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Literature and Literary Criticism: An Interview with Rev. Fr. Professor Amechi N. Akwanya

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This is the last of a three-part interview series with the eminent Reverend Father Professor Amechi Nicholas Akwanya of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the second having been published in an earlier volume and issue of this same journal, and the first in *The Criterion*: *An International Journal in English* Vol. II, Issue-III, June, 2020. The uniqueness of this exchange is that it is a tribute interview, honouring the literary guru in the year of his retirement from an academic career laden with a beehive of activities. In this sequence of conversations with Andrew Bula, a young lecturer working the job of teaching English and Literature in the Centre for Foundation and Interdisciplinary Studies (CFIS) at Baze University, Abuja, Nigeria, Professor Akwanya offers uncommon and differing insights into the field of literary studies, something for which he is widely known for many decades.

AB[1]: Fr. Prof., it is my utmost pleasure to interview you for the third time!
Prof. Akwanya[2]: Thank you. I am delighted too.
AB: Our conversation this time is especially significant in that this is, I know, your retirement year after decades of teaching, research, and administrative work at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Congratulations Sir!
Prof. Akwanya: You are welcome. Yes, it is my year of retirement. 6 December 2022.
AB: By the mention of the date, I have a feeling you anxiously look forward to it…
Prof. Akwanya: Yes, it's something to look forward to. Thank you.
AB: In the light of the foregoing, I would like to obtain first-hand knowledge of your linear educational trajectory (including, no doubt, the priestly), since in some way that too is educational in nature.
Prof. Akwanya: Priestly training is not just *in some way* educational. You know we say in the Catholic Church that one studies for the priesthood. It involves two academic programmes, first philosophy, then theology, in each meeting the requirements for a Bachelor's degree award. My primary school education was mainly in Awkuzu, Oyi Local Government Area, Anambra State, followed by secondary education in All Hallows Seminary, Onitsha. The civil war (1967-1970) came during my time in All Hallows Seminary. Every effort was made to keep the seminary open during the war. When Onitsha was taken by the federal forces, it moved to Awka-Etiti near Nnewi, and then Ukpor, south of Nnewi. I started my philosophy studies in 1972 in Bigard Memorial Major Seminary, Enugu, moved on to Theology in 1976, and finished in 1980, with Priestly Ordination. In 1982, I gained admission in the National University of Ireland, at Maynooth, where I took an Honours degree in English and Geography. I went on from this to a Master's degree in English (1986), and finished with a PhD in 1989.
AB: Tell me more about your work in Ireland in the years spent there.
Prof. Akwanya: There was nothing much. I worked as hard as I could on my programmes, losing not a moment from one to the next. Apart from my studies, the really great thing was my novel, *Orimili.* The first draft of it was in 1986; and one of my teachers, Professor Kevin Barry helped to connect me to a literary agent, who made suggestions on improving the work, and

then suggested Heinemann Educational Books. I met very nice people in Ireland, who helped me in different ways. Some of them are on the Dedication Page of Orimili. That was all I could do to say thanks.

AB: Did you work alongside D.I. Nwoga, who taught at UNN long ago?

Prof. Akwanya: No, I am afraid not. Professor Nwoga had just retired when I came to UNN. That was in 1991. We met very briefly at my first arrival, and he enquired about my doctoral work, as he was going to set up a publishing business. So I took the thesis to him. One week later, he was dead. His family was kind enough to make it immediately available to me when I came to commiserate with them at the shocking news.

AB: Oh! How ghastly it sounds!

Prof. Akwanya: Really awful

AB: Could you please summarize your book, *Semantics and Discourse: Theories of Meaning and Textual Analysis*, along the topics of "Word Meaning", "Sentence Meaning" and "The Semantics of Written Discourse" which together make up the text?

