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of Glasgow

Smith, A. (2010) *First and second glances: working class Scottish readers and 'Things fall apart'*. *Cross / Cultures: Readings in the Postcolonial Literatures in English* . ISSN 0924-1426

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/40578>

Deposited on: 19 October 2010

## First and Second Glances

### Working Class Scottish Readers and Things Fall Apart

Andrew Smith

How is it, asks Karl Marx in the intriguing note appended to the introduction of his Grundrisse, that Greek art forms “still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model?”<sup>1</sup> His answer, in that context, is that whatever we find pleasing or compelling in the cultural products of earlier social formations arises from something like nostalgia, tied up with the knowledge that the world which made such art possible cannot be revisited. We may well agree with Pierre Macheray that there is something rather too easy about this answer,<sup>2</sup> although when Marx talks about a sense of “joy in the child’s naïveté,” we should perhaps recognise this as being of a piece with his rejection of any conservative hankering after old certainties: “A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish.”<sup>3</sup> In a sense, this has nothing to do with what I am concerned with in what follows, which is the question of the cross-cultural reception of fiction in the contemporary world. Greek art faces us, at least so Marx believed, across a definitive historical break which separates distinct modes of production. Yet, his framing of the puzzle is useful, especially for anyone who shares his assumption that the products of imaginative or creative labours are in some respects, determinate: that they are shaped in significant ways by the historical and social conjunctions in which that labour took place. And that, therefore, for other readers, in other contexts, the products of such labour can often contain something which is disconcerting, not immediately knowable, threatening even.

This essay, then, reflects on the responses provided to Things Fall Apart by readers who read the novel as part of community education courses in which I was involved for six years, and which ran in primarily working class areas of Glasgow and the west of Scotland: Govan, Easterhouse, the Gorbals, Stranraer, Dumfries and Dalbeattie. The courses in which I took part did not involve formal assessment, but students were asked to provide a written response to Achebe’s novel, and it is those responses which I am drawing upon here, with the permission of those involved.<sup>4</sup> Those

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy, tr. and foreword Martin Nicolaus (Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie; 1939; tr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973): 111.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Macheray, A Theory of Literary Production, tr. Geoffrey Wall (Pour Une Théorie de la Production Littéraire; 1966, tr. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978): 70--71.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, Grundrisse, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Background information about participants was provided by a short questionnaire. This essay discusses some material, as well as developing an argument, which was first made in an earlier publication, written while the research was in progress. For a more detailed discussion of some of the methodological questions involved in this work, please see that earlier essay. My thanks to Terry Barringer, editor of African Research and Documentation, for allowing me to

responses, as I will endeavour to demonstrate, reveal a minor version of that puzzle which Marx describes. These are readers in the modern world reading a text from that world, to be sure; there is no question here of treating Achebe's novel as product of a context which is earlier, let alone childish. Nevertheless, the responses of these readers, by and large, did involve a troubled initial sense that here was a story whose meaning was in some respects out of reach: that it had something about it which was, in Marx's word, unattainable. What I want to take from Marx then, at the outset, is the recognition that between readers, in their historical and cultural specificity, and texts as products of a context no less specific, there can be a kind of crisis of understanding. Moreover, although in some respects the historical self-confidence which marks his answer is jarring, it does imply an insistence on the conditionality of reading. A recognition, in other words, that readers read from where they are, having no other choice. Whatever solutions can be found to that crisis of understanding posed by writings that are shaped by other kinds of social context, readers are required to find such solutions in and on the grounds of their own social and historical experiences.

For many of the Scottish readers that I worked with, then, first impressions of Things Fall Apart were defined by feelings of befuddlement and frustration. One reader, for example, described their "sinking feeling" on encountering the novel, others their resentful sense that this book had been chosen for them against their own instincts: "Wandering around a bookshop or library, I would never have looked at, or chosen a book with a title Things Fall Apart." To some extent, perhaps, such responses reassert something of the student's autonomy in a pedagogical situation. As one essay put it: "Things Fall Apart is not a book I would have read had it not been selected for me." Other readers, clearly, felt disengaged by the fact that this was a novel by an African, about African experiences: "It may sound insular, but I am not interested in Africa," is the confessional note with which one reader began their essay. Not all respondents were quite so antagonistic but a significant number did talk about finding the novel "difficult to get into," "hard to crack" or "hard going."

