

THE PAUCITY OF LITERARY CREATIVITY IN ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON

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If the literary map of Africa is charted, it would be noticed that, unlike Nigeria where the blossoming of literary creativity has been rapid, where works of great achievement in fiction, poetry and drama have flourished, Cameroon falls among those countries where creative writing of English expression is at its lowest.

However, many reasons have been advanced to explain this apparent lack of literary talent in Cameroon. Yet, it is a truism to assert that every Cameroonian is born with the creative talent in him. The veracity of this assertion is evident when one watches little children at play. One finds this children's play instructive and interesting. Their world is a theatre in which they assume various rôles. The little girls assume maternal rôles, with little dolls, or even sticks for dolls, tied behind their backs, they collect empty tins, fill them with sand and leaves, and play at cooking the family meal; or again, they fill these tins with sand and play the market woman. As for the little boys, they assume manly rôles; they collect sticks and play at house-building, hunting or war-fare. Under nights of moonlight the bigger boys dramatize the sagas of the tribal heroes. It is obvious that these children at play are engaged in dramatization. The unfolding of their drama, although spontaneous, is as effective and interesting as the dramatization of a theatre piece by grown-ups.

However, if these little children happen to notice that somebody is looking, unless they are very wful, they will immediately withdraw within themselves as a tortoise withdraws within its shell. Here we notice the inhibiting effect of adult convention on the minds of these children. These children sink into convention, because they think they are doing something unconventional, or they feel they are behaving foolishly. They are unaware of the fact that their play-acting is the manifestation of the creative impulse in them. Even some grown-ups are oblivious of this fact, and would chide their children of six, seven or eight years old for behaving "childishly". Thus, the spontaneous development of the creative spirit is arrested by convention. Jean COCTEAU, aware of the "child-like" quality in literary creativity asserted:

"A poet is one who knew how to remain a child."

It is evident that if the creative talent which exhibits itself in infancy is not encouraged or stimulated, as the child grows up, it will be dormant, encrusted by convention or "reasoning", that playing at something is infantile.

Dr. Bernard FONLON, writing in 1963, in the maiden issue of *ABBIA*, stated,

*No country however god-forsaken and forlorn
is without its share of talent. Even when
the prospect is bleakest, seeds of it are
there, waiting for the ground to be broken
and manured and watered.*

I maintain, therefore, that it is the duty of every Cameroonian teacher, worthy of the name, be he a primary school teacher, a secondary school master or a university professor, to break the ground, manure and water it, so that the seeds of genius which lie buried in the Came-

roomians at his charge may quicken, blossom, and bloom. This is a noble and priceless undertaking especially when we consider good literature as being first and foremost a means of cultural, intellectual and moral enrichment of the individual and the society, and the enterprise of stimulating and cultivating literary creativity being an enterprise of informing them how best to reach this end by means. It is the sacred duty of these lux mundi of Cameroon to equip and activate the minds of the youths for spontaneous invention. They must instill, in the Cameroon youth, the knowledge, the requisite techniques and skills, the sensibility, discrimination and the thrust necessary for artistic success.

For, without the active effort of these torch-bearers in assisting in the tillage, the creative talent will be dormant in the untutored youth and they would feel a profound frustration in their haphazard learning - picking up what they know about artistic creation by trial and error and from such comments as they may chance upon. The fact is that the creative mind must be found ready for creation, it requires some tending. Vincent Van Gogh must have felt such a profound frustration when in 1880 he wrote to his brother Théo of,

the man who is doomed to remain idle, whose heart is eaten out by an anguish for work, but who does nothing because it is impossible for him to do anything because he is as if were imprisoned in something, because he hasn't got just that which he needs in order to be creative.

The creative process is the process of metamorphosis, of change, of development, of evolution, in the organization of subjective life. In the words of Henry Miller,

Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery.

It is my conviction that the torch-bearers of our society should devote themselves with heroism and enthusiasm to the task of guiding the young minds on this voyage of discovery. They should lead the future generation towards the beautiful and permanent values; in so doing, they will be assisting in the birth of our national literature.

However, some people who are loath to careful tillage and tending, would argue that artists are born and not made or again that the born artist would create no matter what happens. To which we may reply by recalling to mind Jean COCTEAU's statement,

The poet is at the disposal of his night...
he must clean house and await its due visitation...

An excellent example of such visitation, after a long period of house-cleaning and waiting, is offered us in Friedrich NIETZCHE's article on the composition of his Thus Spake Zarathustra, in which NIETZCHE informs us:

... One can hardly reject completely the idea that one is the mere incarnation, or mouth-piece or medium of some almighty power...
One hears - one does not seek; one takes - one does not ask who gives; a thought flashes out like lightning, inevitably without hesitation.

I have never had any choice about it...

Even so, when we recall Nietzsche's extensive and arduous preparation for creative work, it is enough to repel many from achievement. 'Inspiration' must be produced by conscious labour, by what Katherine MANSFIELD called,

"terrific hard gardening".