Prof. Akwanya: Semantics is the science of language meaning. In general, its object comprises the whole language phenomenon insofar as the question of meaning arises. So words are understood to have meaning, as well as sentences, and also complexes comprising several sentences. The meanings of words are usually presented in a dictionary. But the task of semantics in regard to the word may be stated in these terms: can it be explained in a scientific way that a word means what the dictionary says that it means? It implies other questions like how does this meaning come about. Can this meaning be changed or is it constant? What explains the use of words in operations not directly covered by the meanings assigned in the dictionary? Sentence meaning raises specific problems, including that a change in the position of words, where a change is permitted, often affect the interpretation of the sentence; that membership in a sentence can result in a word ending up with a meaning or implication different from the familiar ones – and therefore that sentence meaning is not necessarily the same as the meanings of all the words that make up that sentence. There is also the case that the interpretation of a sentence may vary depending on whether it is a transcription of a spoken string and the identity of the speaker, or even the addressee. Then again, is the interpretation or an interpretation of a sentence the same as *the meaning* of the utterance. The result is that there is no agreement whether the question of meaning arises in regard to sentences in the same way as it does for words. So, there are many different approaches to the question how to account for sentence meaning. The problem becomes still more complex in dealing with language events involving many sentences. Some scholars would not associate semantics to such complexes on the ground that as a linguistic theory, semantics ought not to go beyond the limits of linguistic science of which the maximal level is the sentence. In that case, semantics as the science of language meaning may be seen to be in bad faith leaving a whole swathe of the language phenomenon unaccounted for. There are, however, a variety of approaches to different kinds of texts and speech events in which the linguistic structure is analysed to achieve interpretation or determine what is going on in the text. These are the various issues that are dealt with in *Semantics and Discourse.*

AB: You are not only versatile in literature, but in language and philosophy, Prof. Could you outline your interests in such eminent published studies as "Literature and the Possibilities of Language Function" and "Art-Being and Úrù: Use-Value is Everything; or is it?"

Prof. Akwanya: You're right to bring the two articles together under one question, for there are continuities between them. You see, thinking problems philosophically seem to demand first to know the nature of the problem, then you can have a 'theory of consequences', so to say. There is a Latin adage, *agree sequitur esse,* which means that acting follows being (follows from what the thing is). In the two articles, however, the nature of language and the nature of literature are underlying questions. The nature of language is commonly, and if you like, carelessly connected to communication. But not all communicative events are linguistic events, nor are all language events necessarily communicative. However, language has functions, one of which is communication, and communication has channels, one of which is language. Language as a means of communication declines to answer the question, what *is* language. So, this is a question on which linguistic science may seek assistance from philosophy. As to literature, the question of its nature has been handed on from the foundation of criticism, the science whose object literature is, namely that it is the art form that takes place by means of language alone. It is not likely that a criticism setting this basic statement aside could be genuine criticism. It requires criticism to think this object in itself, and not just to take it that if it is a language event, therefore it must be communicative. And so a central question in 'Literature and the Possibilities of Language Function' is: what is language to literature? Two explanations, really are offered in the critical tradition: that language, with an independent existence all its own, as Shklovsky states it, is a medium of mimesis (Aristotle), and that language is a constitutive element in literature (Formalism, Heidegger). Literature has a prima facie dimension, whereby it may look like a novel, a drama, a lyric. But looks can deceive, as in the popular saying: all that glitters is not gold. So there has got to be someone who is able to tell when there are only looks, and nothing beyond that. He or she is traditionally called a literary critic. Language has a very limited function when it is communicating in the form of a poem: it is about packaging the information. In mass communication, they use the concepts of coding and decoding as analytical tools to distinguish what the communicator does by means of language and what the addressee does during listening or reading. Literary criticism is careful not to lend itself to capture by mass communication. Mass communication and literature are two ancient practices; and the science that deals with the former is rhetoric, and the latter poetics. Since language is at issue in both mass communication – in the great speeches of Pericles, for example – and poetry – Homer's *Iliad,* for example – co-occurrence of the linguistic devices is to be expected. So if these devices which the ancients place in the domain of rhetoric appear in poetry, it is not to be taken as evidence that poetry is engaged in the same activity as mass communication, a war speech, for example. Poetry is art, and comes into being by means of language alone, and does not require that language be shorn of any of its

properties – things that belong to it essentially, such as word meaning, grammatical form, and figures of speech. So this art comes into being by means of language: language is a constitutive element in the poem. The other incidents. By means of language, these incidents are arranged to form an action. And the relationship is such that when you speak of action, you at the same time speak of language. This action amounts to something –like a heroic narrative, or a sonnet. What it amounts to is the issue of central importance to the literary critic, not the uses that one may put the poem to.

AB: What of "Semantics and Literary Studies"?