The encounter with Things Fall Apart for these readers, in short, began with an estrangement in the most literal sense, the sense of being made to feel like a stranger. There has been some critical discussion, of course, about the degree to which Achebe may or may not have gone out of his way to translate the terms and idioms of Igbo culture for non-Igbo readers, and therefore about his intended readership. Very few of the readers I worked with, however, felt that the book was addressed to them, implicitly or otherwise. On the one hand, they felt themselves estranged in that they were faced with a fictional world where even the usual handles by which sense is made of a story seemed absent: "the places and characters were so strange"; "it was difficult to grasp the characters and details even after rereading." But more than this they described a sense of being

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revisit this material here. See Andrew Smith, "Imaginative Knowledge: Scottish Readers and Nigerian Fictions," African Research and Documentation 83 (2000): 23--36.

somehow snubbed or ignored by the author. “It was like sitting in on someone telling [the story] to someone else,” is how one respondent tellingly put it.

One could argue, no doubt, that the frustration and bewilderment that typified these first responses makes clear, by a kind of negative example, the degree to which Western readers tend to assume themselves to be the necessary implied readers of any given text. In that respect, the comment from one reader that Achebe’s descriptions of Umuofia seemed to reveal “a life so totally strange [...] that it seems far removed from reality,” could be read as meaning just what it says: that for Western readers that which is real, or at least really significant, is precisely that which falls within the charmed circle of already given Western experience. Comparative research carried out in Nigeria, using the Scottish novel Consider the Lilies as a basis for discussion among groups of Nigerian readers, revealed a noteworthy difference in this respect. This secondary research had a more limited sample, and tended to involve readers who were better educated than those that I worked with in Scotland. All the same, the initial response of Nigerian readers to Iain Crichton Smith’s story of the highland clearances was very different from that of their Scottish counterparts. Here the typical reaction described not estrangement, but rather a sense of surprised familiarity: “When I first of all read the book Consider the Lilies I started thinking that are we really in Nigeria because it has a perception of things Nigerians have”; “I’d like to add that actually when I read the novel my first impression about the setting was it’s Africa”; “When I came to consider the setting it’s really Africa [...] it’s actually Nigerian.”<sup>5</sup> This apparent difference in the initial responses of Scottish and Nigerian readers to texts from a different cultural context does suggest something of what Gayatri Spivak has called the “sanctioned inattention” which characterises much of the European and American engagement with the wider world.<sup>6</sup> An inattention which is at once an assertion of power and a kind of wilful ignorance. For reasons that will become clearer in what follows, it seems to me that such an interpretation should be qualified in some respects. Nevertheless, what was clear was that for many of the working class Scottish readers Achebe’s novel was felt to present a significant challenge: that it was something which made unusual and disconcerting demands of them.

One could argue, of course, that this was a response to the strictly literary qualities of Achebe’s writing. Thus, we could interpret the complaint of one reader that “the detailed thread of the story gets misplaced” in Things Fall Apart, as a response to the fact that the early chapters of the book involve a kind of orature which is focused around collective experience rather than that of a single individual and which is cyclical or swirling in its construction, rather than straightforwardly linear. In these formal respects, perhaps, the book upset prevailing expectations among these readers about

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<sup>5</sup> The quotations used here are drawn from the transcripts of reading group discussion and are presented as such.

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999): 164.

the shape and structure of novels as such. But there is, of course, no simple divide between literary form and the social context of literary production. That Achebe wrote a book predicated, at least in part, on aspects of an oral tradition is itself inseparable from the cultural politics of his place of writing and, indeed, from the wider politics of which cultural debates of one sort or another are a part. Achebe has always been clear about the political and historical context in which his work was entailed and to be thrown by his formal strangeness is to be thrown by something which is more than just a matter of form.<sup>7</sup> It is, in other words, precisely because Achebe's novel could not have been any novel (which is not the same as saying that it was fated to take the form it has); it was because its production was socially and historically shaped, that it has the power to disrupt the assumptions of readers who meet it elsewhere.

