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LITERARY INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE WRITER AND THE CRITIC.

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Abstract
This paper discusses literary interactions between the writer and the critic. There are interactions between the writer and the critic and also between their products, creative and critical resources. In literary practice, one notices that there are divisions of labour or put in another way, distributions of labour. These differentiations that are found to exist in mutually different tasks of the writer and the critic are glaring when one studies their resource materials. The conclusion of this study is that neither the writer nor the critic should be placed on a hierarchical pyramid of importance in such a manner that one is greater than the other in that sense. The relationship between the two is symbiotic rather than parasitic. The truth is that the critic depends on the writer and he or she also depends on the critic. The field of literature offers its products in their beauty and relevance as coming from both the writer and the critic. Therefore both the writer and the critic should enjoy an interdependent relationship as they engage in their differentiated but yet mutual literary tasks.

Keywords: Literary Practice, Literary Interactions, Resource Materials, Writer, Critic.

Introduction

In literary practice, there are very close interactions between the writer and the critic as well as between their products, creative and critical resources. In different endeavours of life we are often faced with the issue of who does what in relation to the other – call it the division or distribution of labour. The idea of role differentiation tends to bring the question of hierarchy, the question of who is more important, greater or less than the other. We encounter this situation in the field of literature where the writer and the critic perform mutually different tasks. We become aware of these two personages when we try to understand what literature is all about.

Literature as a Subject

The sense of literature as printed information differs from what literature represents as a subject, as a field of discipline. While, for instance, economics textbooks appeal to economists, and those on physics are of interest to students in that field, imaginative literature, which refers to works of art, appeals to people from all walks of life, such as traders, doctors, lawyers, academics, engineers, scientists and farmers. As a matter of fact, literary writing contrasts with writing in other subjects, especially in its manner of approaching truth. Imagination rather than factuality or real world exactitude is emphasized in literature to the extent that meaning in literature is multifaceted. Literature in its imaginative modes of poetry, drama and prose fiction differs from non-fiction prose such as textbooks, reports, articles, editorials, historical and biographical works among others. Non-fiction prose is concerned with describing, interpreting facts and offering judgements and opinions. While imagination is emphasized in literature, factuality, truth, real world exactitude without ambiguity of meaning is the order in non-fiction writing. Thus, Roberts (3) explains:

> A major goal of non-fiction prose is truth in reporting and logic in reasoning. It bears repeating that the truth in imaginative literature, unlike that in nonfiction prose, is truth to life and human nature, not to the factual world of news, science, and history.

Literature is an artistic composition designed to tell or dramatize a situation, to convey emotions, ideas and experience in a way that reveals some vision, some interesting outlook or attitude. Being one of the aesthetic arts, literature entails conscious artistry; hence, some think of literature as beautiful writing – "belles letter". The artistic elements could be in the quality of emotions evoked, in the choice of language, in the organization and selection of events and narrative substance, in the characterization or in the thoughts

and ideas subtly revealed. The artistry in literature does not serve as an end in itself; rather, it is art speaking to us in indirect and subtle ways – entertaining, pleasing us and, at the same time, speaking knowledge and wisdom to us. Literature is, therefore, an art of words.

However, some people tend to consider literature only in its written form, rather classifying imaginative oral recreation as folklores. This must be the reason Kennedy and Gioia (xxxviii) think of literature as "a kind of art usually written, that offers pleasure and illumination." Granted, much of what we know as literature is designed for writing; but then, artistic use of words for creative purposes is much older than writing. Therefore, it is important to state that many pre-literate communities developed rich forms of literature. Parts of the Bible and the Koran, for examples, were transmitted orally much earlier before they were inscribed on paper. The Arabic word, "Quran" literally means recitation. There are many examples of literature that have been handed down to us from generation to generation in the oral form. Think of the Mali epic *Sundiata*, *Emperor Chaka the Zulu* from South Africa and the Igbo saga *Ojadili*. As a matter of fact, the different genres of literature trace their roots to the event and practices of pre-literate societies such as religious rituals' dirges, songs, chants, incantations, oral tales, dances and physical performances. In line with such evidence, Obasikene and Okeke (2008: 8), therefore, explain:

Before recorded history, a great deal was designed to be uttered aloud – like poems and narratives, or like plays to be spoken and acted on stage. Even in today's literate world, the oral forms still exist and indeed generate much research interest.

Literature then is an imaginative recreation of life's experiences through the medium of words, be it oral or written. The two definitions that follow below recognize these two forms of literature. Thus, Obasikene, Eze, and Inyiama, (1999: 358) define literature as "any verbal communication in a language, oral or written, which has some degree of emphasis on style or some imaginative quality in its form"; and Egudu (1981: 248) states:

Literature – written or oral – is an artistic verbal expression of author's thought and feeling about an event or a series of events or an experience or a series of experiences and that is to say, the author's perception of those events or experiences. Perception involves thinking and feeling and unifies the two activities inseparably.

