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On the State of Amharic Literary Scholarship

Yonas Admassu

Introduction

My aim in this brief essay is two-directional: first, the essay is aimed at pointing out some misconceptions, faulty assumptions and unwarranted, sweeping generalizations about Amharic literature that I particularly observed in those few works by expatriate scholars, who, to their credit, and as opposed to their Ethiopian counterparts, have attempted a more or less 'comprehensive' study of the literature. Obviously, this does not mean that Ethiopian scholars have not made any attempt in this respect. A cursory glance, for example, at the M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations as well as journal articles written by students and university professors is an indication of the growing interest in Amharic literary research. Virtually all of these studies, however, whether crude or refined, are what I would like to call 'specialized' studies, in the sense that they deal with such aspects of fiction as 'characterization', 'setting', 'form', 'style', 'points of view', etc. While such works contribute to our understanding of individual fictional works and to the art of fiction writing in Amharic, they do not (neither are they meant to) answer the apparently simple but delicate and complex question: what do writers of fiction in Amharic write about? The answer to which, in my opinion, would not simply be: 'love', 'marriage of unequals', 'abduction', 'eloping', 'getting lost and found', 'prostitution', 'patriotism', etc., subjects that are not peculiar to Amharic literature alone, if such a question is meant to address the problematic of getting an insight into what we may call, in general terms, the 'nature of narrative' in Amharic.

Having pointed out the misconceptions, assumptions and sweeping generalizations I have in mind, by way of negatively showing, at least, how not to talk or write about Amharic literature, I shall then proceed to my second aim: that of suggesting ways of conceiving of Amharic literature and indicating possible future directions literary scholarship in the language can take and, in some cases, should take. The essay does not attempt to develop any definitive 'program' for the study of Amharic literature but suggests what we may call 'possibilities of reading', taking as much care as one could to avoid the pitfalls of being prescriptive, one of the tendencies that the essay itself sets out to critique.

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2. The Literature Under Review: The Discontents of Amharic Literature

Excluding, unfortunately, the numerous works inaccessible to me because of language barriers (I am thinking of works by expatriates who wrote in Italian, French and German), one may start with Stephen G. Wright's "Amharic Literature," which appeared in the very first issue of Something, the literary magazine of the then University College of Addis Ababa (undated, probably 1963). Since then, we have Albert X. Gérard's "Amharic Creative Literature: The Early Phase" (Journal of Ethiopian Studies, Vol. 6, No. 2, July 1968), later expanded and incorporated in his bulky volume titled Four African Literatures (1971) under a chapter titled "Amharic Literature," wider in scope but not that much different from the earlier version in its general orientation. Then we have an article of a relatively substantial size (about 33 pages) by Joanna Mantel-Niečko, titled "Ethiopian Literature in Amharic," which appeared in Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys, edited by B. W. Andrzejewski et al. (1985). By far the most important works on Amharic literature are, in the order they appeared, Thomas L. Kane's Ethiopian Literature in Amharic (1975) and Reidulf K. Molvær's Tradition and Change in Ethiopia: Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Writing, ca. 1930-1974 (1980).

All the works cited here, except for differences in scope and orientation, treat Amharic literature in more or less the same manner. The attempts of the authors, expressed or discerned, have to do with providing the reader (particularly non-Amharic speakers who might otherwise be interested in knowing 'something' about the subject) with a general survey of Amharic literature from its early days up to what they refer to as its modern stage. The only exception is Molvær, whose aim is to map out the different customs, beliefs and attitudes of Ethiopians, using the bulk of the fictional works he examined as sources.

What most of these scholars share, however, is the method of chronological listing and description of works, with a sprinkle (in some instances, in fact, with quite unnecessary doses) of biographical sketches of their authors, so that their works appear to be less about the literature than a parade of books and personalities, thereby tending to confuse the process of studying the literature qua literature with "the problems of the [authors'] private lives," as Wellek and Warren (1984) have put it. To the extent that the works in question are read as providing a general knowledge of who wrote what and when, one should not fault them with what they did not set out to do in the first place. One could leave the matter at that if that was all there is to it. What one finds disconcerting and, in some instances, simply preposterous, are the attitudes assumed by some of the scholars about Amharic literature and the inevitable assumptions and generalizations arising from those attitudes. It is to this aspect of their 'studies' that I will now draw the attention of my readers, mainly by way of pointing out some of the inexcusable misconceptions they have about the literature,
some due to haste, others due, perhaps, to excited knowledgeability, resulting in naive or silly remarks, or revealing ignorance about the language where reasonable knowledge appears to have been unabashedly claimed. Let us have a closer look at what the different scholars considered in this essay have to say about Amharic literature, whether in terms of individual authors and their works or the literature in general.

