The Significance of Ngugi's Recent Writing: or Why Ngugi wa Thiong'o May Not Want the Nobel Prize (and Why He Should Get It)

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This paper grows out of a longterm concern, or anxiety, I've had about which
African novels get into American, or British consciousness--which get most
discussed, which get taught, which make it into the informal canon. The
achievement of the immediate pre-and post-Independence novels established a
short list of what must be read first--Things Fall Apart, Boy, Dark Child, A
Man of the People, The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born, and so on. The canon
is there, chronological priority has become pedagogic necessity, and the
result has been that African literature courses concentrate on a rather thin
slice of African history and experience, and on particular ways of writing
about that thin slice. The problem is not wholly a matter of this priority,
because it also relates to aesthetic criteria--to the kind of writing that is
let through, or screened out, from joining what is by now a crowded canon.

For instance, many college-level African courses include writing by the
Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, but most frequently the text is one of
his early novels from mid-1960s, The River Between or Weep, Not Child. But
Ngugi's fiction has been through a dramatic change since the 1960s, initially
into a kind of complexity too difficult for the average undergraduate class.
But his latest novel, Matigari, is eminently teachable, and relates directly
to many of the issues discussed in other African courses. If you get the
African literature teacher's package from Heinemann (much the cheapest way to
get African course-texts), you get only the early novels, just as you get
two of Achebe's early novels, but not his more recent Anthills of the
Savannah. It seems to me as much Matigari's politics and its links to modern oral and popular tradition that have screened it out, as any considered or timeless aesthetic judgment. It seems to me not only a recent book by a major novelist, and an accessible book, but an important book in the issues it makes us confront about reading modern African literature, and the terms on which it has gained EuroAmerican recognition.

The Nobel Prize record provides a relevant sidelight on these issues. We commonly think of the Nobel literature prize as a kind of aesthetic world championship, an Olympic gold medal for creative writers, yet through much of the past ninety years, it has not been a world competition. The Nobel winners have been overwhelmingly European or North American. For thirty years or more, sub-Saharan Africa has nurtured some of the most significant writing anywhere, yet to date only one Nobel award has gone to a black African writer, Wole Soyinka of Nigeria; if, like many older readers with African interests, one remembers waiting year after year during the late nineteen-sixties for the Swedish Academy to recognize the achievement of Chinua Achebe, the Soyinka award in 1986 seemed both belated and a little eccentric. Yet only the embittered or the cynical would predict that Soyinka's award can stand for long as the Nobel committee's sole nod towards modern African writing.

One of the liveliest of African essayists, Chinweizu, has argued that the Nobel prize system is irrelevant to Africa, that the prize is simply "a bewitching instrument for Euro-imperialist intellectual hegemony," resting on the ridiculous "conceit that a gaggle of Swedes, all by themselves, should pronounce on intellectual excellence for the diverse cultures of the world" (Decolonizing the African Mind, Lagos: Porto Publications, 1987, p. 175). The prize system, Chinweizu suggests, encourages African writers to "mimic fashionable styles from Western literature," and even when writers "contrive" to make their works "appear authentic products of the African
"tradition," they may only be peddling "sophisticated literary versions of airport art," "to satisfy the Western tourist case for exotica" (p. 181).

Perhaps unfairly, Soyinka, whose writings show close technical links to European modernism, features as Chinwiezu's prime exhibit of the Nobel Committee's preference for politically-tame authors of "Euro-assimilationist" tendencies. Along the same lines, it was an expatriate Nigerian magical-realist, Ben Okri, who won the British Booker Prize a couple of years ago, for a very powerful first novel novel, a fantasy The Famished Road, developed in a British creative writing class, rather than the later works of a politically-astringent writer like Ngugi.

The Nobel Prize committee, the Booker judges, and we ourselves as syllabus builders, needs to ask what variety of voices, of perspectives, we are open to. On African syllabuses, particularly, we need to examine texts that represent a variety of current Africas, not just the cultural polarities of the Negritude and Independence generations.