In describing the ways in which these men and women responded to their sense of readerly displacement, I will limit myself to saying two things. The first is that the way in which they went about making sense of the novel was entirely at odds with what is considered proper practice in the conventions of our academic literary studies. Most of these readers had no education beyond secondary school level. Many were retired from manual or semi-skilled work, or were younger, and looking to return to formal education after periods of employment or unemployment, parenting or recovery from drug or alcohol dependency. They had no interest in reflecting abstractly on the novel as a construction, nor did they have a theoretical language which would have allowed them to do so. They were, in this respect, stubbornly resistant to the kind of critical distance which I, as the eager young tutor, tried to propose in class. Their method for overcoming what most of them already experienced as a sense of detachment from the novel, was not to step back further but rather to bring it closer. One way in which they went about this was through a series of small-scale acts of cultural translation in which the seemingly foreign was made explicable in terms of the familiar and the known. Hence, for example, the essayist who talked about realising that the court of the masked spirits described by Achebe “seems similar to our own justice system,” or the reader who described the sale of produce in Umuofia as operating according to a “Super Market principle.” Hence, also, the reader who began by saying that the book was “difficult to follow” because it had been “written from the local point of view,” but who found a way of following it precisely by drawing up a whole itinerary of correspondences from her own particular local point of view:

the customs celebrated included the Feast of the New Yam [...] We too celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving [...] There were other similarities between the tribal way of life and our own such as the breaking of the kola nut when visitors arrive which is similar to us giving visitors a cup of tea or coffee [...] marriage brings the whole clan together which is similar to our own wedding celebrations.

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<sup>7</sup> Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (London: Heinemann, 1975): chapters two and five; Chinua Achebe, Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988): chapters five and thirteen.

The ethnographic accuracy of these correlations is not terribly important. What they reveal, rather, is the possibility of a reading strategy premised on the assumption that what mattered about the novel was not its formal or literary construction, but the human story that it contained. A story which demanded not distance, but something that we might call critical closeness: the attempt to construct, at no small intellectual and emotional effort, a sense of empathetic location within, or in response to, the events Achebe describes.

There were, for example, a significant number of essays which involved a more or less direct, if summarised, retelling of Achebe's original. Such retellings often included mistakes, judged from the point of view of a conventional literary analysis. Yet the alterations that such retellings involved were very often alterations which were absolutely appropriate to the emotional structure of the original. Hence one reader, for example, claimed that it was Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, who killed the village's sacred python, an act which sets in train the events leading to the novel's terrible finale. In fact, in the original, the killing of the python in Mbanta is reported as the act of an osu who has become one of the most zealous converts to the new church. Yet it makes more than just good dramatic sense to retell the story in this way, it also serves to make Okonkwo's final actions more explicable, more humanly understandable: this retelling aligns itself explicitly with the ethical and political dilemma of the central character. Similarly, another reader rewrote the final confrontation of the novel as follows: "The five court messengers come, one of them was the head messenger who had degraded [the villagers when they were in the colonial jail]." It is implied in the novel that this might be the case, but it is not explicit. By retelling the story so as to clarify this ambiguity the reader very effectively underscores the political tensions of that final scene, and simplifies the moral quandary facing Okonkwo at the end of the book in a way that further justifies his desire to resist, and his heartbreak at the community's refusal to do so. There is nothing arbitrary or misunderstood about these small but consequential imaginative reworkings of the plot details, and they reveal something important about how these readers went about their reading. On the one hand, they clearly operated with something like the assumptions which characterise oral traditions. That is to say, the assumption that story is as an inescapably social product, collectively owned, and therefore open to the appropriations and remakings of all who lay claim to it. In this respect these readers quite explicitly made Achebe's story their own. On the other hand, the fact that they did so does not suggest some desire for proprietorial authority over the story, on the part of these readers, but rather a profound sense of investment in the story itself. What they displayed was a willingness to bring the dilemma of the villagers of Umuofia closer to the dilemmas of their own lives, and a desire to clarify and respond to those dilemmas through acts of retelling. In short, these readers allowed themselves, as it were, to be owned by the story.

A second variety of these retellings revolved around speculation about the life of the characters beyond the story, speculation by which the readers made clear something about where they wanted the story to go, as well as a critical assessment of where it had failed to go. Here it is necessary to settle for a single set of examples:

Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, seemed to be a bit of a rebel or maybe, feminist. I'm sure her daughter Ezinma, who had remained with him to the end and who he had always wished had been born a son, maybe, she would perpetuate the memory of [that] proud African warrior.

This is representative of a number of responses to the story by women readers which subtly reinstated Ezinma as a central character, as the possible heir to Okonkwo's rebellion, and which made the incident in which Ezinma is taken into the caves by Chielo absolutely pivotal to the whole novel because, after this, as one reader put it "she just seems to do domestic duties." Another reader brought this moment together with the recognition that there is no notable mother figure in Okonkwo's past. She tied both of these facts to the particular gender coding that marks the events of the night after the egwugwu has been unmasked:

Achebe starts when Okonkwo was 18 years old no mention of any devoted mother nurturing him before this [...] When Chielo the priestess of Agbala came to take their precious daughter Ezinma away in the middle of the night [...] this was the only infant to survive from ten children and you can comprehend the mothers instinct to protect the child [...] after Enoch killed an ancestral spirit that night the mother of the spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan weeping for her murdered son.