In the 'Introduction' to his book, Thomas Kane has the following to say, perhaps with sad concern, about writers of Amharic fiction: "what is seriously lacking among all [my italics] writers is the willingness to confront life as it is lived in Ethiopia and to observe carefully and probe deeply in their search for understanding (p. 2). In his review of Molvær's Tradition and Change in Ethiopia, published in Silence is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature, Hailu Fullass cites these same words of Kane, and after giving credit to Molvær for his observation that Ethiopian authors indeed write at close quarters about their society, considers Kane's remark as being "accusatory without being explanatory in a critical sense," admonishes such 'critics' as Kane for such unwarranted generalizations and cautions them to "observe carefully and probe deeply in their search for understanding literary works written in languages and cultural settings different from theirs" (p. 116).

In a similar vein, but coming from a different direction, Mantel-Nieko cautions: ". . . in evaluating contemporary Amharic literature, it would be incorrect, in my view, to apply any criteria other than those which reflect the Ethiopian sense of the literary value of a work." She, then, goes on to add:

If a traditional or contemporary Amharic work is felt by the Ethiopian reader to be moving, interesting or amusing, then the European reader (or worse--the European scholar) who sees in it some naivety of thought and deficiencies in composition provides proof that in Amharic literature he values only those aspects which conform to canons of beauty and sense of his own times and his own culture (p. 317).1

Before going into the particulars of the negative attitudes of the scholars in question, I would like to raise one major point about how the literature has been perceived in terms of its purposes and functions. It is often assumed and believed that literature, but particularly so-called 'third world' literature, of which Amharic literature forms a part, 'reflects' the society in which and for whom it is produced. I will grudgingly, and for the convenience of the moment at hand, grant that this is so. With this assumption or belief as a launching ground, the works considered here parade themselves, consciously or unconsciously (at least one discerns that much), as attempts at a sociological study of the literature in question. My preliminary observation, however, suggests that Amharic fictional works have almost invariably been treated as nothing
more than sources for sociological data in respect of 'culture', 'customs', 'beliefs', 'marriage', 'class', etc., ad infinitum. Molvær's book is one good example of such an approach to Amharic literature. (And I say this without taking anything away from the commendable effort he has made in presenting us with even as much as what he did, an effort worthy of emulation by Ethiopian scholars who, I believe, can and should use it as a basis for launching a well considered and better executed critical project.)

If, as Hailu Fullass aptly observes in his review of the same book, "the social anthropologist or ethnographer who knows Ethiopia may find nothing original or of much interest in the book" (114), one is inevitably forced to ask what, then, the purpose of such a 'study' after all is. Hailu has his answer in that he considers the book "the only comprehensive single volume on social relations, belief systems, etiquette, and relations between individuals at the family level that are most characteristic of Christian Ethiopia" (115). Granted. But this has nothing to do with treating the various works considered in Molvær's book as literature, whether in terms of their aesthetic components or the discursive significance they have as fictional works. The author himself does not claim to do any more than providing insight into these aspects of life in Ethiopia. But one could do as well without resorting to fictional works. In which case, then, the term 'literature' in the title of the book is simply a misleading appendage that has no other function than just pointing out that the sources for the sociological data are works of fiction, data that are available in their own right, fiction or no fiction. The term 'literature' in the title is misleading for another reason: it gives the impression that the author is engaged in analyzing the works in terms, say, of the conditions of their production, or in terms of the values informing the narrative enterprise. Indeed, a glance at the table of contents (class structure of the society; beliefs and ethics; private relationships and individual life; national characteristics [1], and so on) gives one the impression that these 'phenomena' are incorporated into the fictional works under consideration in their own right, as an end in themselves, to be flaunted to the outside world as 'peculiarly' Ethiopian. How (and why) the respective authors of the various fictional works weave these 'social facts' into the fabric of the narratives qua narrative is not given thought to.

