

Literary Musings and Critical Mediations: Interview with Rev. Fr Professor Amechi N. Akwanya

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Abstract

Reverend Father Professor Amechi Nicholas Akwanya is one of the towering scholars of literature in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world. For decades, and still counting, Fr. Prof. Akwanya has worked arduously, professing literature by way of teaching, researching, and writing in the Department of English and Literary Studies of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. To his credit, therefore, this genius of a literature scholar has singularly authored over 70 articles, six critically engaging books, a novel, and three volumes of poetry. His PhD thesis, *Structuring and Meaning in the Nigerian Novel*, which he completed in 1989, is a staggering 734-page document. Professor Akwanya has also taught many literature courses, namely: European Continental Literature, Studies in Drama, Modern Literary Theory, African Poetry, History of Theatre: Aeschylus to Shakespeare, European Theatre since Ibsen, English Literature Survey: the Beginnings, Semantics, History of the English Language, History of Criticism, Modern Discourse Analysis, Greek and Roman Literatures, Linguistics and the Teaching of Literature, Major Strands in Literary Criticism, Issues in Comparative Literature, Discourse Theory, English Poetry, English Drama, Modern British Literature, Comparative Studies in Poetry, Comparative Studies in Drama, Studies in African Drama, and Philosophy of Literature. A Fellow of Nigerian Academy of Letters, Akwanya's open access works have been read over 109,478 times around the world. In this wide-ranging interview, he speaks to Andrew Bula, a young lecturer from Baze University, Abuja, shedding light on a variety of issues around which his life revolves.

Keywords: Art, Aestheticism, African Literature, Meaning and Interpretation, Phenomenology of Language

AB¹: I'm pleased to speak with you again Professor.

Prof. Akwanya²: You are welcome.

AB: This year, hopefully, there won't be any lock downs and ASUU strike to warrant a shutdown of universities.

Prof. Akwanya: One hopes that the disruptions of last year should be behind us for good. But the truth is that Coronavirus is still a worry. More highly infectious strains seem to be evolving and spreading. But, we hope for the best, as the vaccines are now rolling out. The situation of our universities is sad, I would say. The problems not being addressed are compounded as the student population steadily increases, and the unmaintained infrastructure degrades. The strike you mention may end, as

many before have done, in a palliative here and there, without addressing the root problems. So then, once again, it would be a matter of time, before another strike action.

AB: Although it wasn't a good development, the period of self-isolation or quarantine afforded some an opportunity to publish critical essays or complete some writing tasks. At least I can say that among other things that I did, I published an article in London and a review essay in a national daily. I'm sure you accomplished a whole lot of things, given that you are always hard at work.

Prof. Akwanya: Well, the lockdown came with the new idea of working at home – it is not new for academics though; for some of their work has always been done away from the offices, in their private studies. I think this is something important. An academic should have a good library. His or her study must be well stocked. Then again there is the virtual library. And also a mobile one in one's laptop so that part of the work, namely research can go on all the time. In our discipline, our study also contains our lab – the objects we research and try to learn more about. So I must say, if shamefacedly, that I did get some of my own private research advanced. And, yes, some publications.

AB: I understand that literature is primarily orientated towards entertainment, aestheticism, or escapism. Do you see, as I do, that a secondary role of utility can be assigned the discipline, and rightly so, even if incidentally?

