

OBITUARY

It is with great sadness that we announce the sudden death from a heart attack, on Thursday 16 July, of Richard Bjornson. Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the Ohio State University, "Dick" (as he was known to his extensive circle of friends) was a commanding figure in African literary studies.

Richard Bjornson was born January 16, 1938, in Oak Park, Illinois. He was educated at Lawrence College, Appleton, Wisconsin, where he obtained his B.A. (*magna cum laude*) in 1959, and at Northwestern University which awarded him the M.A. degree two years later. He spent the next few years in Europe doing odd jobs and studying languages, acquiring in the process a command of French, German, and Spanish. In 1968, he received his doctorate (*troisième cycle*) from the University of Paris.

On his return to the United States later that year, he took a position as Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He moved to the Ohio State University at Columbus in 1974 as Assistant Professor of Comparative Studies, and was promoted to Associate Professor the following year. He spent the 1976-77 academic year at the University of Yaounde, Cameroons, as a Fulbright Professor. He became Professor of Comparative Studies at Ohio State in 1979; in 1981, his position was redesignated to that of Professor of French and Comparative Literature.

The broad scope of Bjornson's first major publication, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (Wisconsin, 1977), reflected his profound immersion in the Western literary tradition, to which his acquisition of the major European languages gave him direct access over a wide range of its linguistic/national manifestations. The meticulous scholarship displayed in the work established his reputation as a comparatist of the first rank. The authority he acquired through the work and his essays on Spanish literature led to his being invited by the Modern Language Association to edit *Approaches to the Teaching of Don Quixote* which appeared in 1984. Bjornson had in the meantime encountered African literature, appropriately enough through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The interest that was kindled in him by his reading of a major founding text of modern African literature was deepened by his direct experience of the realities of contemporary Africa during the year he spent teaching in Yaounde. The intensity of the intellectual atmosphere that prevailed at the university there in the seventies made a lasting impression on him, a fact which accounts for the African orientation in his subsequent work and its specific focus on Cameroonian literature.

Bjornson began his contribution to the field of African literature with translations of the work of Cameroonian

writers. His English version of René Philombe's *Lettres de ma cambuse*, translated as *Tales from my Hut*, was published in Yaounde in 1977; it was later expanded and reissued in 1984 under the title *Tales from Cameroon: Collected Short Stories of René Philombe*. This was followed by Mongo Beti's *Lament for an African Pol* (1985) and Ferdinand Oyono's *Road to Europe* (1989). In 1990 appeared perhaps his most important translation, that of the monumental novel, *Doguiçimi*, by the Dahomean Paul Hazoume.

Bjornson was all the while producing a stream of critical and theoretical essays, much of this output devoted to African literature. The publication in 1991 of *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity* can be said not only to mark the culmination of these efforts but also to represent a landmark in African literary studies, for the work provides the most comprehensive account to date of a national movement in modern African literature.

Bjornson's other publications include his edition, with Isaac Mowoe, of *Africa and the West* (1986), the proceedings of a Humanities conference held at the Ohio State University two years earlier, and, with Marilyn Waldman, of various other collections in Comparative Studies, notably, "The Future of the University" (1989) and "Rethinking Patterns of Knowledge" (1990). Well-known for his prodigious energy, Bjornson was not only active in several professional organizations but also acquired a reputation as a dedicated teacher and student adviser, a role for which he received a University Alumni Teaching Award in 1982.

The work he leaves behind represents a considerable legacy for all of us engaged in the study of African literature, and his death comes as a grievous loss for the field. But Richard Bjornson will long be remembered-- as much for his work as for his generous disposition and engaging personality. While we mourn his loss, we are conscious of the force of his example and of the need to sustain the momentum he generated, both as a scholar and a teacher, in the development of African literature as an area of serious academic discourse and intellectual endeavour. We can only hope that our resolve will be up to the challenge.

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