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 honourary 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 Col-}

leges on the day he received his D.Litt. The ceremony was conducted
under unique – in the history of convocations – conditions. The con-
vocation was planned for out-of-doors. It rained. Graduands were
trekked into the basement of the convocation hall. Chinua read his ad-
dress 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 Uni-
versity, the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of the College to be among the
most compelling presented to Guelph convocations. It reads in part:

Although honourary 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 ad-
dress 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 previ-
ous 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 him-
self 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 Wil-
fred Owen’s anguished cry is: Yes, it was ‘for this the clay grew tall’. But some-
how I don’t think you should accept that answer. I believe you have a responsi-

bility 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, Mani-
chaean 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 avail­
able to you. Your education in a university that takes its international vocation
seriously is one aspect of it. Your personal commitment to redress the parochial­
isms 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 con­
temporary 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.