In particular, Ngugi's later work, though it has been translated, raises the question of language and audience. The many works over the years published in African languages surely should be of special importance for EuroAmerican understanding of Africa, just because they were not initially intended for a non-African readership; as the Belgian scholar Albert Gerard showed in his pioneering survey African-Language Literatures (Washington: Three Continents, 1981), these literatures are much more numerous, and have been reaching print for a much longer period, than most commentators had previously realized. In the middle decades of this century, immediately before and after the end of colonial rule, it appeared "obvious" that African writers would increasingly produce their major works in the ex-colonial languages, even when trying to incorporate literary features from an appropriate African-language oral tradition. Now, in spite of the publication obstacles, that projection
seems much less obvious, and in many countries there has been a marked
increase in the recognition given to modern African-language writing.

It is out of these background concerns that I believe we need to
reexamine Ngugi's later career, and be prepared to teach those later works
which the international reviewing community seems to have screened out. Ngugi
is a writer of obvious world stature, whose major books have already appeared
in French, German, and Portuguese, as well as in English and (for later works)
Gikuyu and Swahili. There is a clear *prima facie* case for taking his chosen
development in fiction very seriously, and examining it in the undergraduate
classroom. It provides almost a textbook case of issues that the traditional
African literature course tends to gloss over. W r i t i n g s are not better known
to American readers.

Born in 1938, Ngugi has so far published six major novels, as well as
plays, literary and cultural criticism, short stories, and children's
books. He was educated at Makerere University, in Uganda, and for a number
of years he was a professor and chair of the Literature department at the
University of Nairobi. Since 1981, he has lived in political exile in
London, but (in words Ngugi has himself quoted from Bakhtin) "it is
possible to objectivize one's own particular language... only in the
light of another language belonging to somebody else," and the paradoxical
result of his enforced separation from Kenya has been to strengthen, rather
than weaken, his self-commitment to what was long considered the risky
cause of African-language literature.

He did not start out as an African-language writer. Indeed his (very
successful) early novels appeared, not only in English, but under the
English-form name "James Ngugi." Right from the publication of *Weep Not
Child* (1964), Ngugi has been widely recognized as one of the most
sensitive, technically-accomplished, and morally-committed of African
writers. That novel, and The River Between (written first, but published in 1966), were representative of their generation, exploring the cultural dilemmas of the colonial situation, especially as it was experienced by young mission-educated Kenyans. These novels present strongly the conflicts of Kenya in the nineteen-fifties (the so-called Mau-Mau Emergency), as the British colonial government tried to repress the forest-based resistance fight against settler alienation of Gikuyu land. The River Between, in particular, includes in the political equation a Gikuyu cultural heritage, and both books remain powerful and shocking in realizing the physical violence of the Emergency period, yet the ethos of these early novels is predominantly individual and humanist.

Ngugi's third novel, A Grain of Wheat (1967), is technically much more complex, moving forwards in time to incorporate post-colonial Kenya's collective rewriting of the resistance fighting of the fifties. It interweaves the interior monologues, part memory, part stream of consciousness, of four principal characters, during the preparations for Kenya's Independence celebrations. It is something of a mystery-novel or whodunit, too, because one of the four had been responsible for betraying a famous freedom fighter to the British, though all four experience guilt and self-doubt. In a sense, the technical bravura of the novel's complex narrative method underscores human fallibility to such an extent that the novel's positive values (the commitment to freedom and loyalty and the rightness of the resistance struggle) come to seem almost impossibly remote from the shortcomings of actual human behavior. Though I would not myself rest the case for Ngugi's greatness on this phase of Ngugi's development, A Grain of Wheat by itself demonstrates an aesthetic mastery well in the Nobel class.

During the nineteen-seventies, Ngugi's work began to change in
direction. Angst gave way to anger, and anger, in turn, found its
grounding in a new affirmation. In literary terms, Ngugi enriched his
full-length fiction with elements from the more popular forms of the short
story and drama. Such stories as "A Mercedes Funeral" and "Wedding at the
Cross" (both in Ngugi's collection Secret Lives, 1975) show a much clearer
narrative structure (based in part on oral story-telling) and a much
broader satire on post-colonial social divisions, than anything in Ngugi's
erlier work. Ngugi's co-authored play about a Kenyan freedom-fighter, The
Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976) juxtaposes horrific cameos of colonial
repression with a rather Brecht-like use of mime and dance and song (it
tells one a lot about Kenya in the period that he had difficulty getting it
staged because the Kenyan National Theater had a prior booking for A Funny
Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum). The new aesthetic freedom shown
in the stories and play characterizes also Ngugi's novel Petals of Blood
(1977), an angry satire on modern economic development and its impact on
the people of a small Kenyan village. By this stage, Ngugi's understanding
of the villagers' betrayal by the new Kenyan elite clearly links the
traditional Gikuyu concern with land to Marxian economic analysis, but far
more than most Marxist-influenced fiction, Ngugi's presentation rests on a
rich sense of individual people and their interwoven personal stories.

