

RIDENTEM DICERE VERUM;
LITERATURE AND THE COMMON WELFARE

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DEDICATION

To Mr.Simon Alagbogu Nnolim who sent me to School but wanted me,above all things,to be a policeman. Brother dear:sorry I did not meet your wishes because I lacked the height.But see what I have made of myself with the height God has given me!

And

To my mother,Mrs.Angelina Lolo Nnolim,Ada Ezelibe,who worked and starved and “shielded” me from farm work so I could go to school.

RIDENTEM DICERE VERUM:

LITERATURE AND THE COMMON WELFARE

“And what are you reading, Miss---?” “Oh! It is only a novel!” replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affective indifference, or momentary shame. “It is only *Cecilia or Camilia or Belinda*; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineations of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language”.

(JaneAusten:*Northanger Abbey*)

Those of us raised in the rural environment, as most of us were, might have observed that little dance (which looks like a threat) which the cock does toward the hen after riding her and climbing down from her back. “I will buy you the long Akwette cloth” it promises the hen, according to our elders. ‘Promises, promises’ the hen is said to invariably reply, distrustingly. The kid goat, in another incident observed by our elders, is once said to have packed bag and baggage to go and seek out a wife. The mother naturally opposed the trip. The kid-goat turns around and says: “Mother, if you don’t permit me to go out and find a wife, I will marry you!” And with that, he made very threatening passes at his mother.

The above are instructive. La Fontaine tells us: “I use animals to instruct men”. In other worlds, literature, whether written or oral, is an expansion of the proverb. The cock may not have been making endless unfulfilled promises to the hen, *but it seems* so. And the kid goat may make threatening passes at his mother, but may not have threatened to marry her, *but it seems* so. When, therefore, the proverb is expanded, we are catapulted into another world of appearance and reality. And the world of appearance and reality is the very stuff of which literature is made. Once we enter into the realm of literature, we are catapulted according to Sister Sweeney, into another world, another country. In that world, through the powers of imagination, we are enabled:

To see the world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour
(Blake: “Auguries of Innocence”).

In the light of the above, for the next hour or so, therefore, I invite you to accompany me on a visit to another country, a better land where things are better arranged than the one in which we at present find ourselves. But you have to be an alert guest or you

will be like a traveler carried through a fascinating country full of beautiful and breathtaking landscapes, but fast asleep in a corner seat in your train. I invite you, therefore, to enter with me, the world of literature, and to enter this world is to willingly agree to submit yourself to be *deceived*, to accept the experience of a world where “flowers smile in the sunshine”, and the night “approaches on bended knees before moon-blanching evening”. This is what that inimitable poet of eerie and surreal experience, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, aptly terms that “willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith”. An adult who accepts and enjoys the world of literature is like an old man who willingly joins children in a game of blind man’s buff.

But before we sit pretty in this new world of literature, it is only proper that for those who are not quite sure of what it is, or have forgotten what it is supposed to be, their mind is refreshed. I define imaginative literature as that writing which is more emotionally moving than intellectually instructive; that writing which primarily deals with a make-believe world, whose language is highly connotative rather than denotative, symbolic rather than literal, figurative rather than plain; and whose ultimate aim is to produce a satisfyingly aesthetic effect and find anchor as a work of art. In its common categorizations, poetry, drama, and narrative fiction (the novel, the short story, and the essay) belong to the major genres of belles-lettres. The ultimate test of literature as a “verbal work of art” is its *fictionality* and its *imaginative* import. Literature is an idea, a philosophy wrapped up in a symbol, an image, a concept. It is a performance in words: like a dance, it is full of intricate rhythms; like the masked spirit, it is full of mysteries.

But why literature? How does it conduce to our common welfare- the welfare of the individual and the welfare of the society at large? How can literature help man cope with business of life which is generally harsh? This is the burden of today’s lecture. On the individual level, literature exists to open up for us the inner life of at least one other human being. By having glimpses into the inner lives of various other people, literature informs us of some of the resources of the human mind and spirit; of man’s ability to love, hate, scheme; of his triumphs, ambitions, and frustrations; of his complexities and perversities. “I owe everything to poetry” asserts Maurice de Guerin:

I owe to it whatever I have pure, lofty, and
Solid in my soul; I owe to it all my
consolation in the past; I shall probably owe to
It my future (*Reliquiae*).

