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‘Everywhere Felt and Nowhere Seen’: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and the Paradox of Sovereignty

An artist must be in his work like God in creation, invisible and all-powerful; he should be everywhere felt and nowhere seen

Flaubert in a letter to Mademoiselle Leroyer
Dechantepie (quoted in Boyd, 1983, p.29).

In reflecting on the artist as an invisible and all-powerful presence, Flaubert anticipates the rise of the modern novel, where a reflexive hyper-omniscience effects precisely this ‘God-like’ state. Rather than simply being told a story, the reader is permitted – indeed, required – to participate in the construction of the story itself. The author of the modern novel becomes, in this way, effectively invisible: ‘everywhere felt and nowhere seen,’ and thus parallels in literature what Giorgio Agamben calls ‘the paradox of sovereignty,’ where sovereign authority can be understood to exist, at the same time, both inside and outside of the law (1995, p.15).

‘Inscribed as a presupposed exception in every rule that orders or forbids something,’ Agamben explains – as, for example, in the rule against homicide – ‘is the pure and unsanctionable figure of the offense that, in the normal case, brings about the rule’s own transgression’ through state authorized killing, i.e., capital punishment (1995, p.21). This sort of killing is no longer considered ‘natural violence,’ and therefore a *transgression* of the law, but instead: ‘sovereign violence in the state of exception’ (1995, p.21).

In this essay, I will argue that Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* reflects this sovereign paradox on two levels: first – as seen in the subject of the novel – on the juridico-political level, and second, on the level of the novel’s language and structure. For Agamben, language itself is the prime example of the ‘sovereign exception’ implicit in juridical order. ‘Language,’ he writes, ‘is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself’ (1995, p.21). Language and the law both parallel and promote the ‘double exception’ that, according to Agamben, constitutes the *Homo Sacer*: ‘Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed’ (1995, p.82). In the following pages, with the help of Agamben’s explorations of ‘sovereign power’ from *Homo Sacer*, and Michael Boyd and Robert Siegle’s reflections on reflexivity in the novel form – a technique that allows the narrative itself, through what Siegle calls a ‘double divergence from “reality”’ (1986, p.9) to acknowledge itself as a constructed object – I will show how Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* demonstrates the integral relationship between language, narrative and juridical power.

‘There is no story that is not true’

Obierika’s words in *Things Fall Apart*: ‘There is no story that is not true’ (Achebe, 1958, p.14), neatly illustrate the paradox of sovereignty, positing on the one hand the omniscient authority and reliability of the narrative text and on the other directly undermining that authority. But it is by doing away with the binary system of what can and should be considered true and untrue that the reflexive narrative – of which Achebe’s novel is a prime example – positions itself in a ‘permanent state of exception’ (Agamben, 1995, p.21). That is, it establishes for itself ‘a zone of indistinction’ (Agamben, 1995, p.47) characterized by the very *impossibility* of arriving at the ‘truth’ as such, or ‘of distinguishing between outside and inside, nature

and exception' (Agamben, 1995, p.37). In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, this 'zone of indistinction' is constructed on the textual level by the novel's transgression of its own narrative borders. For example, at one point in the novel Ezinma begins a story in the following way: 'Once upon a time [...] Tortoise and Cat went to wrestle against Yams.' But here she interrupts herself: 'No, that is not the beginning,' and begins again: 'Once upon a time there was a great famine in the land of the animals...' (1958, p.100). This narrative overlap demonstrates at the micro-level the larger question of narrative structure at work in the novel: how the interstices and tensions between cultural narratives and ways of knowing overlap in the form of conflicting religious and political laws. Crucially, the final sentence of the novel, which concludes with the title of the as-yet-unwritten historical account imagined by the white District Commissioner: '*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*' (1958, p.209), directs the reader beyond the limit of what the text itself can contain. Not only is the reader in this way reminded of the fabricated construction and restrictions of the text as such, she is also reminded of the manner in which history and law-making (represented by the Commissioner's un-written text) is always potential, always imagined.

As Richard Begam has observed, Achebe's novel actually presents us with three different conceptions of history and its account: 'Nationalist,' 'adversarial' and 'metahistory' (1997, pp.397-398). It is the latter model that allows for the simultaneous exploration and expression of all three. Achebe's 'metahistory,' writes Begam, allows history itself to '[call] attention to itself as a piece of writing, a narrative construction that depends on principles of selection (what material will be included), emphasis (what importance will be attached to it?) and shaping (how will it be organized and arranged?)' (1997, p.398). Similarly, Achebe's novels present juridical power as a narrative construction, positioning his own narrative at the 'point of indistinction' between what Agamben refers to as 'constituting' and 'constituted' powers (1995, p.41).