Prof. Akwanya: Well, there are a number of issues here. One, is that semantics is a science of language meaning; that being the case, it should not be excluded from the programme of literary studies whose object is the art that takes place by means of language alone – while some others take place by means of colours, shapes, and so forth. Even though language is already *literary* in the poem, and is what we see when we look at the poem, the skills and knowhow taught in semantics can help open up angles in the poem. Two: I have just mentioned that poetry/literature is an art form and distinguishes itself from the other arts by its mode of taking shape, by means of language. Now we can borrow from axiomatic semantics to express this reality. In axiomatic semantics, word denotation is established by arranging the direct hyperonyms of the words – or sign, to be more exact – in such a way that they are unique to the sign. So to say that literature is an art form that takes place by means of language alone is in fact to identify the hyperonyms that together account for the meaning of the sign *literature.* Language is essential to literature, and without it, there is no literature. But this does not mean that literature is an equivalent utterance to language. There is a point of overlap between art and language; and that overlap comprises literature, the bulk of language being concerned with other things; and so also art. We can even distinguish between literature and poetry, even though I use the two terms interchangeably. Poetry is Aristotle's word. He assigned it for a class of objects including epics, comedies, tragedies, and lyrics. It includes the chanting of the followers of Dionysus which are purely oral, and probably owing to mantic inspiration. Literature derives from Latin, and comprises written compositions. So if we say, language and art, we identify the direct hyperonyms of poetry. But writing being a subtype of language encounter can be used with art to distinguish the art form that comprises writing only. Now in mentioning the kinds of objects that come under the designation *poetry*, I in fact identified epic, drama, lyric as direct hyponyms of poetry. But each sign has to have a minimum of two direct hyperonyms to be fully specified, and not to be confused with any other sign. Aristotle in fact provides the full set of hyperonyms for all these. Drama, for instance, is linguistic art made up of men doing things. So the strict denotation of the sign *drama* is linguistic art + men in action. Lyric is linguistic art + meter, with the alexandrine meter more or less reserved for epic – only that as Aristotle himself notes, some natural scientists and historians also used the alexandrine in their texts. The texts are still distinguishable as natural science and history because they lack the aspect of art. The third point I should like to mention has already been hinted at, and only needs to be underlined. It is that art is not something added to language or to a story: it is the very constitution of this object. The literary work *is* art, and shares all the characterizing features of art. This is made explicit in the manner of statement of denotation in axiomatic semantics. Another consequence of thinking the literary work in line with axiomatic semantics is that the work has meaning insofar as it can be grasped, as Roland Barthes phrases it, at the integrational level. For example, *Things Fall Apart* has the feature specifications of a heroic narrative. First of all, the sequence of events is in the public domain, chronicling the rise and fall of a gifted and highly regarded individual acting within the public domain. So there are three hyperonyms: rise and fall of a 'good man', as Aristotle would say, with action in the public domain, intersecting with a specific poetic form, heroic narrative. These three factors together explain the novel.

AB: In another prestigious paper of yours, "Literature in the Light of Philosophy", it is fascinating how you make a link between two disciplines. But I also wonder if this linkage is appropriate, Prof. Tell me about this work too…

Prof. Akwanya: Perhaps the first thing to understand is that literature and philosophy are two different kinds of things. Of course, there is the traditional account of philosophy, literature, and history as neighbouring intellectual activities, but I follow Northrop Frye on the point that literature is not a discipline, but a field of study, like nature. That gives us a clearer perspective of the relation of philosophy and literature. Insofar as literature is like nature, it does not study anything. But it is studied by a number of disciplines. Philosophy is one of these. The main discipline that is concerned exclusively with literature is called by Northrop Frye *criticism.* If we call it literary studies, we would be making room for criticism, as well as philosophy, language-related practices, like literary discourse analysis, and a whole raft of other disciplines that find a rich resource in literature. We can think of psychoanalysis. Freud wrote many powerful papers in which he explored literature and art in order to understand or explain certain aspects of human behaviour. There are papers like *Dostoevsky and Parricide*, *Creative Writers and Daydreaming, Michelangelo's 'Moses'*, and so forth. Philosophy's interest in literature is seen at least from Plato onwards. Aristotle followed with his *Poetics*, which sketches the foundations of criticism and theory. Many modern philosophers have dedicated major books to literary investigations, like Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgment*, Hegel in the massive *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art,* Nietzsche (*The Birth of Tragedy),* Heidegger in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* which I was especially concerned with in the article you mention, to say nothing of such late twentieth century thinkers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricoeur. You may find that these philosophers do not make apology for addressing literature in their works. As far as they are concerned, criticism is a way of doing philosophy, where the focus is exclusively on the literary work of art. According to Jacques Derrida, criticism is in fact the 'philosophy of literature'. But within this philosophy of literature is to be distinguished 'thinking the sphere', as Heidegger calls it, a service, if you like, which philosophy renders to all academic disciplines, resulting in topics like philosophy of education, philosophy of science, and philosophy of law. But at the deeper level, for instance, where the history of a discipline is mapped out, the history of criticism is largely a survey of philosophizing on literature: between philosophy and the particular engagement with literature called criticism, there is no crossing of

