

The inquiry of literature

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ABSTRACT: *This is an essay, theoretical and critical, that tends to examine literature through a blend of moral, philosophical, aesthetic and intellectual attitudes and judgments that cohere into what is entitled here as “The Inquiry ‘Literature.’” It owes its insights and inspiration to many years devoted to reflecting about the subject, and to reading, studying, lecturing, teaching and writing about some of the finest writers in world literature. And the range of writers focused on here from William Shakespeare, Saint Augustine, Robert Graves, John Keats, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka to Romanus Egudu to elucidate its claims and assumptions, underscores its over-riding strength in context and comprehension. The essay concludes without a conclusion because of the vast possibilities and impossibilities about the subject of “the inquiry of literature.”*

Perhaps I should begin my statement on “The Inquiry of Literature,” which I offer here as the title of this discourse by predicating it on the assumption that literature (and its theory and criticism) since time immemorial or right from whatever time or century we can claim to be the beginning of our writing and study of it has always been struggling with the “same tensions, the same fundamental elements, and the same claims as to purpose, means, and effect,” to borrow the words of Timothy J. Reiss (9). In other words, right from the time we became aware of what literature is or has always been or will be, we have become familiar with its vast possibilities (or even impossibilities) in our affairs as human beings living in diverse societies and space on this mortal sphere. We have come to know literature and define it, again, to quote Reiss, as a “human behaviour common to all human societies, a means of communicating universally similar feelings, thoughts, and so forth which crosses ages and spaces” (2). Our inquiry of literature perhaps should begin from here.

I must, however, state from the outset that Professor Romanus Egudu had two decades plus ago dwelt on the subject of this inquiry although his concern was essentially with the theme of “Poetry as an Inquiry into the Meaning of Life.” In fact, this was the focus of his inaugural lecture delivered to the academic audience of the University of Benin and other academic-minded persons on Thursday, 20 May, 1982. But I wish to be deliberately unacademic and un-scholarly here by way of intentionally easing him out of my rendition so as not to be

too, too conscious of his frame of mind as embodied in that splendidly and profoundly scholarly inaugural lecture.

I wish to state further that for some time now I have become utterly perplexed by the subject of literature and its practitioners especially those of them in the Literature Departments of our Universities in Nigeria (and elsewhere). How truly have they imbibed literature and its teaching, and regard it as an embodiment of universal values? In what ways has literature shaped their behaviour for the good and betterment of themselves and of our respective societies? How have writers of literature and those who read and study their products as critics and scholars such as we are improved themselves, their Literature Departments and societies ethnically-, ethically-epistemologically- and morally-speaking?

I have been overwhelmed by a sense of literature teachers' and scholars' moral decay, the social decadence they experience and my own personal feeling of catastrophe, and theirs and my own perceptions of worldly reality.

Intrigues, betrayals, lies, deceits, simulations, hypocrisies, gang-ups, back-stabbing and back-biting, character assassinations, dissembling and all the experts at these wanton vices and more are common, rife and rampant in our Literature Departments. Were Hamlet to visit our Literature Departments he would discover certainly that the State of Denmark was far cleaner, less rotten and less foul than any of them. Year in year out we read and study works of literature (which we also teach others) in the forms of poetry, plays, novels, short stories, autobiographies and biographies in all their deferent modes and characteristics in the hope of their transforming us and our world. How intriguing are our thoughts and feelings on this score! How intriguing that we dare to examine literature and inquire into how it helps or can help our understanding of the meaning of life! How dare we do so when we have not dared to inquire into how it has aided us to query our conduct as writers, teachers, critics and scholars! Indeed, don't we have liars, character assassins, betrayers, dissemblers, plagiarists, adulterers and other persons of despicably questionable *attitudes* among our *tribe of literary practitioners and professionals*? How has literature mended, tended and shaped the conduct, perception and general attitudes of such persons among us for their own good and the good of the public which ultimately ought to advance their own good as well?

Any inquiry of literature ought to start from ourselves. Every writer, every teacher, every critic and every scholar of literature must be exemplary. He or she has no choice but to be so. Whether or not he or

she is conscious of it his or her works and what he or she reads, studies and critiques ought to and must reflect one or more aspects of what should mend, re-mend, tend, re-tend and shape and re-shape his or her character and morality and intense passions, thoughts and feelings and positively ideological attitudes in an environment and society he or she inhabits. Every writer is a writer in morality or ought to be so. Every critic is a critic in the art and act of morality or ought to be so. Every reader of a literary work is a reader in the art and act of morality or ought to be so. In other words, every writer, critic and reader is an inquirer or ought to be an inquirer into the meaning of conduct or behaviour which underlines and underlies our moral choice as we grope on this earthly plane. On this score, no writer or critic or reader can afford to be neutral or refrain from asking what does life mean to us? And what role literature plays in our endeavour to understand this meaning? Of course, literature must lose its meaning and value if it cannot vitalize us to reflect deeply and passionately about the greatness and splendour and wonder of the human condition.