A 'constituting power,' Agamben explains, manifests itself in the creative impetus, which requires – in the words of Antonio Negri – that 'every determination is free and remains free'; by contrast, a '*constituted* power is the consumption of freedom brought by constituting power' (as quoted by Agamben, 1995, p.43). In other words: a *constituting* power is that creative force, which persists *outside* of language and law,

in that it can never be substantially expressed. A *constituted* power is the law as it is actualized, the words on a page.

In both juridico-political as well as literary terms, we can see that when a story, law, or mode of conduct becomes normalized, it becomes ‘true’ – even if that ‘truth’ must ultimately be considered partial. This is demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart* when the residents of Umuofia accept the ‘truth’ of the fact that a man with an *Ozo* title must not tap his palm trees – despite the arbitrariness of the law, which Obierika readily admits; ‘I don’t know how we got that law,’ he says to Okwonko, ‘... In many other clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree’ (1958: 69). Okwonko, as ever, is unwaveringly literal-minded: though the law may be ‘beyond [...] understanding’ it nevertheless ‘must be obeyed’ (1958, p.69).

Precisely at the point when something becomes ‘true’ (whether within the governing system of a story or law) it becomes *constituted* by power – then actualized as ‘law.’ Though this would seemingly mark an ‘end’ (Agamben, 1995, p.43), the system is far from static. In fact, it is this ‘end’ that creates what Agamben calls a ‘punctual determination that determines a horizon’ (1995, p.43), which, in turn, creates new possibilities. We can see that, in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, it is the community’s growing dissatisfaction with the ‘punctual determination’ provided by many Umuofia customs and laws (laws pertaining to outcasts [p.155], or to the banishing of twins [p.151] for example) that inspires many of its members to turn instead to the Colonial government’s political and religious systems. Although *constituted* power marks, therefore, an ‘end’ (i.e., that which has *passed over* into actuality) it also marks the point from which new possibilities arise. *Constituting* power, by contrast, can exist only as pure potentiality – as that which ‘*can not pass over into actuality*’ (Agamben, 1995, p.45, emphasis mine).

The reflexive novel positions its reader at the ‘point of indistinction’ that persists between the *constituted* language and framing of the story, and the *constituting* force of the story itself – that which remains always *beyond* the text, or the law. Through a strange reversal, however – and Achebe’s novel illustrates this – it is often by an emphasis on the *constituted* nature of the novel that the *constituting* force behind the novel is made clear. Michael Boyd, in *The Reflexive Novel*, explains this in terms of a ‘bending back’ (1983, p.36), which allows the narrative to recognize, and express itself, as a constructed object. The movement of a reflexive novel is, therefore, simultaneously outward (toward a representation of the outside world), and inward

(toward a reflection on its own inability to represent that which exists outside). Robert Siegle goes further, discussing what he calls the novel's 'double divergence from "reality"' (1986, p.9): first, 'from the "the thing itself"' (the actual object or thing the language represents) and second, from meaning. According to Siegle, reflexivity is that which can be 'said to emerge in the space between these divergences' (1986, p.9).

The reflexive novel becomes a 'sovereign act.' By doubly removing itself from 'reality,' it creates its own reality. Agamben explains: 'An act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself' (1995, p.46). The reflexive novel exists, in this way, in relation to both the *constituted* and *constitutive* forces at work inside and outside of the novel's frame, and attains what Walter Benjamin would call the 'Nothing of Revelation' – a 'revelation' that does not, in itself, signify, but still persists: 'in force without significance' (as quoted in Agamben, 1995, p.51). In Flaubert's words – like the law in *Things Fall Apart* – 'everywhere felt, but nowhere seen.'

It is this – Benjamin's 'Nothing of Revelation' – that Agamben proposes to be at the root of the 'legitimation crisis' of our current era. Not, that is, because the structure of the law has changed, but because the 'Nothing of Revelation' is (and has always been) 'precisely the structure of the sovereign relation' (1995, p.51). Our current era, then, has only revealed this underlying structure – just as a reflexive novel only reveals the underlying (created) structure of what has always been constitutive of the realist novel. 'The Nihilism in which we are living,' writes Agamben, 'is from this perspective, nothing other than the coming to light of this relation as such' (1995, p.51). Achebe effectively demonstrates this 'revelatory' process in *Things Fall Apart* not by depicting a displacement of old-order meaning with a nihilistic modernity, but by exposing the very structure of power at work beyond its particular manifestations in time and place. That is, the way that religious belief and power systems are shown to shift and change throughout the text is not intended to demonstrate any linear progression or regression toward or away from legitimation, but instead to reveal 'the legitimation crisis' that is always inherent in any constituted structure of power. This is not, of course, to say that what Charles Taylor, in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, calls the 'new moral order' (2004, p.10) is identical to the old. There is a profound shift in the 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2004, p.2) of the Umuofia peoples toward a modern, Western mode of thinking in which 'the importance of freedom is attested in the requirement that political society be

