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Chinua Achebe — *It is the Storyteller who makes us see what we are*

I'D LIKE TO SAY A FEW THINGS about Chinua Achebe, which hopefully resonate somewhat with our title — “It is the Storyteller who makes us see what we are.” I’ve been thinking about this title and have come to the conclusion that in the case of Chinua Achebe he was also a Storyteller who made us see *who* we are, or at least he certainly did in my case. I make the distinction between “what” and “who” as a way of suggesting that a personal encounter with him is likely to engender a transformation that is at least as profound as one we might receive by reading the remarkable body of his work. He was such an extraordinarily charismatic man, and having had the privilege of knowing him a little I would like to speak about both “what we are” because of his example, and more specifically “who we are”—or “who I am”—because of a personal encounter.

First, Chinua Achebe is a storyteller whose very existence made it possible for a whole generation of writers to imagine that it might be possible for them to begin to think of themselves as writers. From 1958 onwards, his face was there on book jackets, in the newspaper columns, as part of an ongoing global literary conversation, and he established a presence at a very young age for a writer. As we know, *Things Fall Apart* quickly became a worldwide publishing sensation and not too long afterwards there was a canonical intervention; syllabi and university courses had to be—sometimes reluctantly—cantilevered into new shapes and groupings to include Achebe and his work, and the work of others like him. His example was audacious and it was bold, but it was extremely important, for writers *need* elders—they need to be able to see those who have been before, who have established a presence. Without rehearsing the details of the emergence of African literature in the West—it is clear that somebody had to kick open the heavy, forbidding door to the literary and publishing world and make it possible for others to imagine that

there might also be a place for them to come inside and sit down at the table and participate. And we know full well who that man was.

Chinua Achebe knew from very early on that he bore a great responsibility, for he was part of a generation of writers in English which includes Walcott, Ngugi, Soyinka, Wilson Harris, George Lamming among many others, who had to develop equal fluency in both imaginative and critical writing, for they were having to write themselves into visibility. They all chose fiction *and* nonfiction. It was a generation in which it was pointless to make a distinction between the validity of both, because both were crucial as these writers tried hard to invent themselves. Achebe, of course, famously took an extra step as the editor of the Heinemann African Writers Series and was responsible for ushering over one hundred books into print. Achebe understood his solemn responsibility to others both past and present. But he was fully aware that others would come after him and he was assiduously clearing a space for them, and he continued to do so throughout the length of his life and career.

That, in a sense, is the “what we are.” This storyteller certainly made all of us, ordinary citizen and would-be writer alike, more clearly see both what we are and what we might become. When I think of the “who we are”—the more personal relationship, if you like—I have to recognize, appropriately enough given the timing of the present gathering, that it was Achebe’s battle with Conrad that really forged whatever connection there was between us. We didn’t overlap during the eight years that I spent teaching here at Amherst. I arrived in the fall of 1990, the same year that Chinua had his terrible car accident, and nearly three years after the death of James Baldwin, but the spirit of both writers was still very much in the UMass air. Their wisdom, their brilliance, their contribution—I suppose the best word to use would be *legacy*—the legacy of their tenure at UMass was being kept alive by stories of their lectures, the classes they taught here, by the accounts of those who had been fortunate enough to be their students, by their colleagues and friends, principally, of course, by Professor Michael Thelwell.

It would be over ten years—in fact not until early 2003—before I would finally have the privilege of meeting Chinua Achebe in person. The BBC in London asked me if I would agree to participate in a half-hour film documentary with him, which would involve my being an interviewer, and with the focus being upon Achebe’s life as a writer. Of course, I said yes and readily agreed to drive up to Bard College with the director and whatever crew he brought with him from London. I

also suggested that I arrange for a small group of my Barnard College students to travel up with another teacher in a minibus and therefore create a sort of informal seminar setting and provide us with an audience. I assumed that Mr. Achebe might enjoy the company of a group of young New York-based undergraduates, forgetting of course that he had plenty of undergraduates at Bard College to keep him company. But he graciously agreed to the proposal, and the small caravan, my car and the minibus, took off through the snow and, full of eager anticipation, we made the journey from Manhattan to Annandale-on-Hudson.

As it transpired there were two parts to the day. The first involved shooting the filmed interview with him for the documentary, which we eventually called "The Power of Stories." We did the filming in his home in a rather cramped corner of the living room, which was soon filled with eight or nine young women sitting cross-legged on the floor, notebooks in their laps and pens hovering eagerly. Christie, Mr. Achebe's wife, had made sure everybody had taken off their shoes and not walked snow into her house, and I still bristle with embarrassment realizing that I had probably been the chief, perhaps the only, potential offender, for I remember her looking pointedly at me as she laid down the law.

