

CHINUA ACHEBE “THE NOVELIST AS TEACHER” (1965)

Here, Achebe is interested in the “complex of relationships” (27) that exists between African writers and “our readers” (27) which is not the same, he claims, as that which exists between a European writer and his audience. He agrees that a novel affords the novelist an “opportunity for education” (28) but the education he is thinking of is not the same as the moralising which European theorists from Plato to Richards are concerned with. The African writer is more concerned with the importance of combatting “our acceptance of . . . racial inferiority” (29) by confronting the “disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races” (29). The revolution which he espouses is:

to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the ‘African personality’; of African democracy; of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan’t need them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better. . . . The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. . . . I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels . . . did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. (30)

Achebe refers to this as “applied art” (30).