What is achieved here is a kind of critical bricolage. These related fragments, in which a mother-child relationship is mentioned, are picked loose from the original novel and knotted together so that they stand in distinct contrast to what this reader elsewhere describes: the fear that determines so many of Okonkwo's precipitous decisions, and the patriarchal tradition in which social worth can only be calibrated through "solid personal achievements." There is here, it seems to me, an implicit criticism of an absence in Achebe's novel, and of the almost total disappearance of women characters as the novel progresses. All the same, this criticism is not provided in the abstract but is worked out at close quarters, through a process of remaking the story in such a way that this absence is thrown into relief.

Postcolonial studies have very much celebrated the idea that flows of culture and people across the world in late modernity will introduce a new kind of detachment from our familiar places and ideas of identity, and from familiar stories about such things and about ourselves. That we should see this as an unambiguous good is something that Chinua Achebe has contested, quietly but

trenchantly, in Home and Exile and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> It seems wholly appropriate, in this respect, that we should find here readers of his great novel whose critical insights are based, not on their detachment from it, nor on an interpretive free-for-all, but precisely on their determination to bring that story into their own lives, to respond to it on the basis of their own social and historical experience, and to make it their own, remaking it as they do so.

The second thing which was striking about the responses of these readers was that there was an apparent correlation between readers' class and educational positions, broadly put, and the openness with which they responded to the novel, as well as what they allowed the novel to do in terms of their presuppositions about Africa, and about the history of European imperialism. As with all such findings this is, of course, hazy around the edges, nor do I have the space to substantiate my claim in detail. Nevertheless, there was a distinct pattern here and it was confirmed in large part by the findings of comparative research I carried out subsequently with middle class readings groups elsewhere.

To be clear: almost all of the readers from whom I received responses claimed in the end that they had enjoyed the novel. One of the few exceptions to this was offered by a retired doctor whose father had been a colonial officer, and whose response fragmented into a series of furious rhetorical questions: "Why read it? Indeed I ask myself why [...] Who is the story written for? Heaven only knows! I don't [...] Whose story gets lost in the novel? Answer. Everyones." About this little more can be said than that it means what it says: if Things Fall Apart tells a story without a subject this is because, for this reader, Africans are not capable of being subjects in their own right. Generally, however, there was little of such racism in the response of readers regardless of background or generation. What was notable, however, was that middle class readers and older middle class readers in particular, often came to Achebe's novel with a much stronger existing sense of what British colonial history was and of its symbolic importance for them and their sense of self. As a result, their readings frequently featured an odd kind of double speak. For example: "Achebe tells the story well and manages to give us an insight into the life of the primitive Nigerian" or "his book [...] will I believe alter our perceptions of the colonial history of the dark continent." Both these statements obviously re-inscribe the very perceptions which they claim that the book has challenged. As, indeed, does the claim that "the novel just shows that we were civilized just a little before them." Here certain underlying conceptual categories – "we" and "them," "civilized" and "primitive" – resurface even as they are apparently contested.

By contrast, it was working class readers who tended to offer the most innovative but also the most self-interrogating responses to the novel, such as the night guard who used the novel to return to a dictionary definition of colonialism as "economic exploitation of weak or backward peoples,"

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<sup>8</sup> Chinua Achebe, Home and Exile (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000): 91--105.

before noting that “this still arrogantly supposes the subjects to be weak or backward by comparison.” Or, as a second example, the reader who concluded that if she had read Achebe’s novel earlier “I would also of learnt about different customs, religions and traditions instead of skimming over them, thinking them to be fillings and little in-betweens the real story.” Most readers’ responses, however, did not reflect on the lessons of the story from the outside, as it were, but simply on the story itself, on the fate of the characters and the situations they faced. And it was in doing this that some of the most striking interpretations were offered. For example:

Okonkwo is fearful and violently resistant to the new religion because it has the potential of undermining the life long work of the clan trying to please the gods of its ancestors. If he accepted the new religion then his sacrifices, like the killing of Ikemefuna, who Okonkwo loved as a son, would have been in vain.