I dealt with Molvær at such length because his work provides a veritable example of such a documentalist approach to the literature in question. Others, including Kane and Gérard, fare not much better, except for some instances of attempts at being 'critical', which end up being judgmental. Paradoxically, it is Gérard himself who recalls and justifies Ezekiel Mphalele's protest "against the widespread tendency to exploit African imaginative literature as a gold mine for sociologists" (386). That was in 1962. But the tendency persists; only now it is Amharic literature that is, to use an Amharic expression, balä sammïnt (meaning, next in line for such probing).
The point here is not that such social or cultural phenomena do not constitute the raw materials for literature (after all literature operates in a social context); rather, it is that these phenomena are not incorporated in literary works as mere raw materials but to signify something else. The following quotation from Wellek and Warren (1984), though specifically referring to the incorporation of ideas as concepts into literature, points to the issue at stake. The important question is

how ideas actually enter into literature. It is obviously not a question of ideas in a work of literature as long as these ideas remain mere raw material, mere information. The question arises only when and if these ideas are actually incorporated into the very texture of the work of art, when they become 'constitutive', in short when they cease to be ideas in the ordinary sense of concepts and become symbols, or even myths (p. 122).

To which they add that the ideas must be "integrated into the personal drama of the actors," where the "ideological conclusion is integral to the personal catastrophes [or triumphs] of the main figures" (p.123).

Let us grant that literature reflects society or the culture in which it is produced. But this does not give us the license to equate literature with a mere 'social document'. Conceiving of literature as a social document requires, in the words of Wellek and Warren (1984:104), that we "know the artistic method of the [works] studied, and [show] - not merely in general terms, but concretely - in what relation the picture stands to the social reality." This calls for a holistic approach, to which singling out fragments, whether of content or structure, of the components of a given work and describing them in isolation is anathema. Having said this, I shall now proceed to a consideration of the particulars

3. The Particulars:

3.1 Didacticism: the culprit?

One particular term that often dominates in the evaluation or analysis of Amharic literature (something that can safely be said of African literatures in general) is 'didactic'. The core meaning of the term 'didactic' is: 1. Intended to instruct. 2. Morally instructive. There is yet a third definition, which tends to be evaluative: 3. Inclined to teach or moralize excessively (Webster's II New College Dictionary). The term is alternately or simultaneously used with such terms as 'moralistic', 'edifying', and 'devotional'. Whichever one of these terms is used with respect to Amharic literature, the prevailing tendency is to imply the third definition given above, which is not descriptive but prescriptive and judgmental. Here is an example:

Most early studies of Amharic literature had to deal mainly with devotional and didactic works as well as with genuine creative
writing. This is inevitably the case with all nascent literatures: historians of Old English or Old French writing devote considerable attention to chronicles, homilies and saints' lives which have little, if anything, to do with the literary art (Gérard, 1968:38 - italics mine).

If this passage is read as being a description of what took place with regard to the study of literature, one should have no problem with it. The problem arises when one, such as Gérard, pulls the evaluative card and contrasts didactic works with genuine creative writing, the former of which apparently have little, if anything, to do with the literary art. In other words, if a work is didactic, then it should unceremoniously be banished from the community of 'literatures', something that I am sure will not sit well with Socrates or Plato or Sir Philip Sidney, or even contemporary scholars such as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, cited below.

At a time when the distinction between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary' is no longer taken for granted and, indeed, has become more and more controversial (I am not saying all distinction between kinds of writing be given to the winds), one has to be either valiant enough to speak with cocksureness of genuine creative writing or otherwise be living in one's own imagined world to deny the 'literary' in either the homilies or saints' lives. It may not be as easy a task as one may claim to discern the 'literary' in those works that are considered devotional or religious, but it is equally impossible to whimsically wish away their literary significance, in some of which, to use Wellek and Warren's terms, "the aesthetic function is dominant" (25). Let me even be so audacious as to claim that such works draw upon the essentially literary figures or tropes of which they are made for them to have stood the test of time and to have served for so long in their function as books for moral and ethical instruction. The same could be said of those 'secular works' considered singularly didactic.