founded on the consent of those bound to it' (Taylor, 2004, p.21). *Things Fall Apart* bears witness to this shift, and makes a mockery of this claim. But it is not just the Imperial project that is shown to fall short of its goals. The clash between the *ideal* and the *actual* points in the novel to the 'imaginary' quality of *both* the Umuofia and the Imperial juridico-political structures, so that what is revealed is not that the structures are the same, but that because both structures are based on the 'imaginary' (due to the divergence in *any* form of representation, political or aesthetic, between the *constituted* and the *constituting* power, the sign, and 'the thing itself' [Siegle, 1986, p.9]), the 'legitimation crisis' remains for both as well.

It is by this same process, of course, that the reflexive novel reveals the 'legitimation crisis' inherent in the structure of any narrative. Reflexivity, Siegle argues, is not something that has emerged only in a postmodern era of nihilistic self-consciousness and doubt. Instead, it is 'a basic capability of narrative exercised in every period, historical schematizations notwithstanding' (Siegle, 1986, p.3), which focuses not so much on representing 'things in themselves' but on imagining those 'things' in relationship to one another. Represented objects and narrative content become important because they mark a point of departure: they become, to quote again from Agamben, 'the punctual determination' that 'opens a horizon' (1995, p.43).

But this revealed horizon is nonetheless – and necessarily – circumscribed. Like the juridico-political system, narrative (and in particular the reflexive novel, which picks up on, and makes use of this narrative trait) exists both 'inside and outside' of itself. It sets its own, albeit invisible, limits – which it is not, then, permitted to exceed. This intrinsic limit – what Agamben calls a 'ban' – is crucial at a literal, as well as a figurative level in *Things Fall Apart*. Ikemefuna's residency and subsequent sacrifice, Okonkwo's exile, the role of the outcasts in Umuofia society, and finally Okonkwo's suicide, are all examples of the 'ban,' in which the 'law' *is applied* in its '*no longer applying*' (Agamben, 1995, p.29, emphasis mine). 'He who is banned,' writes Agamben,

is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed, threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order [...] It is in this sense that the paradox of sovereignty can take form. 'There is nothing outside the law' (1995, p.29).

'There is nothing outside the law'

This paradox – 'There is nothing outside the law' – is clearly illustrated in juridico-political terms by *Things Fall Apart*. Over the course of the novel, the traditional Umuofia law – prescribed by the spirit world, and described as 'too great to be known' (1958, p.181) – is replaced by a 'new moral order' (Taylor, 2004, p.10). This happens so gradually, however, that though the 'moral order' has indeed changed drastically by the end of the novel, no obvious break is ever made with the sovereignty of law. The new Colonial law is also, of course, 'too great to be known,' and, likewise, it is maintained by an invisible Head of State, described by the District Commissioner as 'the most powerful ruler in the world' (1958, p.194). In both cases (both the older and the newer form of order) the imperative is clear: obey. There is, after all, 'nothing outside the law,' and the law itself is 'too great to be known.' Even the 'exceptions' are shown to be part of the rule: the murder of an adopted son in the case of Umuofia is legitimized by the boy's status as an enemy 'exile' in much the same way that the torture and hanging deaths of Umuofia citizens are legitimized by a Colonial law that purports to have brought a 'peaceful administration' to the Umuofia people (1958, p.194) and, more specifically, *because* it purports to do so. In this way, violence is shown through the novel to be inextricably linked to law, to peace, and to the manner in which the law provides for the 'state of exception' that constitutes the rule. 'The rule lives off the exception' (Agamben, 1995, p.36), constructing itself precisely at that point of indistinction between a *constituting* violence and *constituted* law (Agamben, 1995, p.37).

It is precisely this indistinction that Okonkwo's suicide exemplifies. After a devastating crop failure at the beginning of the novel, Okonkwo is told by his father: 'I know you will not despair. You have a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and bitter when a man fails alone' (1958, p.25). Although Okonkwo remains, and perhaps in no small part *because* he remains, so inflexibly 'manly and proud,' he ultimately 'fails alone' just as his father 'failed alone' – exactly the fate he has tried so hard to resist. From the beginning, Okonkwo is 'dominated' by a fear of 'failure and weakness' (1958, p.13). This fear overpowers any other fear, even of gods, nature, and the law. Okonkwo's fear, it is said: 'was not external but lay deep within himself. It was a fear of himself, lest he be found to resemble his father' (1958, p.13). By allowing a 'fear of himself' to replace all else, Okonkwo enters into his own sovereign system. It

is not surprising, therefore, that it is neither to any god nor any other man that he ultimately succumbs – but to himself. Similarly, when Ezinma recalls the story of the snake-lizard who kills his mother, it is the conclusion that makes sense of the story. Ezinma recounts ‘[The snake lizard] gave his mother seven baskets of vegetables to cook and in the end there were only three. And so he killed her’ (1958, p.84). When she is reminded that there is more to the story, she says: ‘Oho... I remember now. He brought another seven baskets and cooked them himself. And there were again only three. So he killed himself too’ (1958, p.84). Without the ending, the initial act of murder seems to be a cruel and random act of violence. It is the second half of the story that establishes the law according to which the world of the story is governed and makes sense of both crimes. The assertion, ‘there is nothing outside the law’ is therefore literalized by the suicide of the snake lizard.