The above makes high claims for literature, on a personal level, for P.B Shelley claims that “poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments, of the best and happiest minds”, and that “poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed”
(*A Defence of Poetry*).

Maurice de Guerin must be right. He must have agreed with Shelley that “a poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds: his auditors are men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician” yes, poetry is a lovely song sung to delight and cheer men- to cheer us. The pleasure which only literature or poetry can offer begins with the arrangement of words into pleasurable patterns – what has been referred to as the right words in the right order”; or as Alexander Pope might say, it consists in

What oft was thought
But ne'er so well expressed

Listen to the pleasure derived in the arrangement of words into what we commonly refer to as alliteration or tongue twisters:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper
A peck of pickled pepper Peter Piper picked
If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper
Where's the peck of pickled pepper Peter Piper picked

Or this

Mrs Butter went to buy some better butter
To make her bitter butter better

We also read poetry for its melody, for the rhythm it offers. Listen to this rhythmic piece meant for children's enjoyment:

Pretty little song bird
Happy as a king
Will you tell me truly?
Why is it you sing?
Early in the morning
At the break of the day
High up in the blue sky
In sweet tones I pray
I praise God the father
Every time I sing
And then pay my homage
To the great high king

Literature, as we can see is both poetry and music, and both exist to entertain us, to offer us pleasure: the pleasure we derive from listening to good music. And Shakespeare tells us in *The merchant of Venice*:

That man that hath no music in himself
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treason, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus
Let no such man be trusted.

I have said that Maurice de Guerin must be right, for literature exists to please, to lighten the burden of men's lives, to make us forget for a short while our sorrows and disappointments in life; to help us face our frustrations and uncertain futures. Matthew Arnold characteristically assigns a noble function to poetry, to literature:

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to Poetry to interpret life for us, to console us,

to sustain us. Without poetry our science
will appear incomplete; and most of what
now passes with us for religion and
Philosophy will be replaced by poetry (*The Study of Poetry*)

We must therefore agree that literature makes definite contributions to human knowledge. We, therefore, read literature because all knowledge is naturally agreeable to us, and if, as in most literatures, that knowledge is imparted interestingly, it provides a pleasant truce from our cares. Literature, by expanding our intellectual horizons allows us to imbibe certain seeds of wisdom in the process. And an acquisition of knowledge and wisdom is an acquisition of happiness, for good literature, like good art, creates for man the highest enjoyment.

Moreover, good literature sharpens our aesthetic sensibilities for the appreciation of the beautiful. Didn't Robert Browning say in "Fra Lippo Lippi":

If you get but simple beauty and naught else.
You get about the best thing God invents.

Literature thus produces desirable effects on the reader by means of the aesthetic experience it evokes. And a good aesthetic experience not only does no one any harm but relieves tension and suppresses destructive impulses, thus resolving lesser conflicts within us and helping to create an integration or harmony within the self. Bertrand Russell in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech had claimed that the love of excitement is one of the fundamental motives of man – the excitement of invention or artistic creation and the excitement of discovery including the discovery and exploration of a new complex work of art which, according to him, are two of the highest, purest, satisfying types of excitement. This tonic effect which art and literature provide always creates a pleasant diversion for a troubled mind.

At the level of society, the aesthetic experience foster mutual sympathy and understanding and, according to Munroe Beardsley(*The Inherent Values Of Art*), will help, on a larger scale, to draw men together, since all shared experience helps to bring people together in friendship and mutual respect, for any group to people who share the same aesthetic experience, have a bond between them; any group of persons who share the joys which only literature can give never feel emptiness, frustration, lack of fulfillment or despair – feelings that cripple the mind.