Regarding this rather stunted view of the didactic in literature, Scholes and Kellogg, as if anticipating Gérard, had, two years earlier before the publication of his first article on the early phase of Amharic literature, provided us with a sensible explanation of the term as one mode of representation: "Extreme forms of intellectually controlled fiction," they tell us, "whether more or less related to the real world, we have called didactic" (1966:106). But coming closer home to the problem of waxing evaluative, they have the following to say, which I shall quote in full:

Two persistent problems in definition tend to inhibit all discussions of fictional works in which intellectual considerations influence narrative structure. These two problems are related. One is the tendency to use the word "didactic" in a pejorative as well as a descriptive sense. We are likely to think of a didactic narrative as one in which a feeble attempt is made to clothe ethical chestnuts in fictional form, resulting at best in a spoiled story. When the term is
used in this sense it effectively begs all questions of judgment and appreciation. Our criticism may be improved if we can strip the word of the unfortunate connotations it has acquired and allow "didactic" simply to refer to a work which emphasizes the intellectual and instructional potential of narrative, including all such works from the simple fable which points an obvious moral to the great intellectual romance which seeks to justify the ways of God to man or to present the psychological laws which govern man's behavior in society. A didactic work may illustrate complacently a moral truism, or put to the most strenuous kind of examination the most problematic and profound ethical and metaphysical questions (p. 106).

It is after giving us this uncomplicated 'definition' of 'didactic' that they cite Aesop, Dante, Milton, Swift, George Eliot, Lawrence and Proust. None of the Amharic works considered by Gerard, Kane or Molvær may approach anywhere to being, say, Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, but there is no compelling reason that they have to, not because they belong in a culture radically different from that in which Proust wrote, but because their concerns, concerns certainly dictated by the social and political as well as ideological environment in which they were written, were simply different. Anyway, the point here is that the 'didactic' should not be confused with 'bad' literature or 'non-literature'.

3.2 The realistic card

The second term thrown around at will in works on Amharic literature is 'realism', with the qualifier 'realistic' invariably used in close connection with it. Here, too, 'realism' or 'realistic' is used prescriptively instead of descriptively. The second problem Scholes and Kellogg consider as besetting modern literary criticism is the "tendency to confuse descriptive and evaluative terminology." Thus they tell us that the terms 'tragic' and 'realistic' are "normally applied to literary works as terms of praise." And they lament this tendency because "a serious drama can be damned for its failure to be 'tragic'" or that "a narrative can be damned for being 'unrealistic'" (Scholes and Kellogg, p. 8). Their lament is particularly directed against what they call the "hopelessly novel-centered view" of narrative characterizing mid-twentieth century criticism. As far as they are concerned, and I fully agree, this novel-centered view not only has a disadvantage, it also brings in its wake a faulty perspective, for, as they put it, "it cuts us off from the narrative literature of the past and culture of the past," for starters, and secondly, "it cuts us off from the literature of the future and even from the advance guard of our own day" (p.8).

Evaluators or critics of Amharic literature would do better to pay attention to the possibility (I did not say 'fact') that didacticism is a mode of representation. Realism
may be said to be a particular movement vis-à-vis, say, romanticism or idealism, but we would benefit more if we considered it as one mode of representation dictated by the milieu in which it is supposed to have emerged. A more serious problem is the persistent tendency to evaluate not just individual works but the whole range of Amharic literature in terms of realistic representation, without even bothering to stop and explain what its users mean by the term, or to ask: 'realistic' for whom and in what context? The reader of works of Amharic literature is then expected, or forced, to piously accept the declaration that the hallmark of 'good' fiction is the degree to which it is realistic. A related problem is that, since realistic representation is predominantly, and to a considerable extent nonchalantly, associated with the 'modern' novel form (an unjustified, or at least a controverted claim), then any fictional work that does not meet the requirements of this 'rule' is not worth one's while to be read at close range, or altogether not worth wasting one's time on.