Prof. Akwanya: Literature. Entertainment. Aestheticism. Escapism even. Well, it is true that some people think of literature the same way they think of entertainment. Maybe some even think of it as something to seek to withdraw into for safety, or something else. Aestheticism? This is a big word. It may suggest something put up as a technical display, something hung out to be admired, just. However, we must distinguish the uses that people make of things and their natures. Think of the word *abuse*. If such a word exists and has meaning, it is because it is possible to use things not in accordance with their nature, and what they are really good for, or exist for. For me, to deal with the question of literature one must proceed on the basis of well-founded ideas concerning its nature. The question of 'nature', wherever it arises, is of course a philosophical question. In the present case, therefore, we must enter into conversation with philosophy; and from this conversation, we can take our bearings. Literature is art. A very short sentence. People may go to a museum to see great works of art displayed. An artist who toils to produce something that people may go and see in a museum may possibly be in the service of aestheticism. I don't know. But I suspect that it must be a very small minority of artists would be targeting such a moment of display when they are toiling in their studio. Most are probably just taken by an idea or some image; and they give it all their time and energy and skill, and passion. There may be rest and a feeling of time well spent when it is done. But they also want others to confirm the outcome of their labour, that it is indeed art. So the art work gets into the open, where, to appropriate Heidegger, it *craves* to be seen. The art work *wants* – again Heidegger – to be perceived: it wants what he calls *preservers*. The origin of the word *aestheticism* is here: *aisthētikos*, which means 'perceptual'. The work of art dwells, as it were, in the space of perception. Think of a novel or a poem: it is *most* itself – Heidegger – in being read. So if the one who reads calls what he is doing entertainment, then it is likely that he will be done with the novel after going through it; he will not discover the need to read it again. For the one who discovers the need, reading is *work*, of some kind – I think, in fact, serious work, because he is engaging thought fully, exposing his consciousness to the work of art, excuse my putting it that way as if the work is taking note. But it is the reader, you must grant, that comes to the work, not the other way around, so that engaging with the work is, in Paul Ricoeur's formulation, by the poem's invitation.

AB: In the 17th Professorial Inaugural Lecture of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, given by you on 28 February 2007, entitled *English Language Learning in Nigeria: In Search of an Enabling Principle*, as much as in your charming book, *Literature and Aspects of Causality*, and elsewhere, you have bemoaned the lack of proper grasp and of accurate accounting of certain objects of knowledge in literature and literary terminologies in Africa such as: 'form', 'African criticism', 'literature-in-English', 'art for art's sake', 'formalism', 'mimesis', and the very concept of 'literature as an art object'. Could you re-state your views of these here, Prof.?

Prof. Akwanya: Yes, certainly. The terms you have mentioned are of importance, as long as the nature of the object they are concerned with is properly established. A lot of what I have already said is again pertinent here. If the artist is busy in his studio or study because he is fashioning an image which is its own prompting, a labour he will not be deterred from even if he didn't know beforehand what it would come to, or what he might do with it: isn't that what people call art for art's sake? The artist is working, and it is this image that has prompted the effort, accomplishing it the purpose to which the effort is geared. That has got to be art for art's sake. And I do not think it is uncommon. Far from it. There are poets who have what is traditionally called moments of inspiration. They produce poems while the moment lasts; and they may publish these immediately or long after – it may not matter all that to them since they have produced the poem. Sometimes they have to wait for further bursts of inspiration until they have enough for a collection. Shouldn't we say that it really is art for art's sake that is at work here? Sometimes by the time they have a collection, they may have forgotten the specific circumstances of an individual poem. On the other hand, when the work is done, and the public takes possession of it, does the public really want to know what may have been the artist's motivation, unless it is a product the public is unable to decide what to make of? But

if the public or some within that public are able to make it out as art, they can show how it is recognizable as art: criticism has started; a mode of knowing that is proper to art. For the work of art is a knowledge object. As a work of art, it is the whole object that one is confronted with, which gives the food for thought – again the German philosopher, Heidegger. The visit to the museum is a knowledge encounter, just as the reading of a novel in one's private study. And what does one know, the direct object of this knowing? The work itself. And form is a key element in this knowing, being the element that enables art to take place. In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida speaks of form in terms of appearance, because that is what organizes, gives a certain shape to the material elements the artist has at his or her disposal. Since he does not make this form, that is what relates his or her work to other works of the same kind by other artists, perhaps of all ages. The taking of interest by criticism in things to do with the appearing of the work as a work is, in short, what is called formalism. When people say, quote and unquote, literature in English, they probably just mean literary works read in schools in English-speaking West African countries which are not in any of the local vernaculars. But here's the thing: the speaker does not always control the meaning of what he or she says. Literature in English contains the possibility that literature is something that can be moved about: you can put it in one language, or take it from that one and put it in another. But literature comes into being in a language; and that very linguistic construction is itself the literary work. That event of coming into being is mimesis: in Heidegger's language, it is the fashioning of truth, or the letting happen of truth. As to the concept, African criticism, there is probably nothing wrong, as long as there is no implication of a criticism that is characteristically African. Criticism as an order of knowledge is universal. I have never heard anyone say, African geometry, or Nigerian Biology.

