

BONGO and the THIN of COWARD¹

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The title is not a misprint. Nor, as the E.S.L.C. English Literature Examiner said in his report on the 1967 paper, is it either amusing or untypical. Like its fellow traveller, 'Unseemed him from the novel to his chips...', it is "more pathetic than amusing when it is realised that such misquotations represent the rule rather than the exception."²

Does a misquotation matter, particularly? Does it matter that so many people say, and will go on saying, 'Tomorrow to fresh fields and pastures new' rather than '... fresh woods'² It might be argued that 'fresh fields,' with its alliteration and a suggestion of open spaces rather than enclosed woods to be explored, is better in some sense, although Milton didn't write it that way. Certainly, there is something Joycean in the title. 'The Thin of Coward', a sudden, perhaps misleading and misguided, yet forceful and illuminating insight into a hitherto unexplored facet of Banquo's character and, indeed, an insight into an unsuspected level of meaning for the play itself. Might not Macbeth be one of the first Nietzsche-style, existentialist heroes, a hero in the sense that he is and does, however one regards his being and doing. Perhaps Banquo is just a thin coward. Perhaps 'Cawdor' was intended by Shakespeare as an anagram of 'coward'. Perhaps the candidate who wrote 'the Thin of Coward' was fully aware of the Elizabethan (and, indeed, Amhara) love of punning and ambiguity and was trying to express it. He might even have been familiar with the 20th. century concept of the 'non-hero', the character who achieves his 'non-heroism' by being acted on, by suffering and merely experiencing, rather than actually doing. Perhaps. And perhaps he should never have been asked, or even allowed, to study for an examination a subject as remote and as baffling for the average Ethiopian secondary school student as 'English Literature'.

Like the free essay and the précis, 'English Literature' always seems to have been part of all examinations, in Britain and overseas, whether English was the first, second, third or fourth language. Clearly, it has been yet another sacred cow. Like hanging for thieves, it was obviously considered to be 'a good thing for the soul'. It was thought, and in some quarters it still is thought, that the study of English Literature, 'the best words in the best order', would automatically lead to an improvement in a student's English. What evidence is there for this? What is true, it seems, is that reading, extensive reading, **does** lead to an improvement in a student's English. But extensive reading for pleasure should not be confused with a rather formal study of English Literature.

Sweet's lament:

'... When the classics of a language are ground into pupils who have neither knowledge enough of the language to appreciate their styl-

1. This is a quotation from an essay written by a 1967 E.S.L.C. English Literature candidate, who was, of course, referring to 'Banquo and the Thane of Cawdor'.
2. It is reproduced from the Report by the English Literature examiner. From the examiner's Report on the 1967 English Literature examination.

istic merits, nor maturity of mind and taste to appreciate their ideas, the result is often to create a disgust for literature generally'.³ still seems applicable today wherever 'English Literature' is exported.

In January 1967, at the Secondary School Curriculum Development and E.S.L.C. Examination Seminar, it was recommended by the English Commission that the English Literature examination should be temporarily suspended as of 1968. The announcement was greeted with what was almost a cry of horror from many of the English-teachers in the audience, with the exception, however, of the teacher who had had to stencil the whole of *Animal Farm* for his class, there being no copies available. One suspected that it wasn't only the English-teachers who were shocked. One recalled the case of the Biology teacher at the same seminar who trembled with outrage at the prospect of not being able to test Biology by means of essays. One had the impression that the general feeling was: 'I had to plough through Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Dickens. It didn't do me any harm. Why shouldn't Ethiopian students do the same?' One also had the feeling that the study of English Literature hadn't done them any good, either. It had merely been something to be endured, far removed from an enjoyable study of language well used and never considered likely to provide any insights into the nature of man or the human predicament. However, it was not recommended that 'Literature' should be dropped never to be restored. It was proposed that certain questions should be gone into before the examination was reinstated. The remainder of this article will be devoted to a discussion of a few of these questions. It is hoped that these remarks will provoke further discussion by practising English-teachers.

