



A Globalectical Imagination

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

As William Blake saw eternity in an hour, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues for an ethics of reading that assumes the interconnectedness of time and space in the area of human thought and action. This globalectical approach reads every center as a center of the world and each text as its mirror.

I have often responded to questions about the role of a writer or artist in society by saying that I try to examine issues arising from the organization of wealth, power, and values that impinge on the quality of human life. In the preface to his book *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling expressed not too dissimilar sentiments when he wrote that it was “no longer possible to think of politics except as the politics of culture, the organization of human life toward some end or other, toward the modification of sentiments, which is to say the quality of human life.”

I may have picked the phrase from him, for I remember looking at his book way back in the early 1960s when, as a student of English at Makerere University College, I was beginning to explore the connection between literature and society. Trilling wrote some of these essays against the background of the Cold War, and as Louis Menand wrote in the introduction to the 2008 reissue of the collection, he had intended it to be an attack on Stalinism. He was a member of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom

founded in 1951. Interestingly, I began writing in the early 1960s, when African countries were emerging from colonialism only to be caught up in the politics of the Cold War. My writing was against the *ism* of colonialism, but we were also caught up in the cultural politics of the Cold War. In fact, the first major conference of African writers of English expression held in Kampala, Uganda, in 1962, organized by the Society for Cultural Freedom, was later found to have been funded by the CIA.

I see some other links. Trilling was a scholar of Matthew Arnold. I too had had a good dose of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. His articulation of the mission of culture as the pursuit of happiness by means of getting to know “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” and that culture sought “to do away with classes, to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere,” stuck in my mind. Trilling's liberal imagination, or rather, the liberal part of it, is imbued with the spirit of Arnold's articulation of the mission of culture. But the word *imagina-*

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tion is all the more intriguing, under whatever political system, then or now.

Imagination is the most central formative agency in human society. An architect visualizes a building before he captures it on paper for the builder. Without imagination, we cannot visualize the past or the future. Religions would be impossible, for how would one visualize deities except through imagination? It's because we can imagine different futures that we can struggle against the present state of things. The arts and the imagination are dialectically linked. Imagination makes possible the arts. The arts feed the imagination in the same way that food nourishes the body and ethics the soul. The writer, the singer, the sculptor—the artist in general—symbolize and speak to the power of imagination to intimate possibilities even within apparently impossible situations.

Imagination is the most democratic attribute of the human: kings and plebeians, adults and children, graduates of the ivory tower and of the street are equal before it; money cannot help one accumulate and hoard imagination. Imagination crosses boundaries, even those imposed by the present.

That is why, time and again, the state tries to imprison the artist symbolically and, in reality, limit the imaginative space of a society. Every imperial state has always wanted its citizenry to embrace Leibnizian optimism: Why fret? We have the best of all possible worlds. The state can achieve the same ends by limiting the space of the artist or their products by killing, detaining, and exiling the artist, or by censorship. But the imagination is no respecter of boundaries of time and space.

Yet the state is not the only force that can restrict the operation of imagination and the healthy consumption of the products of imagination. There are other ways of arresting the imagination or rather the full impact of its products. These need not be obviously political or intentionally aimed at such restrictions. The most common of these ways, and of which we may all be guilty from time to time, is putting the products of imagination in the prison house of a narrow view of the world or rather in the prison house of reading. This can manifest itself in the reading of any text, but it is often seen in the organization and reading of literatures, in the imperial tradition of the colonizer and colonized.

Every imperial state has always put its own national literature at the center, conceived as the only center of the literary universe. In my most recent memoir, *In the House of the Interpreter*, I have shown how Shakespeare, a writer most beloved by the colonial order, occupied a central place in colonial education. One could have been hanged for possessing Marx's *Communist Manifesto* but embraced for possessing a copy of Shakespeare. Yet Shakespeare dramatized class struggle and the notion that power came from and was maintained by the violence of the sword—in our world today, by tanks and drones—long before Marx and Engels discussed it as theory. But the colonial state had faith that Shakespeare could be taught safely as a “mindless” genius. Thus, they trusted the narrow view of interpreting texts to do its work and mutilate Shakespeare. Macbeth's bloody dagger could be explained away as the result of blind ambition, a fatal character flaw. It was a power grab through assassination. A globalectical reading of Shakespeare would have freed him from colonial and imperial prisons. Imperial nations had taken power by the sword—maintained it by the sword—and the colonized could only grab it back by the sword. Today, a Fanonian reading of Shakespeare would yield contemporary relevance even for students outside the imperial perimeters. It's not just Shakespeare, Goethe, or Balzac. A certain reading of postcolonial literatures can equally straitjacket the ethical and aesthetic vision.