AB: In *Semantics and Discourse: Theories of Meaning and Textual Analysis*, you devote a lot of time to the study of meaning in all its ramifications as pertains to language, something which has exercised a lot of philosophers in the past. How so?

Prof. Akwanya: Well, meaning is one of the entailments of language, and proper to it. Language has sound properties, as well as ordering properties. Individual linguistic sounds linked together according to the conventions of the particular language make up a word or sentence. But we know for certain that the set of sounds is a word or sentence or something else if the meaning is ascertainable, or if by virtue of our familiarity with the language we are able to tell that the set of sounds is likely to be meaningful, even though for the moment we do not know what that meaning is. Of course Chomsky's transformational generative grammar is constructed on the premise that the sound and syntactic patterns can be understood and analysed without necessary reference to meaning. But that is as far as we are dealing with the language as a system. But language putting man, as Heidegger says, in the openness of what is, cannot be without meaning. So the study of meaning is an essential part of the language disciplines. In handling literature, reading is based on the assumption that the set of words is intelligible and can be made out. Meaning as the yield of a linguistic event to the mind is taken for granted in everyday language use, just as the linking of sound units in speech. But the matter quickly becomes complex if we ask a small question like: is meaning in the sounds uttered in speech or in the mind of the one making the utterance; so how is it that the meaning yield is sometimes different in the hearers of the utterance? The science of semantics is concerned with explaining what meaning consists of, how it takes place in language, and how it is accounted for within the language system. The question of meaning probably becomes more urgent in discourse where human subjects who freely exchange the pronouns 'I' and 'you', depending on who is at the moment speaking, and alternately take on the entire resources of language to package and convey information, and do it always with a view to influence the hearer in one way or another. These are the kinds of issues explored in *Semantics and Discourse*. I do not remember where I read that language is thought's mode of production. I think it was in a book called *The Material Word*. Language is thought's mode of production means that I must know what I am thinking; that if I see it another time, somewhere else, I can recognize it as what I had been thinking. Recognition is a dimension of meaning, and of intellection. Any constitution of a linguistic event brings meaning into play. But just as meaning is not exactly the same in recognition and thinking, so it differs in different constitutions of language, whether a word listed in the dictionary, a sermon, a conversation, or a poem. Semantics is the science of meaning concerned strictly with words and sentences of the language – the language considered as a system. To this extent, it complements the sciences of language, phonology, morphology, and syntax. But beyond the level of system, the question of meaning still arises, and it is doubtful that at this level, the study can be scientific, quote and unquote. This has given rise to specialties like text semantics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, ordinary language philosophy, and so forth. Simply, the more closely you look at the language phenomenon, in its different manifestations, the more complex the question of meaning analysis.

AB: In *Language and Habits of Thought*, you have written that in much of Africa "Literature is what Achebe writes, and Soyinka, and Ngugi, and so on. The name of the individual is important. This satisfies the desire to have great men we can worship, or at any rate, revere as geniuses. But the consequence is that we tend to treat literature as a collection of works of geniuses. How is this genius constituted?" Could you expatiate on this, please?

Prof. Akwanya: Well, the problem is still about how we regard literature and art. Put it this way, where literature is what Achebe or Ngugi or Soyinka writes; in a sense, there is nothing further to say. The statement is true. But in another sense, there is much to say. Literature, having a nature specific to it, which may be made out, and in some way made ostensive, means that what Achebe writes, or Soyinka or Ngugi, is to be referred to something outside itself for identification. It is not

Achebe that gives identity to this writing. Its identity comes from something that Achebe does not control, but instead probably serves – serves through his writing. Heidegger in fact insists that the writer's identity as a poet and the work's identity as a poem come from the same source, which precedes both: that source is poetry itself. Achebe is a poet, not necessarily by nature, but because of things he has written which fall under the category poetry. For this reason, Achebe does not have the last word on these things he has written.