It is thus that we find such comments as the following. Speaking of Tobbyia, Molvær (1980) says, "It can hardly be called a realistic work" (8). I wish he had stopped there. He goes on to add, "The book is valued for its style, and the author may have written it as a purely artistic exercise; it is art for art's sake." It is enough to note that the contrast this time is between the 'realistic' and the 'purely artistic', as if to establish a relationship of mutual exclusivity between the two terms, whatever is meant by the 'purely artistic'. Molvær has company on the home front in the person of Fikre Tolossa, who judges Tobbyia as not being a 'realistic' work on the grounds that it lacks "truthful details" (Silence is not Golden: 98). (I shall not go into the details of why Fikre's claim does not strike me as either right or justified. On this score I will simply draw the reader's attention to two essays on Tobbyia: "The Form and Content of the First Amharic Novel" by Taye Assefa and "The First-Born of Amharic Fiction" by Yonas Admassu, both appearing in Silence is not Golden (1995).)

3.3 The standards we guard

A more damaging tendency (damaging not only to Amharic literary scholarship but to that of other literatures in the so-called third world) is the invocation of 'Western standards', a comic reminder to me of a debate I witnessed at the University of California at Los Angeles in the late sixties about whether African literature should be evaluated in its own terms or according to Western standards (of the novel). Thus Thomas Kane: "Fōqēr ወስክአ ወልቈውጥ is a novel by Western standards" and "Lelaw Sōm" [by Taddese Liben] a short story" (1975:19). In this regard, perhaps the most persistent (almost to a point of obsession, I may add) invoker of 'Western standards' is Albert Gérard, who imperiously claims, "by Western standards lebb wallad tarik can hardly be considered an outstanding piece of prose fiction" (282). Since we have to be convinced about the truth of this assertion, we are told that the work "tells a rather complicated story based on the familiar folk theme of people getting lost and looking
for each other" (p.282). I need the reader's help to figure that out, while at the same time, I refer you to the two essays on Tobbya in Silence is not Golden.

Gérard's persistence turns into sheer intransigency when he waxes prescriptive and tells us the following:

African novelists and playwrights have been unable--as has often been observed and deplored [by whom or where he does not say]--to achieve convincing individual characterization. In many cases, they continue the folktale tradition of emphasis on anecdotal incidents or on allegorical morality. The absence of any native tradition in those genres also accounts for clumsiness in plot management and in the depiction of personal emotion: constant resorting to implausible coincidences and awkward handling of the love theme are illustrative of the difficulties they will have to overcome (379).

Note that Gerard's Four African Literatures was published in 1971. African writers, such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, James Ngugi (now Ngugi Wa'thiong'o), Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer (unless her whiteness excludes her works from being considered African) and more, had been producing prose fiction and plays with an intellectual acuity that, for reasons I do not understand at all, appears to have surprised quite a few readers, and no less a number of critics, by their close 'approach' to the 'Western standards' so dear to Gérard.

If that was all Gérard had to say about African writers, I would simply note the preposterousness of his remarks and let it go at that. What I find bothersome is such officious attitudes (if that, indeed, is the word) as the following:

... whether concentration on vernacular writing is a consequence of colonialism or nationalism its drawbacks are obvious. The most glaring one is that it prevents writers from conveying the realities of African experience to the outside world. Until the task of translating such writings as are worthy of it is tackled on a large scale, authors have only one means of remedying this isolation, and that is to write in European languages--hence, the fast development of English writing in East Africa since 1965 (379).

My answer to this is a question: WHY? Why, in two ways: why does an apparently erudite critic who has produced, as the list of credentials on the verso of the inside title page seem to testify, such works as l'Idee romantique de la poesie Angleterre; English Romantic Poetry: Ethos, Structure, and Symbol in Coleridge, Shelly, and Keats; Les Tambours du Neant: Le problem existentiel dans le roman americain, want to dictate, even suggest, this monstrosity of a solution? Second, why must (as

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the clause 'authors have only one means of remedying this isolation' suggests) Africans not write in their chosen 'vernacular' simply because Western readers, but particularly critics such as Gérard, find it difficult, or simply refuse, to go to the mountain? Whosoever may choose to write in any of the 'metropolitan' languages can do so, as many have done and still do, no questions asked! It is even all right to suggest or advise that Africans also write in, say, English, or translate their works, as some have done, into other languages. But to dictate one's ignorance of 'vernacular' languages as a way out of an impasse or isolation that, at least to me, does not exist smacks of paternalism--to put it very, very mildly -- good intentions or no!