Writing in 1963, on the timely arrival of ABBIA, the then Honourable Minister of National Education, Mr. ETEKJ-MBOUMOUA, declared:

L'occasion paraît bonne pour affirmer avec Roland COLIN que l'Etat... ne peut assumer son rôle du promoteur du dynamisme culturel que si ceux qui l'iniment le prennent de cœur et d'âme comme un geste primordial, créateur d'eux-mêmes et de leur peuple.

To which we must add that if we are to succeed in this primordial enterprise to effect a rebirth in ourselves and in our people, we must proceed with our task, not hastily and haphazardly, but diligently and systematically. Our mission should begin at the primary school level. At this level the school programme should be arranged in such a way as to allow for creative activity. I suggest that a free period be allotted for play-acting and story-telling. During such a period, the pupils should be allowed to act the various rôles as they do when they are playing on their own at home. As they grow older and as they progress through the elementary school, they should be encouraged to write down bits of dialogue during this period. By the time they are in the last two years of the primary school they should be encouraged to write and act simple one-act plays. There is a vast number of situations which could be the source of one-act plays. The teacher could suggest themes from the world of children or that of grown-ups or situations from everyday life. Folk tales should be acted and puppet shows encouraged. Through folklore the young pupils will acquire a love of the traditions of our fatherland; folklore for these young minds should be a springboard into the understanding of the past and the timeless. The teachers could go further to spur on their pupils by offering little prizes for the best play or the best story told. This encouragement to write and the practice will inculcate in the pupils, right from infancy, the idea that a creative writer is not a man apart but someone like themselves and that they too could become full-fledged writers with time and diligence.

At the secondary school level, the school programme should allow for creative writing in such a way as to actively contribute to the flaming of the creative fire fanned in the elementary school. The first three years of the secondary school course should allow for emphasis on the creative writing programme begun in the last two years of the primary school. I realize that some secondary schools are already engaged in the honourable undertaking of publishing a school journal. I strongly solicit the authorities of other schools that are not likewise engaged, to encourage their students both financially and morally to follow this praiseworthy example. The students should be encouraged to write for publication in the school literary journal, such a journal must be a sine qua non in each secondary school. From the fourth year of secondary school an education it should be clear both to the teacher and student whether the student possesses a literary or scientific bent. This is the time when the teachers with the most sensitive minds and literary or scientific bent. This is the time when the teachers with the most sensitive minds and literary or scientific aptitudes. Apart from a literary journal, a writers' club is a necessity in every secondary school. In order to inspire confidence in its members, such a club should be led by a member of staff who himself has made some modest contribution either in the field of creative writing or literary criticism. The club should meet at least once every fortnight to discuss the work of its members. Members should be encouraged to write plays, short stories, novels and poems, in any of the two official languages, French or English. They should be encouraged to appraise the works of their colleagues. Works that are of some literary value should be polished for publication in the school journal. There is nothing that encourages a budding writer as much as seeing his name in print as the author of some creative work. However, teachers could also stimulate literary creativity in their students by offering prizes for the best works produced.

At the university level, I suggest that a course in creative writing should be established in the Faculty of Letters, of the University of Yaoundé, so that those students who are interested in creative writing should have the opportunity to follow courses in creative work. Here they can acquire the technical skills of literary creativity, while pursuing their specific creativity, a department shall be ascertained that there are sufficient students interested in literary creativity, a department of creative writing could be founded. Given the right minds and the diligence to impart knowledge to these students, it is at the university that the fledgling writer should become a professional writer, while the fledgling critic should become a professional literary critic.

Again, the presence of a literary journal and a writers' club cannot be overestimated at the scene of such literary activity. This is the level at which whatever is produced must be judged from a critical point of view. It must be written and rewritten, until its writer is convinced that he has produced that which is the best of him. It should be polished and repolished, until it gleams with that brilliance which comes from a well-wrought urn.

Apart from Educational Institutions, Radio Cameroon, par excellence, is another great institution that should promote literary creativity. The radio could stimulate creative writing by offering prizes for Radio plays, short stories, and poetry. I highly commend the Radio Programme Books in Focus, and suggest that the Radio should initiate another literary programme to be consecrated to creative writing. It could be entitled either Cameroon Writers' Club, or Cameroon Literary Forum, with the purpose of presenting to the public the plays, short stories, and poems written by the prize winners. Such a programme, I am convinced, would constitute a real channel through which their works could reach the public. From among the many, there may emerge, those chosen few, those passionate and sensitive few that will keep alive the fire of African literature. The immediate results of these endeavours may not seem to be impressive. No matter, whatever is produced, be it meagre, dull, disorderly or fragmentary, must be attended to, it must be sifted by the sensitive mind, and amongst the jumble, there may be a gem of beauty, a joy forever.

Goethe's last phrase was "More light". My clarion call to the cultural torch-bearers of Cameroon of English expression is, "More Light".

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