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Repossessing Time: Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah

Abstract
The first one-and-a-half pilgrges of Anthills of the Savannah contain over twenty references to time. In a sense, it would be surprising indeed if a novel by Achebe did not concern itself with the past and the movement of time and its effects. All his previous novels have blended and reworked the often contradictory forms of classical realism and historical romance into an African context to the extent that he has largely set the agenda for the subsequent development of the African novel. An early critic of Achebe's, the Canadian novelist, Margaret Laurence, recognised the importance of his achievement and its determining effects upon African writing when she wrote that he sees 'History in terms of people with names and conflicts and places of belonging. His sense of social injustice is like a white-hot sword wielded through his powerful irony.' Yet history, without diminishing its importance in a postcolonial context, can be made and remade almost at will, given the right circumstances and a voice empowered by indignation and sympathy. But time is different from history - more fluximal, elusive, challenging, and the novel's recurrent references to time require a closer investigation of temporal structures and what is being articulated through the novel's representation of time.

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Repossessing Time: Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*

And what is the difference between what the historian (and literary criticism is a branch of history) remembers, and what the poet remembers? Time. To the dictator time is a given period of which he is terrified – for him there is no consolation in the fact that his bronze image will be at least bad art or that the bard who sings his achievements can take permanent revenge by writing badly about him.

Derek Walcott, ‘Caligula’s Horse’

The first one-and-a-half pages of *Anthills of the Savannah* contain over twenty references to time. In a sense, it would be surprising indeed if a novel by Achebe did not concern itself with the past and the movement of time and its effects. All his previous novels have blended and reworked the often contradictory forms of classical realism and historical romance into an African context to the extent that he has largely set the agenda for the subsequent development of the African novel. An early critic of Achebe’s, the Canadian novelist, Margaret Laurence, recognised the importance of his achievement and its determining effects upon African writing when she wrote that he sees ‘History in terms of people with names and conflicts and places of belonging. His sense of social injustice is like a white-hot sword wielded through his powerful irony.’ Yet history, without diminishing its importance in a post-colonial context, can be made and remade almost at will, given the right circumstances and a voice empowered by indignation and sympathy. But time is different from history – more fluximal, elusive, challenging, and the novel’s recurrent references to time require a closer investigation of temporal structures and what is being articulated through the novel’s representation of time.

The keywords in Laurence’s assessment of Achebe allude to the fundamental forms of a particular kind of fictional realism: ‘people’, ‘names’, ‘places’, ‘conflict’. Such minimal definitions of realist narrative are supplemented in Achebe’s fictions by the equally minimal and fundamental narrative strategy of cause and effect or the sequential nature of events in time. Achebe’s foregrounding of time in *Anthills of the*
Savanm~h marks a new enquiry into the nature of narrative as a way of apprehending and controlling fictional worlds through the temporal sequence of events. Achebe's text offers a glimpse into fiction's 'atomic structure', as it were, and takes as its principal subject the nature of narrative in an age of oppression.

Christopher Oriki's witnessing of time is destabilised in the presence of His Excellency. The first words of the novel refer to time being 'wasted' or repeated. 'How many times, for God's sake, am I expected to repeat it?,' 'I would never have said it again that second time.' Minutes grow to 'fullness', silence is a matter of duration, not quiet, which 'grows rapidly into its own kind of contest'. Recorded time, 'the crazy log-book of this our ship of state', falsifies the past making it impossible 'to point to a specific and decisive event and say: it was at such and such a point that everything went wrong'. Sequence is distorted for the 'present was there from the very beginning' and 'now' is the past, and 'long ago' - 'a year ago?', 'two years?' - becomes 'the end'. A day is not time but quality since 'days are good or bad for us now according to how His Excellency gets out of bed in the morning' (pp. 1-2).

It is not merely the State which the dead hand of His Excellency rests upon, for his dark and ludicrous dominion spreads to encompass the perception of time itself. The novel begins by asking how, in these dark days, can narrative be made when time itself is usurped? How can the novelist repossess time, which has been stolen, and return it to narrative to order events into stories? Repossessing time becomes imperative for the artist who lives under tyranny, for the control of time is an unendurable despotism, more terrible than the control of history. Under despotism, history, however distorted, can still be written: bad art or bardic praise can, as Walcott states, take a kind of revenge. But without time narrative is impossible. The insistence upon a regard for temporality makes Anthills of the Savannah a radical text because it views the production of narrative as profoundly political in the context of a struggle against oppression for the right and means to order experience into coherence. Time, as a main constituent of narrative, becomes the first and last line of defence against tyranny.