At issue is how a poem or a play or a novel or a short story or an autobiography or a biography or a diary or a memoir or an essay enables us to determine how to live or not how to “Assume a virtue, if you have it not”, to recall Hamlet's bitter and biting advice to Gertrude. *Hamlet* is a first rate play of huge proportions. It is an expansive work of literature. It encompasses everything and every subject, every discipline in our world. It is history, politics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, science, theology, ethics, epistemology, morality, law, human rights, soldiery, love and gender. It is a mighty play which aesthetically expresses divergent views concerning the listed subjects and disciplines, all in the attempt to enable us to interrogate our world and what this world means to us. I am not a Shakespeare scholar in the loose or strict sense of the term, but any time I read and re-read *Hamlet* I am always astounded at these different layers of meaning contained in the play, and which I, unconsciously, must have made a capital importance out of in my early development as a critic and scholar and as an inquirer into the vast possibilities of the meaning of literature in my life and academic and literary career over the years. In fact, other William Shakespeare's plays, for example, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest* engender this same feeling in me although in varying degrees.

The same remark applies to St. Augustine's *Confessions* which every now and then provokes in me feelings of immeasurable proportion. In fact, it and Robert Grave's *Good Bye to All That* aroused

my original interest in autobiography and autobiographical literature including the personal essay. From the latter I learned first the precedent of the possibilities of literature, “of the possibility,” to quote T.S. Eliot, “of fusion between the realistic and the phantasmagoric, the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic” (126). We can't understand existence and we can't understand the essence of literature and what it truly means unless we appreciate this juxtaposition between the real and unreal.

With Shakespeare and St. Augustine, the reading, appreciation and understanding of their works constitute a life time's endeavour. As several advanced and distinguished writers, critics and scholars, for example, T.S. Eliot, had observed, at every stage of one's literary growth and physical nurturing one's understanding of the works of great artists such as Shakespeare and St. Augustine changes for the better. Our maturing life follows this pattern. As we move from adolescence to middle age or old age, for example, our experience and perception of life change, and if we are literary persons life and its meaning reveal themselves to us better and in their true forms. Yet this revelation does not guarantee the real truth and beauty of existence. Ironically, the more of literature one knows the less of life one knows. Conversely, the older one becomes the less understanding of existence, of life, that is, one becomes aware of. This remark contains an illuminating paradox which may deserve an immediate qualification in relation to our inquiry.

Thus we need to state clearly and succinctly, without qualms, that in our writing and reading of literature we all seem to labour in vain. No interpretation of any literary text is definite in the same way our understanding or misunderstanding of life is not definite and can never be. The meaning of life through literature's attempt to reveal it or get at it as it carries out its art and act of inquiry is *ipso facto* indefinitely in doubt. Life itself is always in a state of flux, and the meaning of any text as our inquiry may yield, must also be in a state of infinite doubt. In some quarters, it would be considered eccentric to offer this opinion. Yet those who would consider this opinion as that of an eccentric must themselves be considered eccentric. The reason is obvious. Verbal dissensions and fluctuations in literary, cultural and critical and theoretical studies reflect changes in critical or cultural or theoretical inquiry or temper that are themselves the result of an on-going re-interpretation and re- re-interpretation of literature. Every now and then, literary, cultural, critical and theoretical establishments, schools, societies, academies, associations, clubs and groups would be re-born or re-created with the affirmed purpose of moving received opinions, attitudes and ideas.