Since Gérard also has devoted a huge chapter to Amharic literature in his book, with the aim of critically studying it, my more appropriate question would be: what have all these digressions and incidental, but unwarranted, suggestions got to do with evaluating, interpreting or critiquing Amharic literature? Note that the two citations above come from a person who advises caution to others. To wit: "At the present, inchoative stage in the scholarly study of modern African literature, utter caution in drawing conclusion is advisable" (384). Thou shalt do what I preach, not what I do?

3.4 The 'aesthetic' card

Yet another term tossed around at will is 'aesthetic'. The problem is not the invocation of the 'aesthetic' when talking about literature in general, or critiquing a particular work. The problem lies in the fact that the scholars dealing with Amharic literature do not give us any indication of what they mean by the term as it may apply to the works they have considered in their discussions. It is as if everyone was supposed to know what the writers meant, or worse, as if readers of their works were simply to take them at their words. As far as I know, what is called the 'aesthetic' in literature is not as clear as most of these 'critics' make it out to be. Does it simply refer to the formal structure of a given work? Does it refer to the 'special' use of language that brings out the 'literariness' of the work, as some of the Russian Formalists have suggested? Is it used synonymously with 'beauty', itself a hazy and, for that reason, a controversial concept even in our day? Are they talking about the 'pleasure principle' as opposed to the 'instructive' impulse that earlier theories of Western literary criticism had been debating for long? Or, are we asking about the connection between "fictional and real worlds," as Scholes and Kellogg (99) suggest?

My aim here is not to argue out, much less give definitive answers to, these and similar other questions. I will limit myself to pointing out that we cannot simply take the terms and concepts that we use as tools in literary criticism and interpretation for granted, for the task at hand does ask for more than casual remarks. The term aesthetic has been so controversial that, of late, its invocation as something central to literary criticism has been questioned, as the study of literature increasingly has become an interdisciplinary undertaking. If we make the "aesthetic mode of

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perception" as the only "governing mode," to use the words of E. D. Hirch, Jr. (1976), in studying literature, then our attempt to understand its other social functions would be hampered; for such perception seems to endow literature with an "ontological" essence that cannot, with any degree of surety, be claimed for it in the first place. Hirch suggests, if I have understood him correctly, that in our critical engagement of literature we need "to regard [it] as a verbal discourse, not merely as a verbal artifact" (142 - my italics). This suggestion should not be read as denying that literature indeed is a verbal artifact, but as an argument against the essentialist claims of those who tirelessly invoke the "aesthetic mode of perception" as being privileged in the study and criticism of literary works. The function of literature as "a verbal discourse" does not preclude consideration of the aesthetic component, whether this component has to do with the values incorporated in literary works or the modes of their articulation; rather, it might help us better understand how the aesthetic operates within the framework of verbal discourse. In short, considering literature as some form of social discourse and contemplation of its aesthetic components are not mutually exclusive. To opt for the one may be a matter of emphasis rather than an act of privileging it at the total expense of the other.

Whether one agrees with the aforesaid or not, the particular point with regard to the study of Amharic literature is that the tossing around of terms and concepts that cannot and should not be taken for granted and applying them wholesale, whether positively or negatively, does not help us much in the understanding of the literature, particularly such issues as: the conditions of its production and how it relates to those conditions; what purposes or functions it serves; why it has been produced the way it was but not in any other way; what formal considerations come into play in the appreciation of a work or a group of works; and more. A generalized study of Amharic literature, it is my belief, should raise such questions and try to describe and explain why the literature in question is what it is, at least by way of providing the reader with an insight into the moral, intellectual, psychological, political and ideological issues that have so far come to constitute it. In the kind of study of Amharic literature I envision, at this particular juncture anyway, the socio-cultural functions it serves cannot be ignored, whether one views literature as a 'cultural police', a regulating mechanism, or as a tool for subverting repressive aspects of that culture (Greenblatt, 1995, 1990).