This account, which connects Okonkwo’s fatal last actions back to the death of Ikemefuna at a psychological level, and which therefore credits him with depth, which sees him as a character beset by doubts about his own choices, and about the rightness of tradition, seems to me to be genuinely insightful. At the very least it is suggestive of a real effort to think through the events of the novel from Okonkwo’s point of view. The fact that Okonkwo is the central figure in those events does nothing to make such a sympathetic response intuitive or automatic, as is made clear by the absolutely contrasting reading given by a retired businessman for whom the “first reaction” was to “worry about the role of the missionaries,” and who read Okonkwo, not as a character with psychological complexity, but as a symbolic representation of Africa as such: “Huge, strong, lumbering, ambitious, cruel to the weak and imperfect but with a promise of greatness and wealth.”

A final reading perhaps deserves consideration in a little more detail:

Perhaps Okonkwo was not rash when he killed the messenger, but the other messengers were allowed to escape. It may have been better for the clan for this to happen as we know of [...] the suffering already experienced by the leaders of Umuofia, and that Abame had been obliterated. By taking his own life Okonkwo saved his people from this. [...] He knew what a suicide entailed, this for him would have been the ultimate sacrifice, knowing what his burial would have been like. We are told that ‘the story of Ikemefuna is still told in Umuofia unto this day’ and so the clan continues. Perhaps Okonkwo’s sacrifice was not in vain.

What this essayist brings together are three discrete incidents from the novel. Firstly, the story of the colonial regime’s revenge against Abame after a white missionary was killed there; secondly, the briefest of lines suggesting the continuity of the village into the present; thirdly, the concluding suicide. From these is woven an interpretation of Okonkwo’s self-destruction as something both calculated and heroic. And, moreover, an act which is successful in preserving the long-term

existence of his village. We do no justice at all to readers if we underplay the pressures that impel one interpretation over another. This effort to redeem Okonkwo's death as something positive was asserted against all of the more traditional perspectives offered in the classes themselves, which followed the critical consensus in reading the novel as a form of tragedy. It was produced, also, against the grain of established national histories and against the general media portrayal of Africa as a place still primitive and irredeemably violent. This is not just a cussedly original reading, then, it is one fired by sympathy with Okonkwo's position, and dependent on a concerted imaginative effort to dismantle the categories "we" and "them."

In an interview from 1977, Pierre Macheray returned to that comment from Marx with which I began this essay. In essence, Macheray claims, Marx is having an ironic chuckle at those who still treat Greek culture as an easily transposable model, assuming somehow that the meanings and forms of creative works drift above changing social circumstances, maintaining themselves in some kind of ahistorical purity. What Marx is thus pointing us towards, Macheray argues, is the degree to which:

Literary works are not only produced, they are constantly reproduced under different conditions – and so they themselves become very different. [...] Texts are constantly rewritten, their effects are constantly altered. It is essential to study this material history of texts.<sup>9</sup>

It is exactly a series of reproductions of Achebe's novel in Macheray's sense which are discussed here. Precisely because texts can be reproduced, they can be encountered outside of that context in which they were originally produced. They are, in this respect, both reproduced in each new reading, but they are also possessed of a singularity, a distinctiveness which is born of the fact that they are a product of creative human labour conducted under particular social and historical conditions. This singularity confronts the distant reader as a challenge or a puzzle, a crisis requiring work. How such a crisis is resolved, as these last examples suggest, is related in important ways to what readers bring to their readings and how, as they go about trying to overcome an initial sense of displacement, they seek to reclaim a story in terms of their own local experiences.

For some of the readers that I worked with, especially those who had a stronger personal sense of investment in the image of Britain as a great historical power, Things Fall Apart was intriguing but exotic and was met, in the end, with a reassertion of old, familiar certainties; certainties about the course and cause of British imperialism, and about the categories of identity with which it operated. For others, by contrast, Achebe's novel was strikingly immediate. Readers in places like Easterhouse, or the dilapidated estates outside of Dumfries, can map the story that Achebe tells onto

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<sup>9</sup> Pierre Macheray, "Interview," Red Letters 5 (1977): 6--7.

their own local and personal histories with a remarkably close fit. The falling apart that the novel describes has plenty of analogies in Britain's recent domestic history and those analogies prepared the ground for these readers, in their various ways, to make that story their own. Hence one reader, a man from Govan, the one-time heart of the Clyde's ship building industry, explained in his essay how he had looked up the seven villages of Umuofia in an atlas and failed to find them, a fact that he took as proof of their ultimate disappearance. Govan too seems to have disappeared from the map of places that matter, so it is hardly surprising that readers there, and in places like it, should find a poignancy and urgency in Achebe's novel which leads them to read it, to retell it even, in intimate and deeply provocative ways.

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