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## A Personal Note

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### Abstract

We met only briefly at Derry Jeffares' home in Leeds in 1964 on the evening of the day Chinua read his paper 'The Novelist as Teacher'. We met again at Nsukka in the month preceding the separation of Biafra. Geoffrey Hill, the British poet, had come to Ibadan for a term on leave from Leeds. Desmond Maxwell, Dean of Arts at Ibadan at the time, very kindly let us have the Peugeot 404 Faculty wagon for our journey. We trekked to Benin and then to Nsukka on a two-day hop. On the west of the Niger it was easy enough: after Asaba/Ontisha one had a portent of things to come. We found Nsukka, then a wonder of a University, aglow with health and enquiry and forwardness, everything that should exist to serve the nation with disinterested enquiry, helpful comment on nationhood.

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But the hospital grounds, in the outlying areas of Enugu, were literally littered with maimed and injured bodies of victims of the Northern Pogroms of the November/December of 1966. Okigbo showed a photo-book of horrible injuries sustained by Northern Igbos, photos on the verso, captions on the recto. Achebe said: 'I don't think the captions are necessary.'

We came to know each other well – even though we had met willy nilly over the years – when he kindly accepted an invitation to spend some time at Guelph 1986. At the suggestion of Mr Ric Throssell, Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, I nominated Chinua for the award of a Senior Commonwealth Practitioner which after a period of deliberation he accepted.

What a fine time it was. I had nominated Chinua for an honorary degree from my university as well and he had accepted our offer. That was the beginning of a two-month visit which was memorable in many ways – for his meeting again with Margaret Laurence, a friend of long standing with whom, Chinua had said, 'I seem to have complete intellectual rapport'; for a memorable meeting with Northrop Frye and a memorable visit to give a talk at the McLuhan Institute at the University of Toronto; for active participation in teaching workshops with colleagues and friends from Cameroon; and in presenting a 'Letter from Canada' to Nigeria on the Overseas Service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Chinua addressed the graduands of the Arts and Social Science Colleges on the day he received his D.Litt. The ceremony was conducted under unique – in the history of convocations – conditions. The convocation was planned for out-of-doors. It rained. Graduands were trekked into the basement of the convocation hall. Chinua read his address to graduands assembled a floor below him. His words were seen over a television screen. Chinua's equanimity was never more certain than here.

His convocation address was judged by the President of the University, the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of the College to be among the most compelling presented to Guelph convocations. It reads in part:

Although honorary doctorates are highly prized – and deservedly so – the real heroes and heroines of Convocation are the young men and women admitted to their various bachelor's degrees. I crave the indulgence of Convocation to address them directly.

First, my congratulations on your initiation. I wish you success and happiness in whatever career you may embark upon hereafter.

You have now a responsibility to live up to those ideals of universality for which your Alma Mater has been praised. That is what university education is and should always have been about but often was not. But for *you* and your generation there can be no evasion, not any more.

You are inheriting a world which differs fundamentally from the world your parents inherited – different indeed from the world ever inherited by any previous generation of mankind. When the atom bomb was dropped on Japanese cities in 1945 a horrendous new factor was brought into the affairs of mankind which had never been there before – the power offered to man to destroy himself completely and all his works with him. The rough beast prophesied by Yeats, its gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, had stirred in the desert and was slouching towards Bethlehem to be born.

Perhaps it is true, as we are sometimes told, that there is an irresistible bent in us to make war on our fellows. Certainly we seem to have done it as long as myth and memory can go. And in all that time we got away with it! And then one morning we wake up and find that the game is up.

Actually, that is not quite accurate; we didn't wake up; we haven't woken up; perhaps we cannot wake up. Perhaps all is futility. Perhaps the answer to Wilfred Owen's anguished cry is: Yes, it *was* 'for this the clay grew tall'. But somehow I don't think *you* should accept that answer. I believe you have a responsibility to try to save the world for yourselves. You might say: 'But how can we do it? We have no power.' But power is precisely the problem, not the answer. Consider for a moment the two most powerful men in the world. They are old men reared in a world in which war was safe, even honourable; two old men brought up in the psychology of seeing the world divided in the stark, Manichaean polarity of self and other, us and them, black and white, good and evil, superior, inferior; light, darkness; subject, object. Two old men, in other words, doing precisely what mankind has always done. *They* have the power – to blow up the world many times over.

But there is another kind of power. The power of creation. The power that the

creation myths of all peoples bear witness to – the power of the mind and the word. In the beginning was the Word.

I will end with two short celebrations of that power from widely separated regions of the earth. First an Eskimo poem:

That was the time when words were like magic  
The human mind had mysterious powers  
A word spoken by chance  
Might have strange consequences  
It would suddenly come alive  
And what people wanted to happen could happen  
All you had to do was say it.

Note the last two lines particularly:

And what people wanted to happen could happen  
All you had to do was say it.

And finally to Africa, to the Wapangwa people of Tanzania:

The sky was large, white and very clear. It was empty; there were no stars and no moon; only a tree stood in the air and there was wind. This tree fed on the atmosphere, and ants lived on it. Wind, tree, ants and atmosphere were controlled by the power of the Word. But the Word was not something that could be seen. It was a force that enabled one thing to create another.

I suggest that the force that enables one thing to create another can be available to you. Your education in a university that takes its international vocation seriously is one aspect of it. Your personal commitment to redress the parochialisms and prejudices of the past is another. The new world is not some starry-eyed utopian metaphor. It is a practical question of life and death. Either a *new* world or a *dead* world. I wish you success.

These words are an epitome of the man. They show the spiritual and moral qualities that reveal themselves in all his writing and make him one of the most widely read and discussed of contemporary writers. They also reveal the innate modesty, call it even humility, of the man one meets and comes to know. There is nothing ostentatious in his manner. And why should there be: the power is in the word.

Achebe dominates the African novel, and has a central place in contemporary literature, because he, more than any of his peers, reflectively and unobtrusively has modified the traditions of fiction, derived forms which are distinctively his own for the purpose of envisaging and conveying experience which is deeply convincing. Deceptive profundity, discriminating insight, mental and moral fastidiousness, elegance and lucidity, these are the hallmarks of Achebe's art.