The writer has been told by the Head of the Amharic Language Department of Haile Sellassie I University that it is not until a student reaches the university that any real attempt is made to teach him Amharic literature. Apparently, Amharic is taught even worse than English in elementary schools and the situation is hardly any better in the secondary schools. It is noteworthy that in the English translation of the report of the Amharic Commission at the 1967 Curriculum and E.S.L.C. Seminar there was no mention at all of literature. There may be something to be said for the teaching of English literature first in some African countries, since:

'Most of the artistic genius of African peoples... has gone into music and sculpture, leaving a comparatively simple and unsophisticated literature: a modern literature, based on a combination of native and imported sources, is in most African countries only just beginning to emerge.'⁴

But the case is surely different in Ethiopia where there is, by all accounts, an extremely sophisticated literature. As Mr. Lerner goes on to say, '... a lack of knowledge of literature in one's own language is a serious handicap when beginning the study of English literature.' What Mr. Lerner later says about a Frenchman or an Italian might equally well apply to an Ethiopian who was familiar with literature in his own language:

'... he may have an immediate and genuine response to English literature. If he has read poetry and novels, if he has seen plays and perhaps written something himself in his own language, then he knows what

3. *The Practical Study of Languages*, 1899, p. 219.

4. Laurence D. Lerner, *English Literature - An Interpretation for Students Abroad*, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 64.

to expect. English literature may be strange to him, but not literature: he is prepared to be sensitive to words. He will have a natural sympathy with what the writer is trying to say, and this sympathy will carry him over many language difficulties...

Shouldn't a course in Amharic literature, then, precede a course in English literature or literature, not necessarily English, in English? In addition, would it be possible or desirable to introduce English literature translated expertly into Amharic? Here, the writer is thinking of what he is assured are the excellent translations of some of Shakespeare's plays by Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin. Apparently, the translations he has so far made, of 'Othello', 'Macbeth' and 'Hamlet', are not so much translations as interpretations or rewritings in Amharic. According to the 1967 E.S.L.C. English Literature examiner, '... it is clear that much of the Shakespeare selection astounds and baffles readers by its language and imagery⁵ ... Where topics of immediate interest are discovered, naked ideas can be transmitted...' The introduction into grades 11 and 12 of Amharic versions of Shakespeare might help not only to transmit Shakespeare's 'naked ideas', but also to improve the quality of Amharic teaching, surely a prerequisite for better English teaching? Shakespeare in Amharic might well be supplemented by other plays in Amharic by Ethiopians. One thinks of Menghistu Lemma and Tesfaye Gessesse.

This is not to say that literature in English cannot and should not be taught. The same 1967 English Literature Report makes the point that:

'... where ideas are of consuming interest and their transmission is not befuddled by archaic language and imagery from an alien culture there is possible an immediate rapport between author and reader.'

Apparently, some of the questions on G.B. Shaw's **St. Joan**, George Orwell's **Animal Farm** and Alan Paton's **Cry the Beloved Country** produced very good answers because each book dealt with matters of immediate interest to Ethiopian students. One question on **Julius Caesar** also produced some very good essays. This was the question: 'If you had been a Roman citizen in 44 B.C., and if Caesar, Brutus and Mark Antony had been just such men as Shakespeare describes, whom would you have followed after Caesar's death and why?'

One of the main problems, obviously, is to find more plays and novels which are written in simple lucid and straightforward English and which are concerned with ideas or experiences that are of immediate interest and concern to young Ethiopians. Unfortunately, there is only one **Animal Farm**. When English-teachers in Addis Ababa were asked some time ago to submit their choices for a new E.S.L.C. English Literature syllabus, only four teachers took the trouble to submit their lists of titles and among the titles were: **Under Milk Wood**, by Dylan Thomas, **Lady Windermere's Fan**, by Oscar Wilde, **The Sea Around Us**, by Rachel Carson, **Father and Son**, by Edmund Gosse, **Eminent Victorians**, by Lytton Strachey, **The Forsyte Saga**, by John Galsworthy, **The Rainbow**, by D.H. Lawrence, **Ivanhoe**, by Sir Walter Scott and **The Loved One**, by Evelyn Waugh. These titles were not the most unlikely ones, either.

Mr. Lerner, in the book already quoted, includes his own basic lists for the novel, drama and poetry. For the novel he recommends, not in any particular order: **Pride and Prejudice** and **Mansfield Park**, by Jane Austen; **The Ox-Bow**

5. A short while ago the writer heard of an expatriate teacher who was complaining bitterly about the difficulties of teaching 'Hamlet', presumably in English, to ninth graders.