Time proceeds relativistically; its dimensions are not single and unilinear, but multiple and interrelated. The narrations are framed within 'temporalisations' of an intricate and diagnostic kind. In Chris's narration, for example, tenses are used to indicate unfolding dimensions of time and tyranny. The narration foregrounds the present tense which discloses a distinctive attitude towards its subject. The 'present is a signal' which identifies 'this discourse as an observer's language': the world of the tyrant is seen, observed. The present tense normally indicates 'shared time' or 'coevalness' - observer and observed caught at
the same point in time. Achebe asserts coevalness but only to depict the
way in which the regime denies participation in the present. His Excel­
lency promulgates the notion that time and the state are shared, com-
mon property, but simultaneously, the dictator is in sole possession of
both the state and the present: ‘His Excellency speaks...’ ‘I say noth-
ing...’ (p. 3). The present implies a closeness of contact, face to face,
even intimate. Yet in Achebe’s usage it affirms the opposite – differ­
ence and distance. Through the use of the present tense, Chris and His
Excellency appear to occupy the same place at the same time, yet con-
versely, the text demonstrates the opposite, that the dictator has taken
possession of this discourse.

But His Excellency is not entirely successful. Whenever the present
tense is used, it is used as a signal for the narrator to present a com-
mentary on the event just witnessed. But His Excellency speaks instead. And not even to him the latest offender but
still to me. And he is almost friendly and conciliatory, the amazing man. In that
instant the day changes. The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud: we are
reprieved and immediately celebrating. I can hear in advance the many compli-
ments we will pay him as soon as his back is turned: that the trouble with His
Excellency is that he can never hurt a man and go to sleep over it. (p. 3)

The text creates a double present tense whereby event and commentary
share the same temporal dimension. Irony is achieved by the evocation
of events which are happening, and a commentary which is provided
simultaneously, in an alternative ‘now’ as it were. The dictator is out-
side the dialogue between narrator and reader. Only the narrator and
his reader possess human texture since they share jokes, allusions and
stories which renders their ‘now’ more substantial, more ‘real’ than that
other ‘now’. The dictator’s present is denied such textured reality and
emerges as the negative reflection of the substantial presence of narra-
tor and reader who are engaged in secret dialogue. His Excellency may
lay claim to the present but his claim is undercut by a narrative which
seeks an alternative dimension in the present. The narrator, again and
again in this novel, achieves his or her status as narrator by transcend­
ing the dictator’s present and attaining a level where he or she can
negotiate a dialogue with the reader. The narration passes beyond the
dictator’s present tense to reconstruct other times, other conspiracies.

A similar kind of narrative strategy is employed in the relationship
of time to language. In this case the double present tense of narration
aligns exactly with the two languages of despotism and dissent. Chris
is tuned to the subtle nuances of spoken and unspoken dialects. He can
‘read in the silence of their minds’ (p. 2) the states of despair afflict-
ing his colleagues. Chris's own subtlety is contrasted with His Excellency's logocentric simplicity: 'Soldiers are plain and blunt' (p. 4). Again, as with time, the struggle for the control of words establishes the workings of tyranny as appearing to share a language from which one is, in reality, excluded: 'I was excluded from what he was now saying; his words were too precious to waste on professional dissidents' (p. 4). Yet again, however, the act of exclusion from language makes language the site for an ironic confrontation. The denial of dialogue within the hierarchy of power enables dialogue outside that hierarchy between narrator and reader: 'I liked the look of terror on my colleagues' faces when I used the word *dissociate* and the relaxation that followed when they realised that I was not saying what they feared I was saying' (p. 5). The reader needs to be tuned into Chris's playful language to follow its twists and turns. Perhaps the word 'dissociation', with which Chris has so much fun at the expense of his colleagues is not such a bad term for Chris's kind of irony which requires one not to say what one is saying. This capacity to generate other kinds of lightfooted speech multiplies as the novel progresses.

The 'Commissioner for Words' (p. 7) gives way to Beatrice with her first-class degree in English, a degree won with the help of ancestors who hacked 'away in the archetypal jungle' and 'subverted the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight [her] way' (p. 109). There is a paradoxical quality about this metaphor of language, as if to 'make straight' the language one has to bend it with 'subversion'. In the face of His Excellency's 'plainness and bluntness', one must use a language of chiaroscuro and difficulty. Elaborate metaphors become, by their very complex nature, subversive of the official language of brutality. 'I knew then that if its own mother was at that moment held up by her legs and torn down the middle like a piece of old rag that crowd would have yelled with eye-watering laughter' (p. 42). This deeply disturbing image of violation perfectly expresses the 'blunt' world of mass violence where dictatorships thrive. To counter this kind of language, its alternative must become twisted into fantastic shapes of elaborate metaphors to envisage a possible world of speech coeval with this world of brutality.