As we have just seen, literature reconciles groups of people through shared experience. It does more: it teaches us about life while it both entertains and offers us aesthetic enjoyment. Every short story, every novel, every poem, every drama worth its salt as a work of art, has a thing or two to say about life, has a moral view of life it

enunciates, has a philosophy of life that it imparts. A study of various works of literature is, in fact, a study of various philosophies of life, for every author implants a little stamp of his philosophy in his story, novel, poem, drama. Take Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What does it say about life? It is embedded in that famous passage which reads:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his time upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

What does this passage say about life and about *Macbeth*? It talks about the futility of unbridled ambition. It asks what man like *Macbeth*, as well as his wife, has gained from life by achieving the throne by way of murder and blood: unhappiness, a terribly guilty conscience, bloodstained hands, sleeplessness, a besmirched reputation, an abysmally empty life with nagging nightmares, an awareness of the futility of it all. Only fools seek such life that mean no more than appearances. And *Macbeth* and his wife were such arch fools.

Nearer home Achebe from one important work to another makes a significant statement about life: that no one can successfully resist the forces of change, because the forces of change are by far stronger than the stubborn individual. So, Okonkwo, and Ezeulu, and Teacher Nanga are swept away by the strong current of the forces of change. According to Achebe, then, the prudent man must go along, even if grudgingly, and change with the times.

If we agree with Matthew Arnold that literature is "capable of higher uses and called to higher destinies" and that "we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us," we shall appreciate the more the interpretive value of Leigh Hunt's celebrated humanist poem, *Abou Ben Adhem*, which reminds us of Christ's answer to the lawyer who demanded to know the greatest of God's commandments. Christ had answered him: "Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, with thy whole mind, and with thy whole soul. And the second is like unto the first: Love thy neighbor as thyself" *Abou Ben Adhem* is thus a poem that restates Christ's answer in a humanistic way by saying that love of man can indeed save you more than the mere abstract love of God.

For how can we claim to love God whom we don't see if we don't love our fellow men whom we see. The parable of the Good Samaritan which answers with such clarity the question of "who is my neighbor" is thus given a refreshingly new twist in Leigh Hunt's poem. Here is the poem:

About Ben Adhem

ABOU BEN ADHEM, may his tribe increase!
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold.

Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the presence in the room he said,
What writest thou?' – The Vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered: "The names of those who love the Lord!

'And is mine one?' Said Abou. 'Nay, not so'.
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still; said, 'I pray thee then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men'.

The angel wrote and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blessed.
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

In sum, literature acts as *aids* to life, like prayers that, in Matthew Arnold's worlds, are there "to sustain us" and give inspiration and courage to the despairing so that (to quote Arnold one more time) "most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry". Take William Ernest Henley's famous *Invictus*. Henley (R. L. Stevenson's prototype for Long John Silver (in *Treasure Island*), contracted cancer of the bone at the age of twelve. One leg had been amputated, and doctors had recommended the amputation of the other one. Henley had refused and stoically bore the agony throughout life (he died in his fifties). The following poem, *Invictus* (unconquered) is what he wrote to inspire his courage throughout life.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstances
I have not winced nor cried aloud
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Literature thus offers admonition and advice on how to bear the vagaries of life, how to cope with the agony of existence in a world of generally missed opportunities. We are all used to the self-defeating adage that “opportunity occurs but once”. But Walter Malone in a famous poem urges us to take courage because opportunity does in fact present itself again and again in our lives. His poem which was set to music and entitled “Opportunity” reads:

They do me wrong who say I come no more,
When once I come and fail to find you in,
For everyday I stand outside your door,
And bid you wake and rise to fight and win.

Wail not for precious chances passed away,
Weep not for golden ages on the wane,
Each night I burn the records of the day,
At sunrise every soul is born again.

[I cannot do it never accomplishes anything
I'll try had done wonder].

Where else do we go for uplifting advice as above but to literature? Have you forgotten Douglas Malloch?:

If you can't be a pine on top of a hill
Be a scrub in the Valley but be
The best little scrub by the side of the rill.....
Be the best of whatever you are

And Rudyard Kipling:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too
If you can wait and not be tired waiting
Yours is the earth and everything that's in it
And which is more – you'll be a man, my son!