AB: One of the areas of your research interest is Phenomenology of Language. Could you tell me about it? Why is it such of interest to you?

Prof. Akwanya: Phenomenology is a philosophy concerned with things as they appear. I have mentioned that if you look closely at the language of a poem, it differs from that of a conversation, and a sermon, a political speech, and so forth. Some people do not care to look closely, and take the view that as long as it is language, it must behave like language universally. Yes, there is a universal about language; for instance the issue of meaning – that in taking place language always raises the question of meaning. As Benveniste has observed, in discourse, the one who speaks or writes takes in his or her possession the whole resources of language. How he handles this resource depends on a whole range of factors, like the object in view, whether there is a specific addressee, or to anyone who can hear, this individual user's unique appropriation of the language, the shared presuppositions about the world by the participants or a would-be hearer. Phenomenology of language describes the different kinds of linguistic events, with a keen eye on how one differs from all others. Lack of awareness of these differences is likely to lead to bringing wrong expectations to linguistic events. For example, a ritual may comprise a single declarative sentence, a set of imperative sentences, or even a narration. But the ritual words are taken together, whether long or short, because the whole is in fact a quotation, spoken in the appropriate circumstances by someone authorized to do so. Analysing the linguistic meaning of the utterance is probably beside the point. A phenomenological description, on the other hand, must be aware of the appropriate circumstances in which the utterance is made, that it is a ritual event. There may be no one to tell the phenomenologist that this is a ritual, but he will see the *form*, the quotation with the intention to bring about a state of affairs, in accordance with the cultural or belief systems of the group. In the same way, a phenomenological description will not overlook the discursive relations set up by the 'I' and 'you' if it is faced with a transcript in which a set of utterances is reproduced. The circumstances do not merely place temporal and spatial boundaries on a linguistic event: they underlie and help to organize the linguistic event from within. Then the echoes of the words, in the case of a ritual, for instance, will begin to sound out. The speaker of a ritual linguistic act certainly does not take in hand the whole resources of language, even if a certain amount of adaptation may be allowed in a specific situation. Meaningfulness in the case of the ritual is in terms of what the whole act constitutes, and should not be mistaken as transmissible information value. As with every linguistic event, it can be written, but the text is really an instruction, unless it is part of another text like a novel, where it is spoken by a character performing an act thereby. Ritual happens only in being spoken in the appropriate circumstances. In literature, lyric and drama already draw attention to themselves by their very *form*. The novel builds on appearing to be the normal, everyday language. This may give rise to a problem if it is taken that therefore it is just a slice of life, quote and unquote. And this happens all too often. But the markings of a made thing – *poiountē* – are usually scattered throughout the novel, and readily observable. This poetic feature changes the character of the language from the everyday. For example, *Things Fall Apart* begins with a report about Okonkwo's fame since his wrestling match with Amalinze; and the air is of an event long in memory. In the next paragraph, we are in the scene of the wrestling match itself. There is a narrator, on the one hand reporting; on the other, showing. There is artifice.

AB: In his influential work, *Writing and Difference*, Jacques Derrida holds that philosophy started from poetry. Is this true, do you think?

Prof. Akwanya: He says also in an interview that the, quote and unquote, pure origin of philosophy is the Greek language. But what he says in *Writing and Difference* is of greater importance, I think. Two kinds of reflection, in fact, arise from poetry: one which is exercised to understand the poem as a knowable, and another which takes it up as a meaning system. We have talked about the first already: literary criticism; the second is philosophy. You can take the matter historically. Early systematizing of philosophy is seen in Plato; the *Republic*, for instance. In this work, many of the references are to poetic works; and the philosophy consists of interrogating these poetic texts, demolishing some of the patterns of meaning that can be drawn from them, and building new structures often out of the wreckage. To be perfectly clear, and referencing Plato's example, literature is not where philosophy sources for ideas and meanings, nor is literature an original way of philosophizing. But Aristotle makes clear for the aspect of poetry he calls thought that it pertains to some individual from whom it flows, unless it is some common opinion. These thought structures are the kinds of things that Plato intercepts and interrogates, thereby philosophizing. In Heidegger, a poem is by nature – or as an effect of its nature – thought provoking and, moreover, demands what he calls the keeping of thought, a demand that Derrida meets by the operation he calls deconstruction.