thresholds. Until recently, criticism derived its principles of operation, analytic concepts, investigative strategies, and methods of demonstration by arguments and justifications entirely from philosophy. During the Renaissance, observed similitude was sufficient reason to make philosophical deductions; and speculative reason was all that was needed for demonstration. One strategy of demonstration, for example, would be to say that it was absurd if literature did not make men better. For speculative philosophy, if denying literature influence on men was absurd, it could be considered as, therefore, *self-evident* that literature influenced men for good. But evidence means something totally different in contemporary philosophy. It is concerned with *facts* found in the text. Under the Renaissance mentality, poetry was where striking similitudes were uncovered, and metaphysical poetry was to make what may be called a fine art of uncovering such similitudes. The major changes in philosophical method occurred in the late nineteenth century as a result of which there emerged such philosophical methods as pragmatism and phenomenology. With this, the rethinking of literature became necessary. Some of the pragmatists took the line that this at last was the fail-proof method of demonstrating that literature was a communicative practice, while some pursued the line of structuralist analytics, and giving demonstrations of constituent structure on the strength of textual evidence. Phenomenology took a broadly opposite direction from structuralist analytics: it aimed to perceive and describe the art-object as a made thing; as a totality, showing hardly any interest in how the thing came about. It found that both the art-object and the point of perception of it were forever shifting. This presented a challenge to phenomenology, which was committed to describing what it saw. Unlike structuralism, which uses scientific procedure in inquiring into what 'the thing consists of', phenomenology by focusing on the art-object itself, is advancing the discipline of ontology. In art, the fusion of matter and form has *already* occurred; so, how is this new thing to be grasped; how described; what is its nature? Phenomenology's understanding of mimesis is also rooted here: it is a fusion of matter and form. The outcome of this fusion is neither things by way of nature, as Aristotle calls them – 'mere things', according to Heidegger – nor 'equipment', namely the bulk of human productions, but a third thing: an *art-being*. As I have mentioned, there are bridge activities going on in criticism, imbricating criticism and some other discipline, such as linguistic science, psychoanalysis, and history – history goes a lot further back than the twentieth century. In fact, historicism, in its different forms, including post-colonialism basically repackages the old speculative logic. It says that literature is not written in a vacuum; therefore, it must be about the historical realities of the author's experience; therefore, it *is* about those historical realities. What passes for literary criticism then is reading the incidents in the text back to this doctrine.

AB: If you forgive a last question on your works, what is the entailment of your article, "Aristotle's Double Bequest to Literary Theory and Two Discourses of Truth"?

Prof. Akwanya: In elaborating a philosophy of literature, that is *criticism*, according to Derrida, the first question must be about the nature of literature. Closely related to this must be, what is the point of it? Some people start with this second question. But the best way to avoid error is to start with first things first. The second probably derives from the first. So, the ancients answer the question of the nature of poetry/literature in terms of *mimesis*, which Renaissance humanism understood and handed down through eighteenth century realism as *imitation*, later to be modernized as *representation*. Both postulate that there is something out there that poetry aims to capture. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: Representation of Reality in Western Literature* puts the matter in a nutshell. By contrast, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* understands the term in terms of autonomous constructions to be explained only by poetic form. The Auerbachian model is the version of mimesis that has been handed down in Nigerian institutions of literature, but popular as it may be, it is not, as Jesus would say, the complete truth. To see what really is at stake, there is need to go back to Aristotle – which is what the 20th century Aristotelians sought to do. There is nothing particularly challenging in thinking pictorial representation, but there is in thinking probability granting self-sufficiency to a work of art. In any event, modern translators of Aristotle, like Stephen Halliwell, and phenomenologists like Paul Ricoeur avoid translating the word at all and retain *mimesis* as the characterizing function of poetry. In Aristotle, mimesis is the output when reason acts on contingent matter in someone with the aptitude to make. The intelligent agent and contingent matter capture two out of his four-fold *causes* of what he calls substantial change. The other two are *form* and *purpose* (final cause). These are issues that underlie this article you are asking about, 'Aristotle's Double Bequest to Literary Theory and Two Discourses of Truth'. All the four causes are involved in his account of poetic mimesis, for a substantial change has occurred. The outcome of poetic mimesis, the mimetic object, may conform to something in the external world: Aristotle says that this is possible, and so seeing a statue can make the viewer think of some real person as the original, where aspects of the image correspond to the features of the real person. The artwork may therefore be marked by correspondence, the normal definition of truth. Art working in this way may be associated with the knowledge of things. But even though art can work in this way, it does not always do so: working up the knowledge of real things is not decisive for art. What is decisive rather is *probability*, which means, in simple terms, if the thing constituted by the artwork is conceivable. It can sustain thinking, and will not disintegrate if subjected to thought. It is this probability that in Aristotle gives art its dignity, as something, in his own words, philosophical and worthy of serious attention. Therefore, if a mimetic object does not resemble anything in the world of actuality, there is no problem at all, as long as it has probability. And this is where the second discourse of truth comes into play. The first is the truth of correspondence; the second is truth as *patency*. You know, there are statues of the gods, which have nothing to do with whether the gods exist or not. The statue of Zeus is patently Zeus, even though no one had ever seen Zeus to be able to ascertain the likeness. In Igbo folklore, there are spirits with half-heads; and they are probable, even if unlikely. The narrative constitutes and supports these half-headed spirits; and that is where they exist – in these narratives. So these two dimensions of truth are in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and both are sustained by mimesis. Aristotle does not rule between