Even in death, literature does not abandon us but tries to reconcile us to the fact of death by trying to cushion the impact as an event sweetly anticipated, for finally laying down quietly our weary, old bones. Listen to Spenser's anodyne:

Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas.
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please.
(*Spenser: The Faerie Queene*)

There are other uses of literature to which we have not called attention. Literature records man's infinite desire for the unattainable, for what Shelley calls, "the desire of the moth for a star." Man's longing for a perfect society, a society where all his problems have been solved, a paradise on earth, has bred a sub-genre of works popularly known as "Utopian Literature." Plato originated this sub-genre in Republic, but Thomas More's Utopia (coined from two Greek words "Outopia" (no place) and "Eutopia" (the good place), meaning "the good place is no place", gave it its generic nomenclature. In Utopian literature, the wretched of the earth who unhappily find themselves in this valley of tears are invited to partake, even if vicariously, of the kingdom idea, full of the delights and satisfactions denied them in this harsh world of reality. Utopian literature, therefore, is mainly a literature of escape because, the kernel

of the sub-genre contains man's longing for a world where man's problems have already been solved and the tears of suffering humanity have completely been wiped dry.

Now, to deny that man needs promise of a better future to exist is to deny man's basic longing for a future of satisfactions and fulfillment--- to pose hell for him instead of heaven for all his deprivations, privations, hard work and struggles, and that would tantamount to denial of the truth of the essence of man's existence. We need utopian literature to fulfill man's anticipatory longing of a reward for his labours, for rest after his toils, for transformation of an earthly kingdom into a heavenly kingdom: "According to Paul Tillich (in "Critique and Justification of Utopia"), there are two main characteristics of utopia: its power and its fruitfulness. Its power builds on man's ontological discontent with his lot in life forcing man to break from this ontological discontent in order to transform his dreams into reality, and also its ability to open up possibilities for man which would have remained lost to him if not envisaged by utopian anticipation of human fulfillment. The fruitfulness of utopia becomes the many realizations by man of his dreams on earth through his inventive genius and scientific discoveries that made possible a constantly dynamic present that keeps breaking into a better-realization future.

For those of us in the humane letters who read the Bible as the Judaic literary legacy to the world, the Bible is utopian literature *par excellence*, depicting for mankind a visionary anticipation of the coming kingdom under God, the millennia at the end of time which is apocalyptic. By prophecy, by sheer intense if fanatical imaginative projection, the Israelites were able to break out from the slavery which was Egypt, to attainment of the promised land which was Jerusalem. The realization of the Jewish dream is proof of the power of utopia.

The above must of necessity force us to reflect on the place of utopian literature on the African scene. While the European concept of utopia is futuristic, reflecting a future-oriented world-view, African concept of utopia is, in the main, backward-looking, reflecting a backward-looking world view.

We would easily agree that the legacy of Europe and the west is the legacy of a universe which continues to be transformed through outstanding scientific and technological break-throughs. Why is this? Europe and the West are societies which make the problems of the future their centre of interest today. Read Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (he predicted a journey to the moon from a rocket launched from Cape Canaveral. It was so accomplished one hundred years later). Read Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* with his futuristic insistence that we should be

“educating for change”, “preparing people for the future”, and his warning that “unless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs as well as in society at large, we are doomed to a massive adaptational breakdown”. Archibald Macleish had written in “America was Promises”:

American was always promises
From the first voyage and the first ship
There were promises.

And Bellamy in *Looking Backward* tells us:

Looking Backward was written in the brief
that the Golden Age lies before us and not
behind us, and is not far away. Our children
shall surely see it, and we, too, who are
already men and women, if we deserve it by
our faith and by our work.

While science fiction which is, in the main, futuristic, crowds modern fiction-writing in Europe thus ensuring a more scientific, technologically-oriented future for Europe and the West, African utopia continues to be backward-looking. As Ivor Case puts it succinctly, in African traditional religions

There is no prophetism and no future paradise.
For time... recedes rather than progresses and the Golden Age-that era of
the black man's greatness – the era of the
Timbuctoo and Benin, the era of the Yoruba
and the Zulu, of Shango and Chaka, lies in
the Zamani period. The Sasa is an ever-constant
construction of the past and not of the future.
Utopia exists in the past
("Negritude and Utopianism")

The Negritude movement was African utopian literature *Par excellence* with its consistent *retour aux sources* or return-to-the-sources theme. It was buttressed by the return to Africa movement of Marcus Garvey, the Harlem Renaissance in the U.S., Indigenism in Haiti, Afro-Cubanism in Cuba, the Rastafarian Movement in Jamaica, and the cult of primitivism in the Caribbean. Each, along with the Negritude movement was a *retour aux sources* romantic longing for the African past by writers for whom Africa remained a lost paradise, to which we must all return for the authentication of our humanity denied, debased, and enslaved by the colonial masters. Alex Haley's

Roots becomes in recent times, the enthronement of the ex-slave's longing for his place of origin. But nearer home, Chinua Achebe indulges in ancestor worship while Camara Laye returns imaginatively to his unspoilt childhood and unspoilt Guinea; while the most celebrated return syndrome in Caribbean literature is encapsulated in Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au pays natal (return to my native country)*.