But, even when we study Amharic literature in terms of the social functions it serves, as we also must do, our task should not, in my opinion, be to run after every "costume and custom," to use the words of Thomas Warton (cited in Wellek and Warren, p. 103), that catches our fancy. The objection is not that literature cannot be used as a social document contributing to the study of other disciplines, even using such costumes and customs as, say, Molvær has attempted to identify in the Amharic works he discussed. The contention is that, it is the representation of whatever
customs, costumes, or manners we choose to probe into that we need to focus on primarily. To judge literature "valuable only in so far as it yields results for this or that adjunct discipline," (Wellek and Warren: 20), whether that discipline be history or philosophy, sociology or anthropology, would be doing injustice to that activity we call narrative, which has defined humanity as "homo significans, the sense-making animal--and, as an essential part of the latter, the fiction-making animal" (J. Hillis Miller, 1995:65, citing Peter Brooks) from as early as its "primitive" days, and the function of which activity has far-reaching implications, far and beyond the mere contemplation of the aesthetic object for its own sake. The mode of representation in literature and its function in and for society should each be given its due consideration in literary study. When it comes to Amharic literature, it is my firm conviction that, at this point the task of the Amharic literary scholar would yield better and useful results if it were directed toward producing a literary history, which must involve a serious examination of the social and intellectual climate(s) that informed its production as it evolved over the hundred odd years since the delivery of Afework's Tobbya in 1908. This, however, does not mean that we should meanwhile cease to interpret and critique Amharic literary works in terms of their thematic or formal structures, a task that is not only important but also indispensable for the type of generalized study I have in mind.

4. Rethinking Amharic Literary Study

What then are the possible ways of studying Amharic literature, such that the venture would yield at least satisfactory results? What are the alternatives available to us? The 'documentalist' approach, such as that followed by Kane or Molväer, does have its historical value, particularly to those who are interested in knowing the bare facts. Such works as Kane's or Molvaer's may, in fact, come in handy to scholars interested in undertaking thorough critical studies of the literature, provided they know what to look for that may be of particular relevance to their analyses. But such works do not constitute critical studies in and of themselves. This much must be owned to begin with.

We may begin with the suggestion offered by Wellek and Warren (20):

> Literary theory and literary history both attempt to characterize the individuality of a work, an author, of a period, or of a national literature [italics, mine]. But this characterization can be accomplished only in universal terms, on the basis of a literary theory. Literary theory, an organon of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship.

Except for the difficulty involved in determining what exactly characterizes 'national literature', even a period (the difficulty may be less in this latter case), we can
translate 'characterization' into the more down-to-earth term of 'finding or tracing a pattern' in the works of an individual author, or a comparable group of authors, or a group of works produced in a given milieu. It is my belief, however, that before finding a 'pattern' or a set of patterns for the whole gamut of the literature produced in Amharic, one would do better to examine individual authors and their works and then proceed to the comparative stage. Finding a pattern involves more than indicating accidental similarities or parallels or identifying individual motifs, as Wellek and Warren caution us. These similarities and parallels, we are advised, and quite rightly I believe, "must be exclusive parallels; that is, there must be reasonable certainty that they cannot be explained by a common source, a certainty attainable only if the investigator has a wide knowledge of literature or if the parallel is a highly intricate pattern rather than an isolated 'motif' or word" (Welleck and Warren, p. 258).

The 'wide knowledge' Wellek and Warren speak of involves, first of all, availing oneself of theoretical frameworks suitable to the literature under investigation. Already existing theories can be resorted to, but in the case of Amharic literature, I suggest that the primary sources, that is, the poems, novels, plays, stories, even essays and biographical works be thoroughly read to see if they provide us with clues or codes that would enable us to come up with possible frameworks for 'characterizing' or 'categorizing' them as significant indicators of the milieu of their production.

Whatever our approaches to examining Amharic literature may be, it is my firm conviction that nothing can be a substitute for an in-depth reading of the available works themselves (poems, novels, stories, etc). The process is arduous to be sure, but there does not seem to be any other way out. It may be suggested, at this point, that our reading must be selective. But what criteria are we going to use for our selection? Would not the very idea of selectiveness presuppose that we read at least a reasonable bulk of the works available, which may provide us with the very criteria that we want to establish?