During the mid-seventies, too, Ngugi became directly involved outside
the university, in community education, and here the issues of both
language and politics grew sharper. In 1977, Ngugi and a community theater
specialist, Ngugi wa Miri, joined with the Kamiriith community to build an
open-air theater and to develop Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I
want), a pageant-drama of Kenyan history in the Gikuyu language. The play
clearly evoked a new consciousness in its Gikuyu audience, and it was
enormously successful, but it led very soon to a police crackdown, to the
razing of the theater, and to Ngugi's own extended imprisonment without trial (see Ngugi's Detained. A Writer's Prison Diary, 1981). Furthermore, on his release from detention in December 1978, Ngugi was excluded from his university position.

It was in detention that Ngugi drafted (on standard prison-issue toilet paper) what is for me his greatest book, his first novel in Gikuyu, Caithani Mutharabaini (1980). It is the story of how "the Devil appeared to Jacinta Wariinga one Sunday on a golf course in the town of Ilmorog." This young Kenyan woman has received an invitation from Satan to attend a "Festival of Thieves," at which the centerpiece is a wonderful satiric-dramatic contest between seven Kenyan capitalists to prove themselves the champion thief in Kenya (my favorite is the one who wants to take air from the sky, put it in cans, and sell it to the peasants: "we could even import some air from abroad, imported air, that we could then sell to the people at special prices," but he is soon outbid by the man who, learning of Professor Barnard's South African heart transplants, wants the government to set up "a factory for manufacturing human parts... so that a rich man who could afford them could have two or three mouths, two bellies, two cocks," so that he can maximize personal consumption and help economic growth). The book is not solely satiric, counterposing to its main political theme the very touching, if ultimately doomed, love-story of Wariinga and a young bourgeois-intellectual musicologist, and interweaving the satire with epic or Biblical passages. In the original Gikuyu, the book became so popular that people read it aloud in bars, but even in Ngugi's subsequent English translation (Devil on the Cross, 1982), it is a page-turning book that bowls one over, whatever one's initial ideological reservations.

Since then, through nearly a decade in political exile, Ngugi has
published several further volumes---criticism, history, and autobiography---
trying to explain what underlies the confrontatior between the Kenyan
authorities and his kind of political activism. His most recent novel
Matigari (first published in Gikuyu in October 1986) is a satiric fable
about a former forest-fighter who travels through modern Kenya seeking
"truth and justice" (and the restoration of family land), but finds only
double-talk and oppression. Again, along with satiric cameos like that of
the Professor of Parrotology, there are stunning "documentary" synecdoches,
like the group of orphans camping out in a junkyard of wrecked Mercedes-
Benzes. Matigari is an angry book, advocating a proletarian struggle with
guns, not just words. The initial London reviews of the English translation
ranged from distant to hostile---"a superb work of agit-prop," "a novel of
Christ as an African Che Guevara," "bizarre," "besieged . . . alarming,"
"stock characters," "a poster . . . from the socialist realist school of art,"
"a tedious harangue," "crude despite the conviction of its utterance." Nothing
criticized that much can be without content, at the least. In fact, the book
is a very easy read, fast-moving, with lots of incident, and a moving
modulation between lyric, interior monologue, satire, and religious
mythologizing. It raises issues about international investment, dependency
theory, the role of government-controlled media, the role of cultural and
educational institutions in maintaining political authority, the continuity of
these issues elites in Kenya, and so on, which are the bread and butter of African politics
courses, but are seldom confronted in literature courses. In short, you have a
good chance that at least some of your students will want to criticize or
argue with Ngugi, on issues of substance, and that they will learn more about
African literature, contemporary African society, and themselves, in doing
so. This grows directly from oral myth in contemporary Kenya about surviving
resistance forest fighters, and it raises questions too about the role of
popular apocalyptic religious movements as radical or counter-cultural, the
embodiment of a recurrent religio-political ideal, rather than simply
political opium. It is unsurprising that the Gikuyu version was removed from
bookstores by the police soon after publication. Nonetheless, Matigari,
though shorter and simpler than Ngugi’s earlier books, is imaginatively
persuasive, recognizably from the hand that wrote the major novels.