As we can see, with all writers from Africa and of African descent harping on a return to the past, to the womb of time, where then is the shaping utopia for change in the future, for a future paradise where African's present problems are imaginatively solved? If it is true as Paul Tillich asserts, that "for a culture which has no utopia the present is inhibiting, the future holds no promise and the danger is very much there... of falling back on its past", aren't there great and disturbing implications of Africa, since we now recognize the fact that the power of utopia consists in its ability to transform dreams into reality? And since we further recognize that utopia literature, when it is futuristic and forward-looking has made inventions possible, what happens to us and to Africa where no anticipatory utopia exists to open up possibilities for man? Does this imply for us, as Paul Tillich suggests, "a sterile present" where "not only individual but cultural realization of human possibilities are inhibited and remain unfulfilled?" The answer is not far to seek since we continue to send our best engineers and technologists to train in the effete factories in London when commonsense dictates that they are trained in Japan whose innovative technology and technique of adapting other people's methods to suit her environment without destroying her culture, is the wonder of our modern technological age.

Since we, as Africans, do not project problems in the future and start to think of solving them now, it has not occurred to various African Governments including our own to embark on a massive exposure of our engineers and scientists to the wonders of Japan so that we may learn how Japan maintains an enviably buoyant economy while it imports 100 per cent of its oil needs and about 90 per cent of its steel requirement; how Japan has succeeded in beating the West at its own game. This lack of vision on our part has created enormous developmental problems for Africa.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, I suggest that African's economic, developmental, and technological ills can only be cured by a proper infusion of the right sort of utopian literature in our midst, stranger than fiction as this may seem. For example, Azania or South Africa is a land literally flowing with milk and honey, with its mines scintillating with gold and diamonds. But in spite of the brutalization, the degradation, alienation, and exile they suffer at the hands of the whites, there is no sustained, prophetic, imaginative utopian futuristic literature emanating from Black South Africa, projecting

into the future a time of final home-coming to their new promised New Jerusalem after the last white man must have been imaginatively driven into the sea.

Part of the burden of this lecture, then, is to call on African writers who should be her bearers of utopia, to effect a turn-about in their vision and challenge all of us by facing the future rather than dwelling in the past; by writing futuristic literature to redirect our vision and make all us forwarding-looking. The Negritude movement has run its course and, while it lasted, it had solved the problem of rehabilitating our essential humanity. I envisage that if our creative writers henceforth face the future through imaginative projection of our problems that are equally imaginatively solved, we shall have taken the first steps in solving Africa's developmental problems, today. Until our writers begin to depict African as a land of promise and project her as a continent with a great future, there will always be a worm that squirms at the core of her developmental plans which, as now, will always have an adhoc, stop-gap syndrome that has hitherto stymied her long-range planning efforts. This is the challenge I pose.

But to leave the Negritude movement on this negative *note* is to be unfair to its catalytic effect on African literature. The Negritude movement was the centre-piece of Africa's literary nationalism which closely followed political nationalism in the wake of political independence for all black peoples. To regain cultural initiative, to imbue political independence with national and cultural pride, to embark on the path of psychic reconstruction, were what gave birth to the literary movement now known as Negritude. Negritude, what Jean Paul Satre calls "an anti-racial racism" was embarked upon by writers of African descent as a form of literacy therapy – for the common welfare of all people of African descent, even if surprised Europeans call the product of Negritude "sacrificing art to propaganda". So, all the back- to- the sources movements I have earlier listed –Afro – Cubanism in Cuba, indigenism in Haiti, the Harlem Renaissance in the U.S., nativism in West African descent to recovering their essential self- hood bashed and mutilated by white arrogance through the colonial intrusion. The Negritude movement- that literary effort to conquer *blanchitude* with *Negritude* – was mass therapy, a homecoming of the prodigal to recover his essential self-hood. As I have said elsewhere, the essence of the Negritude movement consisted in its concern with:

The rehabilitation of the black man; in its stressing the innate dignity of the African personality; in its turning for inspiration in art and letters to African folk culture which, it insisted upon, was still a reservoir of the

rhythm and lyricism of its poetry; in its insistence on the “felt” quality of the poetry of all African peoples; in its demonstration of the Life-force that governs the art of all African peoples; and most importantly, in its Encouragement of the study and appreciation of our African heritage.