Perhaps one way out of such an impasse may be examining the various book reviews and critical works so far written and other source material as may be available. Even then, particularly with regard to book reviews, which certainly are not free from the biases of their authors, we should not expect to get any more than some helpful hints. Since one of our interests is exploring why certain novels, for example, were written at the time and in the manner they were, what ideas they entertained, and what purposes they were intended to serve, when selecting the texts we need, limiting ourselves to what are rightly or wrongly considered 'great books', as Wellek and Warren have tried to warn us, poses the danger of making "incomprehensible the continuity of literary tradition [and] the very nature of the literary process, besides obscuring the background of social, linguistic, ideological, and other conditioning circumstances" (21-22).
One possibility is, as I have already suggested, reading the individual works themselves, first by same authors, then by groups of authors who have written on related subject matters and themes, until we have been able to trace, however vaguely, some kind of pattern or perspective that would later serve as a guide for developing a general framework within which to consider the literature in question. Moreover, this involves (1) describing subject matters and themes; (2) indicating the various literary "forms" developed by the authors over the years, with a view to exploring the reasons for the emergence of those forms, and hope, from here on, that the discipline will take its own course.

A second possibility, complementing the first, is to focus, while reading the texts of our choice, on the social, political, and ideological conditions informing the works, again to trace patterns of thinking and projection. What we are after in following such an approach, as Wellek and Warren have suggested, is the "general cultural 'climate'" responsible for the production of the "linguistic and literary tradition" under consideration. This may help us avoid engaging in those types of work such as were produced by Molvåer, for instance, in which such things as the economy, politics, social institutions, and various rituals are presented as mere aggregates to be contemplated outside of the structure that has made them to be what they are and to signify what they have.

A third possibility is that, while reading individual Amharic novels, works of poetry, or plays, we can consider focusing on such issues as 'the relationship between man and god or the search for the ideal truth' (as in Heruy's Wädaje Libbe) 'problems of acculturation or culture conflict' (as in Wolde Girorgis Wolde Yohannes's Ag'azi) 'prostitution' (as in Assefà G. Mariam's Êndâwät'I'ach Qàrrách) 'alienation' and 'anomie' (as in Ba'alu Girma's Kã'admas Bashaggår) or 'dehumanization' (as in Fiqîr Êskä Mâqabîr) or 'gender relations' (beginning with Heruy's Yâlibb Hassab) -- in short, the major informing ideas around which the texts we read are structured, and relate these to a general "scheme of values or norms," to use the words of Wellek and Warren, once again (257).*

Finally, it is once we have committed ourselves to such undertakings that we can move to the greater but onerous task of writing a literary history of Amharic, which certainly is not going to be another chronological documentation of books and personalities (which may well be serviceable in an undergraduate survey course) but a history of the literature both as an artistic engagement and a social and intellectual discourse. A literary history of the language should not be confused with the private 'histories' of the authors whose works assume a virtually autonomous, even independent, identity once they have been delivered. The central task in such an undertaking is, once again, "establishing a pattern" that would eventually enable us, if the available material to be examined warrants or necessitates, to classify the

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literature by periods, which itself must "be established [primarily] by literary criteria" (Wellek and Warren, p. 264), and one of whose concerns would be "tracing changes from one system of norms to another" and discerning "the decay of one convention and the rise of a new one" (p, 265, 266).

But, does Amharic literature, which did not evolve and develop in the same kind of continuum that English or French literature did, warrant such a 'smooth' undertaking? Has not there been one too many disruptions in the country's history for the literature to develop 'normally'? I am afraid that this, too, would be the unenviable task awaiting any literary historian attempting to deal with Amharic literature, hopefully in the foreseeable future.

Notes


2 In her endnotes 24 and 25 to her article Mantel-Niečko, singles out Pierre Comba and Thomas Kane, respectively, for using a negative tone, or assuming the accusatory stance that Haïlu Fullass speaks of in the evaluation of Amharic Literature. This advice to be 'cautious' is something I agree with in general, but to the extent that Amharic novels of the latter period appear to have drawn, more or less, on Western conventions, some of the principles and conventions applying to Western literature and literary evaluation may be applicable to some of them more than to others. The point to be contested, in my opinion, should be the unwarranted, often uncorroborated, nature of the generalizations made by those such as Comba or Kane. Such works as Dagnachew Worku's \textit{Adăfrīs}, to be sure a rare exception in its conscious manipulation of what we may loosely refer to as 'stream of consciousness', and Ba'alu Girma's \textit{Kādmas Bashaggār}, or Haddis Alemayehu's \textit{Fiqīr Iskā Māqabīr}, are receptive to Western conventions and codes of literary criticism, while each of these works should be allowed to retain its own particularity and 'local' flavor.

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