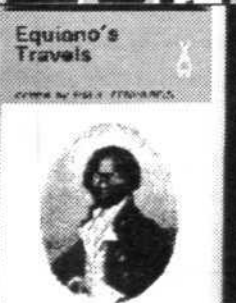
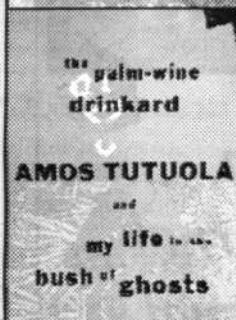


WOLE SOYINKA
Ibadan
THE HUNDREDS YEARS
A MEMOIR 1817-1917



TEACHING WITHOUT THE TEXTBOOKS: New Challenges Of Literature Teaching In A West African University

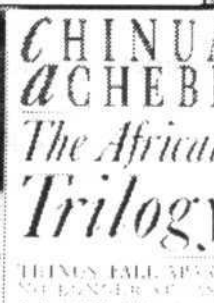
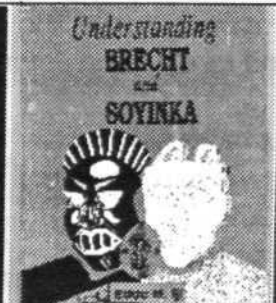
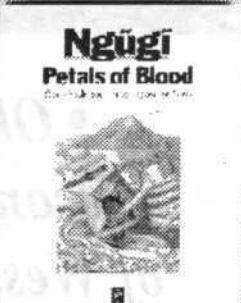
IMO ESHIET

In a late twentieth century literary culture submerged under by massive print, any suggestion of teaching literature without the text may sound as a poorly conceived superstition and for the less cynically disposed, a strange innovation. This is even more so when we consider that the text is the chief source of information, that is, when we consider that the text is an authoritative source providing the basis for the very mode of existence of a literary work. No doubt a teaching of sorts can be made of literature without regards to its construction.

Socio-historical and cultural data such as background and the prevailing ideational moods that produced the writers and their literary creations yield great light in clarifying meaning. However, in both oral and written traditions, the form and substance of literature, something to hook on to in the pedagogy of imaginative experience, is the text. Given the primacy of the text, it is difficult to envisage the teaching of literature without it except in terms of a great difficulty if not a complete curiosity. This, however, is the concrete reality challenging the wits of teachers of literature in our prevailing book drought.

Fundamental to any discipline worth teaching is a clear understanding of what the subject really is. The text which Chris Nwamu's 'Dramatic Literature In Nigeria: Critical Issues For The Playwright' declares as an informative blue-print which motivates action and generates interpretative responses and criticisms, derives its primacy from the fact that it forms the basis for the illustration and demonstration of the excellence of form and pattern which delight us aesthetically and of the great emotional intensities of literature which give us edification and instruction.

The scarcity of texts not only grossly circumvents such exemplifications, it also spirals its atrophy to other vital areas. Hordes of lecturers have abandoned their lecture theatres and whole courses have collapsed due to scarcity of essential texts.



I remember most vividly the traumatic experience of a brilliant colleague who resigned more than half a decade ago. A product of the University, she was the first to make a first class degree from the department. Proceeding to Britain soon after, she finished her Master of Arts degree on record time from the famous London School of African and Oriental Studies. That done, she raced back home with patriotic zeal to take over the teaching of the literature of the Blacks in diaspora from an expatriate whose time was up.

Frustrated by perennially unavailable texts, she threw open the doors of her private personal library to the rapacity of students. Welcomed voraciously by appreciating students, her resources and materials were within two years worn out, dog-eared, stolen, misplaced or vandalised. With razor-sharp enough to be used in high delicate surgical operations, rare texts were 'qualmlessly' relieved of vital pages. She realised it only when her library was as bare as a sun-scorched earth. A victim of the drought and forbiddingly high prices of books, her fortune was a mere incarnation of the fate of libraries looted to their husk all over the land, only her reaction was more sincere and different. Acerbic as her experience, she put in a resignation, transferring her enormous skills and talent to the disposal of the advertisement establishment. Several others have since followed her example either by stepping aside or transferring to countries where the book culture is still esteemed.

The constriction that precipitates their exit needs to be seen from a holistic ambience to be meaningfully understood. Of considerable importance is the relation of this factor to a labyrinth of problems common in a distressed economy where the deterioration of the texture and essence of life in general ensures a sustained hollowness in the supplies of essential commodities. A University of Calabar Library Report for the period October 1987 to September 1988 describes as 'grossly insufficient' the financial provision for the library's acquisition of books and journals. Stressing the obvious need for more fund for the purpose of acquisition, the Report reveals that while the budgetary allocation was N360,000, as against N500,000 for the previous year, only a 'mere pittance' of N101,108.97, was actually expended on books and journals.