Anybody who has been involved in filming knows that it's a mind-bogglingly tedious process and requires great reservoirs of patience should you be the subject. As the director proceeded to rearrange the furniture in the Achebe household and plug out various appliances to free up sockets into which his crew might plug their own equipment, Chinua looked on with great vigilance and a Buddha-like calm and then asked me what exactly I thought we might talk about. I had been deliberately vague in my exchanges with both himself and the director, wanting to give Chinua the space to set the agenda. However, being a very generous man he in turn was reciprocating and letting me know that I should take things in whatever direction I wished. And so, with the students seated at his feet, we began and spoke for what felt like hours, but was in fact little more than an hour and a half, breaking off only to check that the film recording was working or for Chinua to have a sip of water.

It hardly needs stating how mesmerizing he was, but what people who have never had the good fortune to know Chinua probably don't realize is just how mischievously witty he could be. In fact, I love the opening of the essay that forms the basis of this symposium. Let me just read the first few lines.

In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department of the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot. It was a fine autumn morning such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man going the same way as I turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain community college not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster.

Good comedy requires good timing, and during the interview I learned that Chinua was a master of the rhetorical pause. As he spoke the students gawped and scribbled in turn. He took his time with every question, raised his finger to gently emphasize a point, and smiled to soften the blow of any corrective opinion he was about to deliver. It was clear that I was lucky to be in the presence of a master teacher, and, appropriately enough given our present location, the only other time I have ever felt this compulsion that I should listen and learn in the presence of another writer was when I first sat and talked with James Baldwin in the south of France back in the summer of 1983.

Once the filmed interview was over, and the adoring students had had their books signed and their photos taken, they all trudged out into the snow. However, I continued to talk with Chinua and this time raised the subject of Conrad, who, surprisingly enough, had not been discussed in the filmed documentary. The BBC crew were ready to leave but it was clear to me that there was unfinished business. Chinua had more to say and so, as the light began to fade, we moved to a more central part of the room and the second part of our encounter began, without cameras rolling or students taking notes. Now *I* was the student, for I began scribbling in a notebook. I won't bore you with the details of the conversation since I made enough notes, and my memory held up well enough, for me to be able to write an essay about Achebe and Conrad which was soon after published in *The Guardian* newspaper.

What I will say, however, is that on that late wintry afternoon our difference of opinion about Conrad seemed to revolve around the simple fact—well, not so simple actually—the fact that I was not an African and therefore didn't take *Heart of Darkness* personally, which Chinua obvi-

ously did. The more I listened to Chinua the more it became clear to me that the key to understanding Achebe on Conrad involves accepting the notion that the essay is perhaps not so much about Conrad's opinions about African people as it is about Chinua's love and respect for his own people. I was listening to a man who had probably been an elder before he was out of short pants, and as he spoke I remembered all the cultural apparatus which, as a black boy growing up in England, had cast and set images of Africa in my own mind. That afternoon I didn't change my opinion of Conrad but I began to rethink my diasporan relationship to Africa and, by extension, to the whole African diasporan family. Suddenly it became a much more fractured and difficult familial relationship, less romantic, more nuanced, and more challenging in all sorts of positive ways.

Of course, I thereafter did what anybody would do in these circumstances and I began to reread Chinua's work and could clearly see his ongoing frustrations with Western media images of Africa, as well as his own impatience with Nigerian and African politics, and the way in which some behaviors were contributing towards perpetuating negative images of Africa in the West. I read him on James Baldwin, and his poignant memories of first reading Baldwin in the Nigeria of the 1960s and then finally meeting him in Florida in 1980. I was very powerfully struck by his account of his difficulties on meeting some African diasporan writers, particularly Ralph Ellison, with whom he clearly did not get on, and this in turn made me remember Chinua's anecdotes about V. S. Naipaul, whom he referred to (with a big smile on his face) as "my friend Naipaul." Rereading Achebe made me realize that, like every great teacher, everything he had said to me on that late wintry afternoon had already been distilled and taken on board over years of careful thinking and writing, yet he presented it to me as though his conclusions had been provoked by being in conversation with me and these conclusions had been freshly arrived at for my benefit. Of course they had not, but rereading him and being reminded of this fact served only to make the encounter all the more precious.

Finally, two years later—in 2005—I shared a platform with Chinua at the Royal Festival Hall in London. When we came out onstage he received a tumultuous standing ovation (which the director of the center later told me had never happened before for any other writer). What the upstanding audience didn't know was that I had no idea whatsoever what direction this evening's conversation might go in. As we had hovered in the wings ready to make our entrance, I had assumed that we

would rehearse some of the issues that I had already talked with him about, principally, of course, his long tussle with *Heart of Darkness*. As the stage manager signaled that we should step forward and into the light, I suggested this subject matter to him. He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. “Tonight,” he said, “we can talk about anything. . . but not Conrad. Enough of Conrad.”