In this definition by Egudu, it, therefore, becomes impossible to miss the point about the fact that literature originates from an author: it's an author's perceived experience, his emotions, ideas, personal vision. In the light of the topic under consideration, which seeks to examine the relationship between the writer and the critic, the discourse here will be limited to literature in its written form.

Reading and Responding to Written Literature

Written literature depends heavily on reading. Literary products must be read and appreciated for them to yield any benefits at all. Thus, there will be no literature when there are no readers. One of the greatest threats to the study of literature among many Nigerian students today, as it were, is an aversion to reading. The slide in performance in the English language – spelling errors, ungrammatical expressions, limited vocabulary, and ignorance of mechanics – points to this fact. Regrettably, the reading of literature as pastime, for enjoyment of leisure, seems to be a dying habit among many students. This is reflected in their increasing poor language ability. After all, what we read reinforces what we think, write or speak.

What does studying literature entail? What tasks should engage a student of literature? As a matter of fact, literature demands the ability and passion to read voraciously, to have a firsthand experience of literature in its primary, creative source. Studying literature definitely entails reading much not for pleasure alone; it requires active reading of both creative and critical resources. Active reading of literature is, therefore, not a cosy or a lazy person's business. It is rigorous and mentally taxing; it is hard work. A student of literature goes beyond the recreational value to make personal responses through closer analysis and discussion. The student reads intensively considering what the author wants to say and how he/she says it. To gain the deepest appreciation, the student does not just enjoy literature passively, but rather reads with discrimination and understanding, asking questions, making intelligent comments, taking in details, responding to words, catching the ideas and grasping the implication of what is happening in the text. In this way, the student reader exercises his/her critical skills and, so to say, audits the creative work.

The Writer and the Critic

The writer as the originator or source brings in the sense of a god, a creator in the context of creative writing. Creative writing, in other words, written literature, has various uses that involve others other than the creator. It involves the society as a whole since the writer in his art deals with the totality of human experience. Thus, the subject of literature could be anything: a fly, a snake, a dream, wind, oppression, death, love, hatred, morality, social protest, psychology, philosophy and what have you. Literature is concerned with everything about life, existence and human consciousness – whether reality, fantasy or speculation. In communicating the multi-varied experiences of life, literature connects easily with the other fields of discipline, which is why it is inter-disciplinary in nature, and consequently, of interest to people from all works of life as earlier indicated. Besides, literature is diverse in its form and scope. Some are presented just in few lines while some run into many hundreds of volumes. Some appear best in action. In whatever form or scope, each one stands to be responded to and enjoyed the way it is.

Furthermore, literature provides the writer a medium for the interpretation of life. Writers are keen observers of life and before a writer puts pen to paper there must be something burning in him, which he wants to express or share with others beside himself. Obiechina (1988: 1) has made this important point about the writer:

> There must be an overwhelming urge welling up within him, pushing him inexorably, irresistibly, into using his medium to communicate with other men. Some say that the urge is towards self-validation, which is to say that the artist speaks first to himself, in satisfaction of himself and his inner drives, before he speaks to anybody else. I would not know whether this is so or not, not being myself what you could call a pure or self-validating artist. But I do know that the artist also speaks to other people. He appreciates being listened to and being recognized by other people. I suspect also that the expectations of other people are among the forces propelling him towards his creative postures.

The foregoing quotation clinches the fact that the writer is involved in communication, and no communication ever ends with the source. Therefore, writing presupposes an audience, a reader, with whom the writer shares his piece. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which is described by Emenyonu (2008) as "the grain of mustard seed", has grown by leaps and bounds in the consciousness of millions of audience all over the world for over sixty years of its publication. But the writer, however, will be lost and unknown without his readers. It is the art of reading that validates and recommends the writer.

The very best of creative efforts by writers without the reader can best be likened to the images of gem and flower in Gray's "Elegy Written a Country Churchyard":

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene, The dark unfathomed cave of ocean bear:
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen. And waste its sweetness on the desert air

Indeed, the writer's best efforts are wasted without the reader. V. S. Naipaul, an acclaimed writer himself admits that "an artist needs to be nourished, needs an audience and a response. A writer must be supported by the knowledge that he comes from a society with which he is in dialogue" (50).

There is no doubting that literature has vast and varied uses. While we will not go into a full exposition on the functions of literature here, it is pertinent to highlight a few of its benefits, using Boulton's (1980: 7-14) terms called the "4R" functions of literature, namely: "recreation, recognition, revelation and redemption." Literature, to the greatest majority, provides interest, entertainment, and relaxation, offering something to laugh and talk about. It enables us to recognize what is true to experience, indicated in Pope's "Essay on Criticism" as "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." We enjoy literature as we see the resemblance of literary representation to everyday observation. What is more, literature exposes us to experiences far removed from our own through time and space; it is in its revelatory power that literature helps to enlarge our compassion and tolerance for other people and other worldviews. Finally, the redemptive role of literature brings in the moral dimension, in which case literature impacts on our values and goals, shapes our judgements and decisions, moving us to accept the good and the admirable in others and to reject the bad and sinister, humanizing us and guarding us against moral fall.