The birds that sang the morning in had melted away even before the last butterfly fell roasted to the ground. And when songbirds disappeared, morning herself went into the seclusion of a widow's penance in soot and ashes, her ornaments and fineries taken from her - velvets of soft elusive light and necklaces of pure sound lying coil upon coil down to her resplendent breasts: corals and blue chalcedonies, jaspers and agates veined like rainbows. So the songbirds left no void, no empty hour when they fled because the hour itself had died before them. Morning no longer existed. (p. 31)
Ikem’s hymn to the sun is one of many experiments with language contained in the novel as each narrator attempts to discover a language freed from the taint of oppression and expressive of a personal and communal autonomy. This piece of lapidary expenditure with its personifications, dialectics and use of special terms such as ‘void’ seems resonant of the style of Soyinka at its most exotic and undisciplined. The whole is done with a degree of irony at Ikem’s expense as the lyricism gradually digs itself into a hole of hyperbole. Ultimately, this kind of language offers no viable alternative to His Excellency in the politics of language which the novel establishes. Although its power is acknowledged, it leads nowhere and in its excess, it turns in on itself and constitutes its own self-parody.

For Beatrice, the liberating agency of language is contained in the mixture of a child’s game and ‘her friendship with strange words’:

World inside a world inside a world, without end. *Uwa t’uwa* in our language. As a child how I thrilled to that strange sound with its capacity for infinite replication till it becomes the moan of the rain in the ear as it opened and closed, opened and closed. *Uwa t’uwa t’uwa*; *Uwa t’uwa*.

*Uwa t’uwa* was the building block of my many solitary games. I could make and mould all kinds of thoughts with it. I could even rock it from side to side like my wooden baby with the clipped ear. (p. 85)

The effects of such epiphanies of the fundamentals of language are felt throughout Achebe’s novel as emblems of a certainty of a ‘world inside a world’ which His Excellency cannot control and out of which the ‘infinitely replicated’ narratives pour.

I shall elaborate this point shortly, but it should be said that Beatrice’s ‘friendship with strange words’ embodies a spirit of optimism not previously present in Achebe’s fiction, but it is a pretty close-run thing. Certainly, the apparent facts of life under His Excellency do not look auspicious. The nation is deracinated and silenced by a regime which elevates these conditions to a ‘fact of life’. More than once, the novel asks
if its narrators are doomed ‘travellers whose journeys from start to finish had been carefully programmed in advance by an alienated history?’ The text asks despairingly, ‘what must a people do to appease an embittered history?’ (p. 220).

Yet the spiral of decline begins to unwind itself in the novel, firstly through a type of ironic self-referential humour. Beatrice at one point responds to Ikem’s statement that ‘a novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoes and point the writer to where it pinches’. With the words, ‘Now hold it! Are you suggesting I am a character in your novel?’ (p. 97). Beatrice points to the fabricated nature of the text she inhabits, just as Dante’s guide pointed to the main sights in her tour of the created universe. She ushers in a torrent of referential devices enclosed within her text like ‘worlds within worlds’ or words within words. She gestures towards Achebe’s own writing: ‘Girls at war! thought Beatrice with a private smile’ (p. 115). ‘As a matter of fact I do sometimes feel like Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves’ (p. 114). But the referential nature of the text spills out beyond Achebe’s work to Aristotle, for example, when Ikem says, ‘As the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth having.’

Anthills of the Savannah is, in part, an essentially optimistic manifesto of the power of ‘the literary’ in all its variety and humanistic potential to offer an alternative epistemology to that of the state, another constellation of meaning and an arena for the outlawed disputation of political ideologies.

Achebe’s text is founded upon the Romantic notion of the contrary and the contradictory nature of appearances. Art is defined in the terms of an ‘ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy’ (p. 100). Art’s role is to contradict and as such it moves in ways which are themselves contradictory. Art fails in its task of capturing the grandeur of divinity, so it ‘ritualises incongruity’ and by ‘invoking the mystery of metaphor’, art captures the ‘unattainable glory’ by its opposite – ‘mundane starkness’ (p. 108). This oppositional character of art does not signify, for Achebe, the chaotic and unstable nature of human experience; on the contrary, by its paradoxical nature art affirms the irreducible and unchangeable stability of the human personality.