If, then, the Negritude movement is an attempt by writers of African descent to domesticate literature for our own good, the language in which that literature is expressed becomes of primary importance if we shall not continue to talk of our common welfare in a foreign tongue. To assume a language, one critic has remarked, is to assume a world or, more explicitly, to assume a world-view. When Prospero (the imperial master) taught Caliban his language, he made sure his conquest of Caliban was complete. As George Lamming regretfully asserts, “provided there is no extraordinary departure which explodes all of Prospero’s premises, then Caliban and his future now belong to Prospero... Prospero lives in the absolute certainty that language, which is his gift to Caliban, is the prison in which Caliban’s achievements will be realized and restricted”.

Sad as it seems, we are the Calibans of literary history and the European imperialist is Prospero. The single-handed battle being currently fought by Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o to make his fellow contemporary African writers write in their indigenous languages may be unpopular and may presently fall on deaf ears, but it is the correct battle to fight, even if we admit it is the moment, premature. In the long run, the decolonization of African literature will never be complete until the African writers is weaned from the linguistic and literary breast of Europe, until he no longer speaks to his people in an alien tongue. The domestication of the English language by African writers like Achebe by imposing Igbo speech patterns on the English language, while commendable, is not enough. Our common welfare demands that we ultimately write our literatures in our indigenous languages.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, the pattern of inaugural lectures in this University has been for the lecturer to stress his own personal contribution to our own national welfare. Immodest as I have viewed this trend, I find justification of it in the lecturer’s effort to deny that he is an ivory tower academic pontificating on abstract and high-falutin ideas that have little practical application. In the light of the above, let me immodestly repeat here, for the record, my own efforts to draw national attention to the contributions of literature to our common welfare as a nation.

As the current president of the Literary Society of Nigeria. I have had occasion to address the Federal Government on the need to champion the cause of literature because it conduces to the national welfare. In that address we told the Government, *inter alia* (c.f.: Communiqué of the Conference of the literary Society of Nigeria, A.B.U., March 1988:)

1. That Nigeria, through her literatures and her creative writers has won international attention and respect, not necessarily through science (which it sponsors) but through literature (which it spurns); that literature is perhaps the one area in which Nigeria stands preeminent as the undisputed giant of Africa, in fact, of the entire third world. Just last year Nigeria stood tall as her Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature, while Niyi Osundare won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. In the light of the above, Nigeria's continued belief that the *materially relevant* disciplines are of more relevance to our national needs, is a grand illusion.
2. That the study of literature should be vigorously encouraged by the Federal Government at all levels of the educational system, because literature as the expression of people's social consciousness and awareness has always performed an essential function in national development and is an important medium for the formulation and stabilization of positive social and cultural values.
3. That literature affirms, through its progressive vision, the limitless possibilities of the human mind and thus inspires technological and scientific development by inculcating visionary and positive values in the populace.
4. That literature humanizes our otherwise science dominated universe.
5. That through the process of social criticism literature influences the direction of national development and is a weapon for the total education of society because, our culture as a people is promoted, propagated and preserved in our national literatures whether vernacular, written or oral.
6. That in recognition of the above essential functions which literature perform and in order to ensure that these functions are performed with the best possible result, the Literary Society of Nigeria, of which I am President urge the Federal Government.

- a) to establish and fund a National Academy for the Humane letters charged with popularizing and promoting our literatures.
- b) to encourage the teaching of literature in all our schools by providing funds for research in the teaching of these subjects.
- c) to fund the Literary Society of Nigeria and its organ, *Journal of the Literary Society* of Nigeria this nurtures Nigeria's literary harvest.
- d) to set up an institute charged with translating works written in various indigenous languages into English, and works in English into these other languages
- e) to encourage, improve, and promote the welfare of teachers of literature at all levels of our educational system
- f) finally, to ensure that the traditions of humane society which literature champions are entrenched in our national psyche through a proper education founded in the humanities; because Nigeria through her literatures and her creative writers has won international acclaim and respect; and because literature humanizes our otherwise science-dominated universe.