By now, the arguments reasons for taking the later Ngugi seriously, even
for naming him as a Nobel winner should be clear. First, to teach the later
Ngugi is to recognize the validity and power of the return back to African-
language literatures, he is the major instance of a African writer with an
initial European-language reputation who has committed himself to this
development. For more than a decade now, since 1977, all his creative writing
has first appeared in Gikuyu, and in his volume of essays Decolonizing the
Mind (1986) he bade “farewell to English” as his primary vehicle even for non-
fiction prose. His latest collection, Moving the Centre, published last year,
is more internationalist in flavor, but still firmly Afrocentric; his comments
on Geertz’s “local knowledge” anthropology is revealing. Far more successfully
and powerfully than any other modern African writer, he has managed to retain
through translation a world readership, while asserting the linguistic
centrality of his Kenyan audience.

Second, to teach the later Ngugi is to recognize, and help one’s students
confront, the validity and success of the cultural role-reversal his work
embodies. It is easy enough to point out aspects of his work (especially the
earlier work) that draw from the Leavisite English literary canon he had
confronted at Makerere and later at Leeds—Lawrentian lyricism, a Conradian
irony, a tough Hardyan sense of the inexplicably tragic—, and the English
translations suggest that even in the later works, he continues to use
Biblical imagery and resonances. Nor need one ignore the fact that Marx and
Brecht are European writers. But patently, in the mature work, Ngugi has taken these "influences" on his own terms, and he centers his work in African story-telling traditions. In his critical and polemical works, he had long argued for this kind of cultural recentering; it is advocated in, for instance, his 1968 memo "On the Abolition of the English Department," printed in Homecoming (1972), as well as in later books such as his Writers in Politics (1981). But Ngugi has also successfully exemplified the recentering and embodied it in his later fiction. European culture becomes non-authoritative, simply one kind of raw material or cultural territory that the African writer may choose to exploit or appropriate.

Thirdly, the later Ngugi should be examined because it has successfully crossed the great divide between high culture and popular culture. This is not just part of a political program, for Ngugi's involvement with popular audiences long antedates any overt Marxist commitment; in the early nineteen-sixties, while Soyinka was writing modernist poetry, Ngugi was a columnist for a Kenyan newspaper. Nor is it just a matter, as with some earlier African writers, of elite high culture taking over motifs from some safely-antiquarian African folklore tradition. What Ngugi has done is something slightly different. Through his involvement in community education and theater, he has exposed himself to the shaping influence of a selected current oral culture, and to the values of contemporary working-class Gikuyu. In a sense, the subject matter of his writing has been increasingly the collective stories of popular culture—-the colonial resistance-fighters, the loss of land, political corruption, the shared economic struggle of common Kenyans. The aesthetic effects on his work, in strengthening narrative structure and emboldening the characterization, have been both marked and positive, and in spite of his political marginalization and exile, and the banning of his later books in Kenya itself, there is evidence that these later works, which have learnt from
popular culture, have also spoken to it; what other writer is there who, within a year of publishing a novel, finds, as Ngugi found with Matigari, that his hero has struck such a chord in popular response that for a time the police were under orders immediately to arrest this wholly fictional character?

In a recent essay, Ngugi has asserted that "all great national literatures have rooted themselves in the culture and language of the peasantry," but he also comments on the values such national literatures hold for those of other cultures. The writers who work in the "revitalized African languages," he argues, are also creating a new transnational literature of cultural resistance that is "an integral part of the modern world" ("Return of the native tongue," Times Literary Supplement, September 14 1990, pp. 972, 981). Certainly, Ngugi’s career, and his recent books, represent one of the major achievements within more recent African new literature. His later books articulate a wide range of cultural questions, and a cultural voice, that our students need to argue over, if they are to deepen their understanding of contemporary Africa, not just empathize with Africa’s experience during the time of their grandparents.