Incident, by W.V.T. Clark; **Oliver Twist**, by Charles Dickens; **The Mill on the Floss**, by George Eliot; **Cranford**, by Mrs. Gaskell; **The Old Man and the Sea** by Ernest Hemingway; **Gulliver's Travels** by Dean Swift; **The Warden**, by Anthony Trollope and **The History of Mr. Polly**, by H.G. Wells. For drama he recommends **Dr. Faustus**, by Christopher Marlowe; **The Rivals**, by R.B. Sheridan; **In the Shadow of the Glen**, by J.M. Synge; **Androcles and the Lion**, **Caesar and Cleopatra** and **St. Joan**, by G.B. Shaw; **Julius Caesar**, **The Merchant of Venice** and **Romeo and Juliet** by Shakespeare. For poetry, he suggests the usual anthologies and the following individual poets, in this order: Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, Matthew Arnold, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, Shelley and Hardy. Bolder readers, he says, should be encouraged to tackle Herbert, Marvell, Donne and, if they are not deterred by the language difficulties, Chaucer. (Incidentally, the Neville Coghill modern English version of Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales** makes the best of Chaucer readily accessible to any foreign student who has a reasonable mastery of modern English.)

Such lists are, of course, rather like the World Soccer Teams that football enthusiasts are sometimes invited to select. Anyone can do it, it's very enjoyable, but is it useful? For soccer, perhaps, it's not very useful; for a study, no; for an enjoyment of literature, it probably is. What is badly needed is a working party to select novels and plays, originally written in, or translated into English, which are simple enough linguistically for secondary school students but which concern themselves with ideas, situations and experiences that Ethiopian students can respond to. For what they're worth the writer would like to add four titles: **A High Wind in Jamaica**, by Richard Hughes; **Lord of the Flies**, by William Golding; **Vice Versa**, by L. Anstey and **The Red Badge of Courage**, by Stephen Crane. In addition, or rather, before, the writer would also like to recommend a massive dose of reading of simplified readers throughout the secondary grades. Many teachers' and/or purists will throw up their hands in horror, no doubt. But this is irrelevant. Students only learn to read by reading. It seems pointless to deprive them of some enjoyable, interesting reading because we think they should wait until they can read some of these simplified readers in the original. Did an enjoyment of Lamb's **Tales from Shakespeare** prevent us from rereading and enjoying Shakespeare in the original? The Longmans and Oxford series include some excellent titles. If students are given an opportunity to read lots of books that they don't find too difficult, then their appetite for reading will grow. If the books are available (and in Ethiopia this is a very big IF, of course) then students will find their own way to the classics, when they're ready for them, ready linguistically and, perhaps, culturally.

A final word, on African Literature in English. The writer has been accused of being 'hung up on'⁶ African writing in English. While it is true that he has read and enjoyed a lot of it and is even guilty of having taught a one-semester course in it at Haile Selassie I University, it would not be true to say that he is actually infatuated with it. Quite a few people seem to think that a selection of novels, plays and poems written in English by African writers would solve all the syllabus-writers' problems. While it is true that many young African students take very readily, even enthusiastically, to such novels and plays, it is equally true that an Ethiopian student may, for example, find Chinua Achebe's detailed descriptions of Ibo life and customs just as remote, obscure and meaningless as Jane Austen's descriptions of upper-middle-class life in early nineteenth-century England. Never-

6 hung up on (colloquial English) meaning 'infatuated and/or obsessed with'

theless, experience in other countries suggests that an attempt to introduce some African literature into the English syllabus might well be worthwhile. The university students who tackled this course certainly seemed to enjoy reading the books, even though they occasionally misunderstood just as disastrously as they misunderstood English literature.

A secondary school African Literature in English syllabus, then, might include the following: **The African Child**, by Camara Laye; **Things Fall Apart** and **No Longer At Ease**, by Chinua Achebe; **Down Second Avenue**, by Ezekiel Mphahlele; **Through African Eyes** (Books 1 and 2), edited by Paul Edwards (a useful two-volume introductory anthology to African writing); **The Passport of Mallam Illa** and **The Drummer Boy**, by Cyprian Ekwensi (for younger students); **Mine Boy**, by Peter Abrahams; **Kalasanda**, by Barbara Kimenye; **The Lion and the Jewel**, by Wole Soyinka and a selection of the simpler poems from **Modern Poetry from Africa**, edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, and **A Book of African Verse**, edited by John Reed and Clive Wake. For really advanced Ethiopian students, **Oda-Oak Oracle**, by Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, might be attempted.

This, of course, is a very tentative list. If the books did nothing else, however, they would at least illustrate how well some African writers are able to use English to describe their own experiences and feelings. These books are, on the whole, written in clear, reasonably simple English and students might be able to improve their own English through reading them. They will also, one hopes, find them interesting and enjoyable. Of how much literature that one has been forced to plough through can this be said? Finally, since these books might well interest the students, it might not be necessary to reinstate the E.S.L.C. Literature examination merely in order to make sure that students read them and teachers teach them.

Bibliography (excluding suggested reading texts)

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