them, but underscores what they share in common, namely probability, and explains that poetry based on a real event has the property of probability, otherwise the event could not happen in the first place.

AB: Could you offer your view of Northrop Frye's famous work *Anatomy of Criticism*, particularly his account of drama?

Prof. Akwanya: His account of drama? Yes, as elaboration of the rhythm of decorum. Drama is a very complex literary form. Remove the stage direction, which is not really part of the drama; for stage direction is not literature; is not poetry: so the poem consists entirely of dialogue. What each character says is appropriate insofar as it is his/her own thoughts. So if the playwright puts words into their mouths, it will become apparent at once. But what he says about drama as poetry is scattered throughout the text, just like his discussion of narrative and lyric. Of course in his Polemical Introduction, he discusses tragedy, comedy, and so on. But as he makes clear, these are not necessarily dramatic modes. They are modes of action that literature could take, whether in lyric or dramatic or narrative form. *Anatomy of Criticism*, in my thinking, is one of the really important works of the discipline of criticism or literary studies. If there were a course in the English and Literary Studies programme called *Foundations of Criticism* – there really should be – I would put Frye's book there. There is so much in it that I consider essential information for students of literary studies: the elucidation of myth in terms of recurrence in the natural cycle; the account of mimetic levels and their accompanying protagonists; the role of poetic form in making concrete poems; the theory of genres as rhythmic enactments. Any poem, regardless of its surface configuration, as Hegel calls it – the specific incidents that interconnect to make it up – has its place: you can find in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* the principles and the deep structure movements – transformations, if you will – that explain it. He calls criticism a science: this work shows that the word is seriously meant. The *Anatomy* elaborates both the nature of criticism and the deep structure constituents, with their internal movements and exchanges, which are shared by poems – literary works – of all kinds. If this seminal work be allowed to play its role in teaching criticism, (a) there could be no ambiguity about the object of literary criticism, that it is the literary work of art, nothing more, nothing less (b) the critic would have at his disposition the basics, the entry point, and the analytic framework for any work of art, no matter how complex. The book also does a great job of presenting the history of literary concepts and criticism, without arranging it into epochs and centuries, but almost conversationally, as an 'arising', in the course of presenting his four treatises – he calls them *Essays* – on the Modes of literature, the archetypes, and so on.

AB: Prof., an accurate – faultless − definition of literature has always been difficult to achieve. What, in your perspective, is literature?

Prof. Akwanya: You know, the definition is quite simple and straightforward if we would go back to Aristotle. It is mimesis by means of language alone. This is a key issue in 'Aristotle's Double Bequest to Literary Theory and Two Discourses of Truth', and there is a diagrammatic representation of this definition in the article, with two intersecting planes of which one is *language*, the other *mimesis;* and the point of intersection is the field of literature, or poetry, as Aristotle calls it. Literature is not language, but a language whose mode of being is *mimesis*. And so, what is *mimesis?* That is the characterizing function of art: whatever is mimesis is art; whatever is art is mimesis. Literature is art means that it is the art form that takes place by means of language alone. Problems arise when people try to craft the definition to address what they use art for, or the various things that may be used in constructing a poem. But while the things people can use art for are potentially limitless, the building materials for a house are not the house. With Aristotle, we are looking at the essence of poetry, which the mind may know apart from a concrete literary work. Mimesis was anciently translated into English as imitation, applying Plato's use of the term universally, even in translating Aristotle's *Poetics*. In Aristotle, poetic *mimesis* is an arrangement of incidents with a beginning, middle, and end, so that it makes up a whole and complete action. If the construction resembles something in reality, Aristotle would say, that's all right; if it does not resemble anything, he would say, fine: things should be like that. So it is a self-contained construction, not to be validated by anything but its own internal requirements. Aristotle is perfectly understood by Martin Heidegger and richly re-elaborated in his *Poetry, Language, Thought*, a book worth the trouble for any literary scholar.