AB: Tell me about your editorship of *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing* founded by the most sensational writer in Africa, Chinua Achebe.

Prof. Akwanya: My involvement with *Okike* is almost as long as my career in the University of Nigeria. The then editor, Ossie Enekwe, invited me to help him as an assistant editor, I think in 1992. When he retired and left the University in 2010, he handed over to me. And I have been working at it since then. It is a struggle to keep it going – it was even so in the time of Professor Enekwe. It is about maintaining a readership; it is about ensuring adequate funding.

AB: What was your reaction when you first heard of Achebe's passing? Did you attend the funeral service? Did you write a tribute in honour of him?

Prof. Akwanya: A poetic tribute. Yes. There was also a short paper, I think. The poem is called 'Two Lives Divided into One', and published in *Okike* No. 51, which was dedicated to Chinua Achebe. I was at the funeral at Ogidi. The University also held a special senate in his honour at Enugu Campus. See, he was a great man. Somehow, grief wasn't the proper reaction at the news of his death. No doubt, it was a sad event. But it was like he was the same, alive or dead. There was, and is, something permanent about him. He is with us.

AB: You have yourself founded a literary outlet, *Africa and World Literature: University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies*...

Prof. Akwanya: That journal was founded for a purpose. The aim was to provide a platform for research and publication on world literature, especially the aspect covered in the English and literary studies programmes of Nigerian universities, which in some cases comprise more than 60% of the courses taught – from English literature to European continental literature, to American, Caribbean, and Commonwealth literatures – which should include Indian, Australian, and other non-African countries of the Commonwealth. Now at the time of the founding of *Africa and World Literature: University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies* in 2000/2001, and I think, to the present, there was not a journal dedicated to this area of research in Africa. Scholars teaching these courses in Nigerian universities would occasionally be able to publish their research abroad, but tended to do much of their research on African literature. I personally considered that situation undesirable and not likely to promote professionalism in an area that accounted for up to 60% of the programme – or to put it in another way, the situation seemed to consign the teaching of the larger part of the programme to amateurism. The journal hasn't quite died, but I think that it is struggling worse than *Okike*.

AB: You have also served as the Dean of the School of Postgraduate Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and several times as Head, Department of English and Literary Studies of the University. In fact, you have even recently served as Head, Department of History and International Studies...

Prof. Akwanya: Of course a university consists not only of classrooms and labs and offices. The work of a university is organized into units of different sizes and levels of responsibility. It is by these units realizing their mandates and being appropriately led in this task that the university fulfils its mandate. It is about division of labour. For these tasks, of course, the university has to draw on its own personnel. That's how I came to serve as Dean of the School of Postgraduate Studies and at other times as a Head of Department.

AB: In the course of a small talk that we had, you mentioned that you wrote a novel whose manuscript you don't know where it is?

Prof. Akwanya: Yes. It must be among my papers somewhere. I am sure I will look for it someday that I am less preoccupied than now.

AB: I don't know if I have told you this, but I must have. And if I have not, I shall say it now. But if I have, I mean to say it here again, and that is that your articles, to mention just a few, "Semantics and Literary Studies", "Literature in the Light of Philosophy", "Literature and the Possibilities of Language Function", "The Review Essay", and "Heidegger, Poetry, and the Call of Being: Modern Literary Theory and The Thinking of What had been Forgotten" are all written in such exotic taste and fashion!

Prof. Akwanya: Yes. You did say that to me before. Thank you.

AB: Reverend Father Professor Akwanya, it is always a delight speaking with you. Thank you!

Prof. Akwanya: Thanks for your interest in my work. God bless.

Endnotes

¹ Andrew Bula

² Amechi Nicholas Akwanya