The shortage of funds for resources development calls for journal prioritization and since in the thinking of the establishment, science and technology come top, it follows logically

that the arts receive scant attention. A continuous down-turn of emphasis on arts means that its teachers have to rely on the skin of their teeth in the cultivation, development and transfer of the knowledge of the arts, philosophy and science of the beautiful.

This is particularly acute when tracking the intertextual affinities of a bank of literary texts to other related texts integral to their context of situation or literary environment. A prototype text may exemplify and serve as a model of the essential features of a bank of metatext. J. P. Clark's 'Abiku' and Wole Soyinka's poem of the same title easily come to mind. Clark's prototext provides the mythological framework of Soyinka's metatextual operations. In a literary situation such as this where the presence of the prototext looms large in the metatext, the teacher may wish to elucidate the essential features of the giant text which resonates in the secondary text as part of a common cultural and ideational background. He might wish to clarify the arrangement and combination of artistic items in the text or depict the new dimensions of complexity added to the shared awareness or intertextual resonance in the successive text. Soyinka's poem *Abiku* draws from the same folkloric essence as Clark's but unlike Clark who flounders with sentiment and mawkishness, Soyinka ritualises the myth for the celebration of assertiveness, defiance, invincibility and freedom.

Again, Soyinka's aesthetic distance from his subject matter contrasts sharply from Clark's responses. His detachment is itself a rejection of Clark's identification. He also offers a different version of the human condition sentimentally evoked by Clark's involvement with his subject matter. A tremendous advantage here is that both texts are often available and the combined effect experience from them is similar in many ways to viewing both sides of a coin simultaneously.

Not so, such germane texts as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* or Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and Osofisan's *No More The Wasted Breed*. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Euripides' *Bacchae* and Soyinka's *Bacchae* of Euripides, Clark's *The Raft* and Osofisan's *Another Raft* as well as Euripides' *Alceste* are intertextually related texts familiar to the African literary landscape and in each of them authors of the metatext expect their audience to bring some intertextual memory in construing the secondary text if they are to make meaning in their readings and to meet each other as writer and reader. The only snag is that the primary texts are not

always there.

In each of these cases, the use of intertextuality, an obviously respected and ancient mode of artistic creation, might be simply to update a social vision or outlook upon the world, demystify some mystifications and radicalise some thinking, values, beliefs and ideas which govern man's condition and existence as in the case of *The Raft* and *Another Raft*. It may also in the process extend the frontiers of knowledge by exploding effete stereotypes or wrongly and uncritically held prejudices and assumptions or fallacy. In each of these cases the special feature of the metatexts is that they are charged, enriched and intensified in form and thought as they vibrate sympathetically with patterns and motifs existing prototypically but amendable to individual artistic stamp and interpretation.

In a learning situation these two banks of text - the prototext and the metatext - naturally invite comparisons and contrasts. In tracking the relations of say, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, the teacher may face a formidable task without the text to hook on to for the challenge and implication of the interweaving of texts demand a familiarity with the original as with the secondary text if befuddlement is to be avoided. The situation is similar to what obtains in mythic criticism where the critic is expected to be conversant with the myth to be able to carry out any criticism of a mythic work.

Also in introducing the divergence between indigenous African theatre making traditions and Western dramaturgy which is likely to show up early in any discourse involving the two, the scarcity of texts hampers communication in teaching by robbing it of the advantages of a practical elucidation of the African concept of the theatre of total appeal in contrast with Euro-American drama which is anchored in dialogical logistics. In *Poetics*, his world famous treatise on the craft and principles of tragic poetry, Aristotle stresses the primacy of the verbal resource in the generation and resolution of dramatic conflicts or in his words, the imitation of action. Language with its accessories and embellishment is one of the most basically significant of the six elements of drama Aristotle names as essential components of dramatic art.

Over and above the significance of the spectacular element which comes least and last in Aristotle's scheme but extremely vital in African dramatic traditions, the Greek phi-

philosopher approves the rhetorical orientation of Western drama as the chief source for the intensification of thought. Language or diction as he calls it, has from his time remained the key element for conveying and expressing conflict and meaning in Western drama - despite Antonin Artaud's slim but powerful campaign for a return to the primordial language of ritual and magic which is natural to theatre as he argues. This basic component of the literary structure needs to be read, listened to or seen when performed in a theatre in order to get a sense of the total form of the literary work.