AB: And "literary criticism" - what is it? And the practices appropriate to it?

Prof. Akwanya: Literary criticism is the professional and technical – Northrop Frye would say, the scientific – way of dealing with literature. It is an ancient discipline, its foundations in ancient Greek philosophy. I remember an old book entitled *Ten Great Works of Philosophy*. The representative work of Aristotle in that book is his *Poetics*, the same work where we must go for the foundations of literary criticism. Literary criticism is in simple terms a judgment exercised on a literary text whereby it is determined what kind of object it really is; at the same time, it is made explicit the grounds on which the judgment is made – in terms of 'the requirements of the art', as Aristotle calls these criteria, and the properties of the text that is the target of this study. As a discipline, it teaches the discovery procedures of the literary, with the techniques and criteria applied in this process. In other words, the literary critic need not know beforehand what kind of object he or she is faced with, but the signs become apparent in reading, and he/she can formalize this discovery in what the poststructuralists call a *reading*, that is, a critical account in writing; that is, criticism. In reading, a critic will see, as Northrop Frye puts it, that the text before him is a language that exists for its own sake. Many will not want to hear this. But that is what it is from the foundations, that the poem is whole and complete: *whole and complete* are Aristotle's words, *holen kai teleian*. Heidegger expresses it in terms of the *workly character* of the poem, namely its self-sufficient, self-subsisting, and self-contained existence. The idea of the death of the author, by the way, is another mode of expressing the work-being of the poem. The poem, the work of art, needs nothing for a support – not the author, not society, not history; it does not need even geography to support it. It is whole and complete.

AB: As you retire this year, Prof., is there adequate preparedness in place for the future of *Okike*: *An African Journal of New Writing* which you edit? Any future plans in the academia elsewhere? Or, will you now only commit to propagating the gospel?

Prof. Akwanya: Okike has a Board, and it is up to the Board to ensure that it endures. So it will take whatever decisions are necessary when I retire. On my own retirement: I believe I have earned it. So I will take a good break and rest and catch my breath so to say. Then I will see what next.
AB: You have many achievements in the course of your academic career, I know. But what is the one accomplishment that you hold in the highest esteem?
Prof. Akwanya: I have a passion for literary studies; I mean, it is not for me a way of engaging something else, whether it be religion or economics, education or politics, ecology, or geography or geology (why exclude those?). So, an academic discipline; and yes, a professional area. When I first started lecturing, I was taken aback to hear students being told to forget Achebe, Okigbo, Okara and try their hands on new writers, for there was nothing they could say about the old writers that had not been said already. Soyinka was not encouraged, as he was said to be difficult. I did not teach African literature, except for one or two semesters when I had to supply for the lecturer on African poetry who was away. But if I had occasion to mention John Munonye or T.M. Aluko, or Nkem Nwankwo, or T. Obinkaram Echewa, and such names, or any of Tutuola's works apart from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, or any of Elechi Amadi's works apart from *The Concubine*, I hardly ever saw a student who had heard of those. Among these old writers, there are important literary works. I have done a bit of work on some of those, and encouraged research on the entire literary tradition. It is a tradition: it has to have roots. I have done work on Soyinka; I have done even more on Achebe, if only to show that he has not been exhausted as alleged. Far from it. The study has hardly begun, if only the reading would be done with the concentration needed.
AB: Any regrets in your career?
Prof. Akwanya: One aspect of my life I would have liked to have been able to give greater weight is creative writing, especially the novel. But it had to take a secondary position in my career. Well, let us see how things go during my retirement.
AB: Best of luck with your valedictory lecture and your retirement, Prof!
Prof. Akwanya: Thank you very much.

Endnotes

[1] Andrew Bula
[2] Amechi Nicholas Akwanya