We can only hope to rearrange some details in the periphery... Even a one-day-old baby does not make itself available to your root-and-branch psychological engineering, for it comes trailing clouds of immortality’ (p. 100). The movement from the peripheral nature of understanding to the central core of ‘clouds of immortality’ is, perhaps, too easy a transition for any but the believer in a leap of faith which art can accomplish. If, paradoxically, the diffuse and apparent chaos of the social world Achebe depicts is
but the artistic form of representation of deeper, permanent and implicit meanings, where are these to be sought and found in his own artistic practice?

One such possible source lies with the myth of Idemili which Achebe recounts in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Idemili was sent to temper masculine power by ritualising access to titles in traditional society. A man only knows if his supplications to Idemili have been successful if he remains alive three years after the rituals have been performed. His Excellency does not observe the proper forms of the ritual and ignores their results. Reading from ritual practice to the practice of political power, His Excellency has, metaphorically, broken one of the fingers of chalk; the key test in Idemili’s rituals of supplication. Idemili claims what is rightly hers and the rejected despot is dead within three years. ‘Such is Idemili’s contempt for man’s unquenchable thirst to sit in authority on his fellows’ (p. 102).

This tentative theological interpretation renders the narrative pattern visible as mythological history. Time and language are remade and repossessed by myth. Reading is revelatory and involves a typological reading from one mythical narrative to the variety of social and political narratives the novel contains. Ultimately such reading is celebratory and optimistic since myth enables disorder to be theologically rendered. In *A Man of the People*, Chief Nanga is not only unpunished but rewarded for his crimes because, as the novel puts it, there is no owner to reclaim what is rightfully his. *Anthills of the Savannah* marks the return of the owner in a myth of righteous retribution which acknowledges the strategic importance of variety but ultimately insists upon the efficacy of the mythical narrative to order experience and to enable fiction. Myth, as archetypal story, is not only the means by which we read the signs, it is the means by which social justice is enacted. Human society is a work of art to Achebe, inasmuch as it ‘ritualises incongruity’ into the ultimate order of mythology.

Achebe’s mythological principle is also, of course, a historiographic principle since it condenses the historically various into the mythological narrative. But this is a two-way street, for myth is not the terminus of history and the process can be reversed. Myth only becomes significant when vitalised by history. Without the historically specific, mythology is a reference without referent: it is simply exotic decoration. Conversely, without myth history is an alienated journey of the embittered. “It is the story ... that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns and directs us”” (p. 124).
There is a danger, however, that such theological readings compose too comforting a unity for this challenging novel. The novel’s final challenge concerns Chris’s legacy which is, typically, a problem of language. The process of deciphering his last words again foregrounds the act of interpretation with which Chris began the novel. Emmanuel and Beatrice both interpret his words differently, both weave them into webs of significance. The final device of the novel replicates the novel’s narrative strategy as the multiple narrators construct a triangulation around a ‘centre which cannot hold’ – it is unknown, misunderstood, misheard or variously interpreted. The condition is familiar from the earliest of Achebe’s texts where the British colonialists misunderstand and misinterpret the novel the reader has just read as The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. It is a repeated pattern in Achebe’s work that misinterpretation, in the case of Things Fall Apart, symbolically crystallises the crisis of colonial intervention. Anthills of the Savannah marks a departure from that cycle of misinterpretation. Communication, in this novel, is partial and fragmentary; interpretation is plural and productive. Both Emmanuel and Beatrice construe the words differently, but both find the solace of meaning. The ‘centre cannot hold’, in the sense of offering an absolute specificity, but in this novel only His Excellency’s ‘blunt and plain’ language demands the absolutely specific; the Commissioner for Words offers a liberation which is more contingent, but also more various.

NOTES

6. I mean by this an almost Fielding-like ironic quotation from other writers’ work. Compare Ikem’s language to Soyinka’s in Idanre, for example, where ‘void’ is a particularly Soyinkan word, both in that poem and in The Interpreters. See also the description of Oya and the use of the exotic description of gems.

8. Chinua Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah, p. 158; Achebe could have extended the quotation to include the alternative term as in Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'Second Hymn to Lenin': 'An Unexam'in'd life is no worth ha'in / Yet Burke was right: owre muckle concern / Wi life's foundations is a sure sign of decay.'

9. Compare Achebe's statements on art to those of Schelling ('The poetic gift ... [is the] one whereby we are able to think and to couple together even what is contradictory.') or Schlegel ('At the root of personification, we find this imperative: Make spiritual all that is perceptible. At the root of allegory: Make perceptible all that is spiritual. The two together determine art.') Cited in Tzvetan Todorov, Theories of the Symbol, translated by Catherine Porter (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), pp. 185 & 186.