Accordingly, the study and criticism of contemporary literature need a printed text if the teachers and learners are to put themselves in command of the technical apparatus that the literary artists have worked with. A study and analysis of some literary pieces with textual affinities well exemplifies our discourse. If we attempt to follow the literary structure of *Oedipus Rex* as it unfolds we find that we cannot continue long enough unmindful of the pervasive presence of speech in the rubric of the play. We notice at once Sophocles' enormous investment in the resources of language as a persuasive and memorable mode of creating and conveying experience.

The vocabulary range or the fund of image bearing knowledge explored by the playwright, the dramatic dialogue finely chiselled and artfully concentrated to achieve an aesthetically satisfying economy and intensity together with action execute the play story. The element of spectacle is tersely employed in the exposition to hint at the point of reference for action and character and to point the mood and tragic atmosphere of the play. Similarly, the assets of dance are severely played down. The play unfolds with the presentation of the King's Palace, an image which quickly establishes the active involvement of royalty in the conflict dramatised. In the forefront are alters signifying the presence and role of the gods in the unfolding tragedy. Sitting in attitudes of supplication and grouped around the alters are citizens of Thebes, their kinesics and proxemics significant of the tragic intimations the play enacts.

These imagery of contending forces harbour subtle clues to the interpretations the playwright wishes to communicate but to endow the action with full dramatic and tragic effects, Sophocles' stage-business is realised predominantly through dialogue, the language resource of the dramatist. Gory moments such as when Queen Jocasta commits suicide and when Oedipus visits violence upon himself, are conventionally reported.

The idioms and vocabulary of this rhetorical tradition which sufficiently creates a convincing atmosphere in Western dramaturgy, can with the availability of the original text be beneficially contrasted with the secondary text which belongs to a more visual traditional, steeped, to borrow a phrase from Osofisan in the structural machinery of rite. The principles of construction in this tradition are themselves under-girded by the code of such art forms as mine, dance procession, indeed the entire repertoire of ritual.

This gamut is scripted into the play text in a spectacular manner. In his adaptation of the Oedipus myth, Rotimi's text extends the scope of tragic conception by going beyond classical insistence on generic autonomy and purity to integrate viable strands of the comic in his tragic action. The proxemics and kinesics of the exposition powerfully project the complexity of the action and the variegated nature of life represented. A dance procession and merry singing and drumming charge the dramatic atmosphere while anticipations of tragic action are suggested by the clinking of metallic objects, dirging as well as by the ominous presence of the shrine of Ogun with its cultic emblems of patterned palm fronds and lone machete stuck in the ground. The upsurge and interplay of the aural and the visual, the tragic and the festive strike a peculiar African note throughout the expository prologue. These devices draw attention to one of the objectives of intertextuality which is to give a different perspective to the original subject matter, in this case to the variation of the conception of tragedy in another dramatic tradition.

Our brief comparison of the two texts evinces the eclectic quality of African dramatic literature where the basic projections of the theatre such as dance power, song intensifies, music and visual wit constitute components as active and influential as dialogic and verbal wit. As literary compositions the texts can gainfully be studied systematically, based on the principle of literary structure. The printed or oral texts guide us through its unified components and as we participate in them either by exercising our reading or listening abilities the total pattern or form of the composition emerges at the end.

This is the aesthetically satisfying experience often sabotaged by the critical dearth of texts. This situation is indeed a most irksome and an overwhelming educational challenge. It is perhaps responsible in a large measure for the poor performance levels in the development of literary and linguistic skills and the increasing rate of human communication

break down.

Teachers struggle and embark on various ameliorative strategies against the deplorable scarcity of literary texts. Often ignoring copyright regulations, volumes of extant texts are qualmlessly cannibalised by both teachers and students as they photocopy, duplicate or practice other forms of piracy that serve their immediate needs. In the process of perpetuating these illegalities, whole lines are jammed or completely omitted with the result that vital meaning and form are impaired and good learning defeated.

The whole idea of teaching literature without the texts is a weird innovation and unless the abnormality is urgently redressed, we may have a situation similar to a fellow theoretically instructed in the art of driving without ever being given a chance at a practical demonstration. One of the immediate accidents of this unwholesome situation is coming to literature through the back door, through satellite texts such as reviews, critical expositions or commentaries accumulated over time around the original text. Students driven to their wit gleefully embrace such substitutes oblivious to the real thing and to the dulling effects these may have on their confidence to develop sensitive, sharp and critical response to unfamiliar literary compositions.

The constrictions are perhaps not altogether necessary. To emerge from the befuddlement and may be open up vital areas of inquiry than we otherwise have done, books could be locally mass produced, under license. GR

END NOTES

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