals none of the narrowness that its author deplores in other critics and in doing so, given the current climate of opinion which prevails, will perhaps bring down some scorn on its author's head. These words will not do Awoonor much good — but it is not out of place to applaud the book as a prophylactic against narrow-mindedness. Awoonor calls himself a "cultural nationalist, teacher, artist and above all...an African." He interprets his nationalism pretty broadly.

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