That these strident calls have fallen on deaf ears does not mean that we have not tried to urge public awareness of the place of literature in the welfare of our body-politic which is painfully full of materialistic philistines.

If we have thus stridently urged our various governments to more encourage the study of literature, it is because we also believe that literature has other higher uses than the merely mundane encouragement of national development. It is because we do not forget the higher uses of literature in the realm of ethics and morality. Tolstoy tells us (in "what is art"): "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them". And T.S. Eliot adds (in "Religion and Literature") that "the author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, whether we intend to be or not".

Since the content of literature affects us, whether we like to be affected by it or not, it becomes imperative that in these times when our society is in a state of anomy and our youths are vulgarized, that our creative writers should concern themselves with moral and ethical issues in their works and produce good literature that *refines* and *uplifts* us instead of bad one that *vulgarizes* and *debases* us. T.S Eliot further adds that "the greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards", because great literature, where it is worth the name, must be backed by great ethical and religious support, for great works of literature have been and "probably always will be

judged by some moral standards.” For our common welfare, therefore, it must be insisted that everything is not permissible. And since the issue of morality, of ethics, of good and evil cannot be avoided in our literatures the author who creates good and evil characters must tell us *where he stands*. Jeremy Collier admonishes us (in “A short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage”):

The business of plays is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice, to show the uncertainty of human greatness, the sudden turns of fate and the unhappy conclusions of violence and injustice: It is to expose the singularities of pride and fancy, to make folly and falsehood contemptible, and to bring everything that is ill under infamy and neglect.

Ideas, they say, have legs, so that when an author creates evil characters and doesn't indicate to the reader where he stands by condemning or punishing him through poetic justice, he reverses (as one critic humorously puts it) the words of Christ to the woman caught in adultery: he is telling the erring character: “ neither do I condemn thee; go home and sin some more!”. Fortunately, on the Nigerian literary scene, our most eminent writers – Achebe (in *No Longer At Ease and A Man of The People*); Soyinka (in *The Interpreters and A Season Of Anomy*); and Okara (in *The Voice*) condemn their evil characters and insist that the onus of moral regeneration in our society lies with our intellectuals, as if in response to Nietzsche's call that “society needs an elite that will set a pattern and curb the thoughtlessness of the masses”. So, where Okara's Okolo becomes the voice of the elite crying in the wilderness for moral regeneration, Achebe's Odili becomes the same elite's voice in the wilderness for moral regeneration, Achebe's Odili becomes the same elite's voice in the political arena; but since he lacked the power base to effect the necessary correctives, the army had to come to his aid. The warning that our serious writers issue from one work to another is that nemesis overtakes both the populace and the rulers who abuse the system. On the other hand, one must condemn in very strong terms, writers like Dilibe Onyeama (in *Sex Is A Nigger's Game*) and other Nigerian purveyors of Para-literature who lure our young readers into a world of sensual fantasy and mind-numbing drugs, thus watering the passions they should help to control.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, we are about done. It remains for me to pull together the scattered strands of this discourse and perhaps nudge the audience into a clearer perception of the heart of the matter through a summary statement. Where else but through literature are we taught that life is a journey – from a narrow environment to a

broader one, from childhood innocence to the wily ways of adulthood, from ignorance to experience, from naiveté to sophistication. Knowledge of the self and knowledge of the world and its ways is the one province of literature that is recognized above all others, for literature traces man undergoing several transitions, becoming more and more aware of things around him and adjusting to each environment at each stage of his development. The study of literature reveals that when man becomes incapable of adjustment, he becomes a tragic figure and goes the way of such fellows. The study of man is the province of literature. Alexander Pope understood this perfectly when he said:

Know thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of mankind is man.