How may we then realize all these benefits of literature? How can they be of help to others besides the writer? How, for instance, has the values of Shakespeare's works from another age and geographical space far removed from ours reached us? Think for a moment about water inside a well or a borehole. The water serves no vital purpose until somebody takes the trouble to fetch it for use. This happens to be the case with the writer and the critic. The critic can be compared to the one who fetches the water and puts it to use. And who is a critic, we may ask? It must be repeated here again that written literature depends heavily on

reading, without which its benefits will just lie dead and buried in print as in a grave. Literary products must be read and appreciated for them to yield us the vast and varied values that literature has to offer. Undoubtedly, the writer dies without the critic: the writer's immortality is guaranteed by the critic.

As authors write, people must read and react to what they write. In very clear terms, therefore, there will be no literature when there are no readers: the users and auditors of literature. The critic here is not one in the narrow sense of professional, intellectual critics of academic studies at the tertiary level of education. We rather have in mind here the different classes of readers: the one who reads for mere entertainment and who in the process assimilates something, even if passively; the one who reads with discrimination and judgement, distinguishing between serious and escape literature; the one who in his appreciation derives intellectual pleasure, moving from sensory response to emotional and then to aesthetic response, which when done objectively produces what we know as criticism in the strict and formal sense. The critic here is treated in the broad sense of readers, users, auditors, audience – all those who in one form or the other read and comprehend literary products, who, in other words, engage in literary appreciation, formally or informally. Literary appreciation opens the door to the enjoyment of creative writing, and shows us what writers are doing and how they are doing it.

Every criticism begins with reading and responding to the writers' products, even if passively. At a higher level of criticism, though, the critic does not passively take in literature, but rather brings his/her knowledge or experiences into the reading to verify the accuracy and truth of the situation and then articulate his/her own emotional and intellectual responses to the situation and to the characters and their problems. The higher critic also makes some demands on literature, bringing in some extra- literary factors to bear on it.

Most certainly, there is a working interaction between the writer and the critic, and their tasks are mutually interdependent. The relationship between the two is symbiotic rather than parasitic. And it may be put paradoxically that the critic depends on the writer who depends on the critic. Whatever the field of literature has to offer comes from both the writer and the critic. The best writers of the world would never have been brought to their pride of place without their critics, a point which Summers (1972: 309) makes here:

No work of literature has wisdom or beauty in itself. The greatest poem ever written is only a printed sheet until a reader reacts to it. Writing to become literature requires a reader. The reader helps to create literature by responding to the writer's thoughts, emotions and beliefs.

A creative reader considers what the writer wants to say and how he says it. The creative reader brings his own experiences of life and language to the experiences the writer presents on the printed page. He measures the honesty of the writer's approach by his own ideas of truth. Creative reading leads to the deepest enjoyment of literature.

From these comments, we can see that the "creative reader", that is to say, the critical reader or the sensitive critic, is placed in the position of an auditor, a kind of quality control agent, ensuring that standard is maintained, that the values of art and of human experiences communicated by the writer are in order. Here, the critic interprets, elucidates, exposes what he understands the writer to be doing.

In literary studies, therefore, both creative writing (primary sources) and critical writing (secondary sources) become the students' concern. Critical writing is then all the body of work that throws more light on the creative texts or on the practice of literary art. Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and myriads of other critics after them have impacted greatly on writers. So both creative and critical resources are the focus of literary studies; and on no account can creative works replace critical works, and vice versa.

Conclusion

The argument about who, between the critic and the writer, is more important than the other can be placed with neither one nor the other. The two have an interdependent, rather than a hierarchical relationship. On this matter, what the old man in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988: 123) says becomes very instructive:

To every man his own! To each his chosen title! We can all see how that handful of words can save us from the ache of four hundred handshakes and the headache of remembering a like multitude of praise-names. But it does not end there. It is saying to us: Every man has what is his; do not bypass him to enter his compound.

Yes, every man has what is his: the writer has his place and so also the critic. And rightly as some will say, there is no basis for comparison. The argument may go on and on endlessly without ever deciding who is more important than the other. Some may very well credit the writer, the god, originator and creator

with higher value, seeing the critic as a parasite or a midwife, performing a secondary, support task. But then, the critic is an invaluable help to the writer. In conclusion, we may never be able to cite a critic with the fame and stature of Achebe as a writer, for instance. But then it is an undeniable fact that even Achebe's fame has rested on the solid support of those who have read and responded to his writing: the critics.

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