That's why, in my book *Globalectics*, I have argued for globalectical readings of texts and literatures. Globalectics assumes the interconnectedness of time and space in the area of human thought and action. It's best articulated in the words of my all-time favorite poet, William Blake, when he talked about seeing the world in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour. Any text, even human encounters, can be read globalectically.

I have found the globalectical perspective useful in writing my memoirs, *Dreams in a Time of War* and *In the House of the Interpreter*. On looking back, I can see that some events in our rural village were direct echoes of the world. I was born in 1938, and my early childhood was against the background of the Second World War: I was connected to the forests of Burma because my half-brother fought there as a British soldier

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from colonial Kenya. I have cited an incident when he came home with a group of soldiers one rainy night and the army lorry got stuck in the mud. He and his fellow soldiers spent their entire homecoming trying to get it out of the mud, but not before it had slid and hit my mother's hut, which for months later leaned on one side. My mud-walled grass-thatched hut may not have had the same significance as the leaning tower of Pisa, but it was my castle, and the Second World War had intruded into it. The nineteenth-century colonial railway lines opened the interior of the African continent in the same way they had done in America and Russia. A course organized on the basis of railroad and capitalist expansion can bring together Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, my own *A Grain of Wheat*, and the western.

In writing my memoirs, I was surprised to find a connection between the Kenyan African-independence school movement of which my primary school was part and the Garveyite politics in the streets of Harlem. Booker T. Washington's idea of self-reliance had migrated from his conservative notion of relations between whites and blacks in America to animate the idea of Africans and Caribbeans being able to manage their own affairs in politics, business, and religion, and therefore doing away with the colonial state, school, and church. My high school, where *In the House of the Interpreter* is centered, was the most English and elitist of all African secondary schools in colonial Kenya and founded on recommendations of the 1922 Phelps-Stokes Commission for Education in East Africa. The commission itself was molded on similar commissions for African American and Native American education. Many Kenyan readers of my memoir are surprised to find historical connections between the country's educational programs and those of African Americans and Native Americans.

Globalectical reading is a matter of both quantity and quality. The quantity is in the spread of texts across cultures and histories. In this, literature can learn from orature. The traveler of old, on foot, boat, or horseback, was a carrier of tales from one location to another. The stories would of course be retold and acquire

local color depending on the teller of tales. The tale was not confined to the national homeland or region. The translator is the modern traveler who brings in one language what he or she has gotten from another. The great tradition of literary intertextuality, including recasting one story from one cultural context into another place and time—the reinterpretation of Greek classics into modern non-European cultures, for instance—is itself a form of translation.

A globalectical imagination also calls for changes in attitudes to languages: monolingualism suffocates, and it is often extended to mean monoliterature and monoculturalism. This also calls for a struggle against the view of literatures (languages and cultures) relating to each other in terms of a hierarchy of power. "My literature is more aristocratic than yours"—that kind of approach should be replaced by the give-and-take inherent in the notion of networks. I like Césaire's phrase that culture contact and exchange were the oxygen of civilization. Césaire's *A Discourse on Colonialism* is actually very global in its references and even in its reading of history: it's a text that could be read for classes in European, Asian, and African studies, but it is often read as a tirade against old colonialism.

But the globalectical approach is still a method of both organizing and reading literatures: any text can lead the reader from the "here" of one's existence to the "there" of other people's existence and back. In organizing the teaching of world literature, a reader should start from wherever he or she is located. The imperial approach wanted people from whatever corner of the globe to start from one imperial center, the metropolis of the empire, as the only center. A globalectical imagination assumes that any center is the center of the world. Each specific text can be read as a mirror of the world.

A globalectical imagination allows us to crack open a word, gesture, encounter, any text—it enables a simultaneous engagement with the particularity of the Blakean grain of sand and the universality in the notion of the world.

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