Thus whatever conception of literature which we have or assert now will change with time again and again. The lesson I may imbibe from my inquiry of literature may not be as limited or as expansive as any other person's. Time and again it alters and affects us profoundly. One moral lesson, a really profound one, I think, which my inquiry of literature has taught and offered me, as it taught and offered T.S. Eliot, is this: The whole creation, study and practice of literature seem to me, as it also seemed to the illustrious T.S. Eliot, to instruct that the writer as a novelist, poet, playwright, short story writer, autobiographer, biographer, diarist or memoirist should be the messenger and servant of life, rather than the master and emperor of it, despite his or her glowing and experienced rendering. We ought to consider this as the sense of responsibility and one of the philosophical marks of the creative writer, and even of the critic of the creative writer as well for the art of criticism also involves the use of creative imagination similar to the poet's or novelist's or playwright's or autobiographer's. Literature cannot purify us to extent of making us life's master and emperor. The power which chastises ire exacts man to see himself as he truly or really is, is called literature. But literature is not the power that refines, purifies, shapes or develops our world. Ri A ay porters, bus conductors, wharf labourers, cab drivers, philosophers, politicians and statesmen may read and study literature but there is a limit to He - perception and understanding of their realities. "*The Divine Comedy*," in re words of T.S. Eliot, to quote him finally, "expresses every thing in the way: emotion, between depravity's despair and the beatific vision, that man is arable of experiencing" (134). Yet despite his greatness as a poet, Dante never succeeded in his task of making "people comprehend the comprehensible" (134). At best, I must reiterate and reinforce the point, each a- e of us must strive to be the messenger and servant of life, through our creation and study of literature, rather than the master and emperor of life. This is a moral lesson my inquiry of literature seems to me to have taught me in my ; 12 ng of books after books on the subject and in my many trips to literature's echo chamber.

John Keats, the great Romantic humanist seems to share my sentiments when he tells us in "Ode to a Nightingale" as follows:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan,
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin and dies,
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden eyed despairs(11.24)

Keats here is doubtlessly concerned with the fate and suffering of mankind, whom he expresses sympathy for. The lines contain sincere emotions and their echoes that are well expressed, but what holds my keen mention is some kind of moral authority which allows Keats to call imperially for a lucid acceptance of human limitations. Man cannot go beyond his limits, Keats's morally responsible voice warns, despite the joy and happiness one derives from the quality of poetic language and symbols which, to quote Paul de Man, "tease" and "deceive" "in foreshadowing an eternity that is not within our reach" (xxx).

Indeed, Paul de Man has correctly argued that "The pattern of Keats's work is prospective rather than retrospective; it consists of hopeful reparations, anticipations of future power rather than meditative reflections on past moments of insight or harmony" (xi-xiii). What Paul de Man suggests is that Keats as a poet and as a writer was short of worldly experience. He was so futuristic in his poetry that one would easily come to the conclusion that the inquiry he engaged in, in his act and act of writing was bereft of experiential reality. Thus any moral lesson one would learn from Keats could only be got from his fictionally prospective rather than from his factually meditative reflections. Because Keats was too Romantically out of touch with worldly experience we should at best enjoy and appreciate him for decorative and harmonious expression rather than for writing true poems of life. That Keats died at the relatively young age of only twenty-five years, did (and still does?) not seem to mark him as a true and dependable reader and philosopher of the meaning of life. Keats's inquiry and vision of life as communicated in his poetry and essays generally were not those of a sage of worldly experience, but those of an exceptionally talented artist whose medium was essentially poetry. He gained his insight from his writing apprenticeship and craft. Perhaps that was why he was so magisterial and imperial in his writing. Nevertheless he was a magisterial and imperial servant of life.

One could argue successfully that age has nothing essentially tangible to do with the art and act of literary inquiry into the meaningfulness of life. After all, the age of Methuselah has nothing to do with the wisdom of Solomon. This argument is one we can apply truthfully to the case of Chinua Achebe, Nigeria's and Africa's most popular and famous novelist who published his outstanding novel, *Things Fall Apart*, at the youngish age of twenty-eight years. Unlike Keats, however, Achebe in his novel put down in his writing, at the time he did so, the experience and life of generations upon generations of a people. The experience of Achebe's people was Achebe's own experience. The life of Achebe's people was Achebe's own life. In other words, in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe wrote the history and experience

and life and thus the autobiography of his people. In Achebe's novel, which doubles as autobiography, the relationship between life and work must be understood lucidly in this context. Yet this is not to say that Achebe at that time understood fully his Igbo world. Even at eighty years Achebe must still be perplexed at the depth of Igbo philosophy and world view. His talent and bag of literary tricks, derived from his "intellect and crystalline prose", cannot exhaust the Igbo world. As great a novelist as Achebe is, his inquiry still has its limitations:

Why do the Igbo call the middle ground lucky?
What does this place hold that makes it so desirable?
Or rather, what is fortune does it fence out?
The answer is, I think, Fanaticism.
(Achebe, *The Education* 5)

Achebe's questions and answer in this short excerpt pertain to an Igbo "children's rhyme which celebrates the middle ground as most fortunate" (Achebe 5). "The answer is, I think, Fanaticism," which replies the questions Achebe asks, suggests that the grand old man of Nigerian letters does not fully understand an aspect of the world view and cultural life of his people despite the lengthy explanation he goes into after he offers the above quoted excerpt. But, it must be said, the "middle ground" of Achebe's Igbo world is symbolically and metaphorically used to recall "both his happy memories of sending novels in secondary school and the harsher truths of colonial rule" Achebe *blurb*).