In studying mankind, we discover through literature that we must learn from the mistakes of other people who have suffered in life through misplaced ambitions, excessive jealousy, love of flattery, over-indulgence in worldly pleasures, since life is too short for anyone of us to learn all these things from his own mistakes. In tragedy, we see fellow men suffering because they rebelled against their own limitations. But this rebellion forces man, in his search for life's meaning, to come face to face with forces greater than he. We learn humility as we watch a greater man than ourselves go down, nobility and all, pride and all, fighting against a fatal stream that inevitably sweeps him along in its current.

But while tragedy deals with the rebellious spirit in man which is forcefully and painfully tamed by forces greater than man, comedy is concerned with the fact that despite our individual defeats, life does still go on, in its merry way. And while tragedy is concerned with the way we handle the problems of good and evil in the world, comedy deals with the lighter side of life by making us laugh at eccentrics, clowns, and absurdities. Through tragic catharsis, we rise above and gain control of the emotions of pity and fear, but through comic catharsis, we are purged of our worldly cares through a gush of pleasure in a joke or comic situation. The result is that we become carefree again, for comic pleasure momentarily reduces us to the state of carefree childhood and reconciles to the world.

Above all, literature exists to perform two well recognized functions: to teach and delight us, better expressed more succinctly by Horace: *dulce ex utile* (to delight and teach), and *ridentem dicere verum* (I tell the truth, laughing, or in more idiomatic English: many a truth is told in jest). While literature teaches us, its entertainment side becomes the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. This double-barreled function of literature aims at the development of the totality of the individual.

And since man wants to aspire to be more than just himself, he runs to literature to complete himself, to make himself a WHOLE MAN. And man's aspiration to wholeness is seen concretely in his other ventures. Why does he get married? Isn't it because man does not wish to live in a world of men and women and not know the other half? So, man marries to complete himself. The same thing happens in the realm of literature. Man discovers that he cannot live in a world of emotions and experience, knowing only his own. He wants to partake, even if vicariously, of the emotions and experiences of others. In living for the most part of life that is real and harsh, man cannot afford to deny himself experiences that catapult him into the world of romance and adventure. By partaking of these experiences through literature, man tries to enrich his experiences and make himself whole. So, he goes to the theatre, reads novels, and recites poetry written by others.

In especial, many people read great works of literature because literature gives the ordinary man who lacks the gifts of words to express adequately how he feels, the most eloquent words to express himself, and where he would ordinarily be dumb, the poet intervenes on his behalf and supplies the right but inspired words. In literature, also, we are all searching, as the adage says, for that truth that is big enough to live by, and great enough to die for. In the light of all we have said above about literature, we may disagree with Kant's dictum about literature, we may disagree with Kant's dictum about the "purposive purposelessness" of art, for literature is committed to influence a well-ordered, discipline, fulfilled society- people by humanized individuals who are at the same time intellectually nourished by those petals of wisdom which only literature can offer. Wasn't it T.S. Elliot who advises us that in ceasing to care for literature "one ceases to care for the faculties and virtues demanded by literary practice, and this constitute a special form of barbarism". This reminds one of Achebe's advice to a professor in Lagos who declared openly that he doesn't read anything beyond his narrow area of expertise. Achebe compared him to a four-cylinder engine operating on two plugs; any wayside mechanic will tell him that his engine is "missing fire".

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, my function today which I think I have performed to the best of my ability, it to offer literature to my colleagues and compatriots, those who wonder where I get the endless jokes I regale them with, so they can see and appreciate its refining propensities, its humanizing predilections, its intellectually nourishing content, for literature is mighty agent of mind-enlargement, of intellectual liberation.

We are all aware that while the scientist deals with facts, the literary artist deals with man's capacity for wonder and delight. And pursuit of the delights revealed in literature means pursuit of refined tastes. And the ability to acquire refined tastes is born out of the appreciation of all the beauties hidden in literature: the appreciation of a well-turned phrase, the delight in the perfect choice of a word, in the sheer lyricism of poetry, in the beauty of total effect. To cultivate these beauties will ultimately lead to a life so harmoniously and completely developed and lived that we could proudly say of ourselves what Matthew Arnold said of Sophocles:

He saw life steadily
And he saw it whole

Finally let me paraphrase Dickens and say of myself that literature has done me good, and still does me good, and will continue to do me good, and I say: GOD BLESS LITERATURE!

Ave Atque Vale