Achebe's *The Education of a British-Protected Child* consists of personal essays in which the past charmingly "enacts its presence", even though the autobiographical essayist interrogates the past and summons it to present which can be said to be charmingly delinquent. The essays that dwell on aspects of childhood are revealing in their exploration of sensibility, and one lesson they teach me is that autobiography, even in the personal essay form, of childhood, is falsehood of truth of a "place and a past largely known" (Reiss 346).

Wole Soyinka's artistically immaculate autobiography of childhood called *Ake: The years of childhood* provokes this conclusion and lesson as well. Reading *Ake* one cannot but be immersed in its enchantment and magic of childhood which Soyinka's well wrought craft produces. What childhood meant to him (and which it must mean to us as well) is conveyed with a great range of emotion and perception which is too true to pass for that of a child. Soyinka's exploration, his inquiry of childhood, is a reminder that the explorer or inquirer must explore or inquire beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness. The

colours or sounds of Soyinka's childhood and its vibrations and the manner of their recollection call attention to the *lie* in the text, and thus to the immorality of the autobiographer. The lesson of our inquiry here is that factual reality and fictional reality are two of a kind, and are re creation of the same literary parent(s). Now, I feel the need to dwell on one neglected aspect of religious literature. The theoretical as well as the critical example I am citing, albeit briefly, pertains to the well known story or incident a which concerns the betrayal of Jesus Christ in the *Bible*. We all are aware of Judas Iscariot and what he did to Christ. Right from the time of his act of betrayal up to now we have held him in very low esteem. But my sincere inquiry and thought on the matter, from both literary and religious point of view, is that he is the best of the disciples of Christ. Were it not for Judas Iscariot there would not have been redemption for mankind. And Christianity would not have flowered the way it has flowered over the centuries in the a world. How many works of literature have given Judas his due recognition as the best of the disciples? None. My inquiry of literature over the years has not Thrown up any text my way in this wise. No vibration of this thought has sounded to our hearing from the echo chamber of literature.

A Nigerian virtuous and religious poet who fittingly needs to be invoked in this act of critical and theoretical engagement and performance is Romanus Egudu. The title poem of his collection of poems called *Prayer of the Powerless* is as follows, in full:

O god of governance
 disarm for us
 Those who blind voting rights
 with hardened cash,
 Or who plan public budgets
 for private pockets,
 Or who regard barrack guns
 as golden geese,
 Or who turn contract awards
 into wayward gains,
 Or who crucify services
 on civil crosses,
 Or who inter the truth
 in technical graves,
 Or who impregnate banks
 with bastard wads,
 Or who constipate young minds
 with chronic notes.

We also pray you
to empower for us Only those who act counter
To all the above. (39)

In an earlier essay called “Poetry in the Cerebral Cortex, the Nervous System and Digestive Tracts: A Study of Romanus Egudu's Moral Poetry,” I argued that the above cited “Prayer of the Powerless” is a poem of prayer and protest which reveals the poet as one who yearns for leaders who shall be persons of honour and integrity, who shall be models for a “moral ideal, for a moral standard” (Afejuku 706). Now I wish to add as follows: which leader in our world is a model for a “moral ideal,” for a moral standard”? There is a Judas in every political leader in every part of the world. But I must redeem Judas: he gave mankind salvation through his action of betrayal of Christ while our political leaders give us hell through their betrayal of us as soon as they enter the respective houses and offices of governance.

At this point I wish to end this essay without really concluding it. The inquiry of literature is a continuous process. So long as we remain theorists, critics, culture experts and imaginative writers we must keep on investigating it for new trends, new meanings, new interpretations and re-interpretations and re-re-interpretations. Also, as professionals, we must watch out for new literary, theoretical, critical and cultural movements championing new attitudes, conceptions and ideas and any dissensions any where in our world of literature. Our inquiry must change when the actions, functions and critical temper change with the times and with our whole surroundings. But my final statement is that literature, no matter what inquiry we subject it to, cannot and will not satisfy our yearnings and questionings. The more of literature we taste and devour, the less its meaning yields itself to our insatiable philosophical and moral thirst and quest.

What an anti-conclusion! May our readers' (and listeners') exclamation and disagreement with me enable us to probe further the labyrinth of literature and of life to prove me wrong, to prove me dead wrong. What an anti-conclusion! The dissenting exclamation again.

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