Later on in the novel, this same story is echoed under very different circumstances, when Obierika visits Okonkwo in exile – just prior to Okonkwo’s return to Umuofia. When Okonkwo says, ‘I do not know how to thank you,’ Obierika replies: ‘I can tell you [...] Kill one of your sons for me’ (1958, p.142). The dialogue continues: “‘That will not be enough,’ said Okonkwo. ‘Then kill yourself,’ said Obierika. ‘Forgive me,’ said Okonkwo, smiling. ‘I shall not talk about thanking you anymore’” (1958, p.142). In this passage Obierika illustrates the emptiness of the language contract between himself and Okonkwo by revealing the gap between words and the reality to which they point – a gap, in the words of Siegle, that language must ‘spring’ across by first ‘recognizing itself as artifice’ (1986, p.5). Obierika’s request, in doing just that – ‘recognizing itself as artifice’ – points to an empty centre, the ‘absent object’ (Boyd, 1983, p.168) to which language always refers but can neither replicate nor fill. In the moment Okonkwo smiles his ‘forgive me’ (Achebe, 1958, p.142) the emptiness of the language *both* men should presumably be understood, but Okonkwo does not seem to grasp the figurative nature of the exchange. Because his literal mind resists the leap across the language’s empty core, he is doomed to unwittingly fulfill Obierika’s request: he has, of course, *already* killed a son and soon he will kill himself. Okonkwo acts out of an overpowering fear ‘of himself’ (1958, p.13), and in this way functions as his own ‘limit figure’ (Agamben, 1995, p.25), sovereign only over himself. The words of his father at the beginning of the novel, ‘it is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone’ (1958, p.25), take on even greater and more literal significance because of this. Okonkwo ‘fails’ – and in the end, he dies – ‘alone,’ but he

does so *literally* – that is, by expressing ‘sovereignty over his own existence’ (Agamben, 1995, p.136) in the act of suicide.

Interestingly, although Okwonkwo kills himself in protest and despair at the ‘new moral order’ (Taylor, 2004, p.10) that is being imposed on his community, and though Obierika says of the District Commissioner, ‘You drove him to kill himself’ (1958, p.208), Okonkwo’s own life (and the extremity to which his sovereignty is exercised) reflects what Taylor describes as central to the ‘new moral order’ (2004, p.10) the District Commissioner represents: ‘What makes modern humanism unprecedented [...] is the idea that [human] flourishing involves no relation to anything higher’ (2004, p.57). Okonkwo’s ambition from the beginning of the novel has been toward personal betterment at the expense of family and community, precisely what he criticizes the young people of the community – including his son, Nwoye – for aspiring toward. ‘I fear for the younger generation...’ says an elder of the Umuofia community when Okonkwo returns after his seven years in exile. He continues: ‘You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors’ (1958, p.167).

In ‘cursing the gods of his father,’ Nwoye ironically achieves Okonkwo’s own greatest ambition. Further, it is Okonkwo himself who makes room for Nwoye’s betrayal through his rejection of his own father’s way of life (1958, p.5). Because of Okonkwo’s fear of ‘himself’ and, by extension, his own history and traditions – he implicates himself in the murder of his adopted son (1958, p.61). It is an act neither of faith nor of strength; Okonkwo is said to have been ‘dazed with fear’ (1958, p.61) at the moment the crime is committed. Instead, it is a simple act of rebellion from what he perceives as his own father’s weakness – and this rebellion, in turn, provokes Nwoye’s rebellion. In the moment Nwoye realizes his father’s involvement in the death of Ikemefuna, ‘something seemed to give way’ inside him ‘like the snapping of a tightened bow’ (1958, p.61). It is this break – this loss of faith in his own father – that causes Nwoye to turn to the ‘new moral order’ represented by the white man’s church:

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul (1958, p.147).

The new religion appeals to Nwoye not because of any ‘order’ or ‘truth’ that he sees inherent in it (it seems to him, instead, to be quite ‘mad’) but because of the deep desire he feels to replace the system of governance and faith that has been lost to him. The opening that was necessary for the ‘new order’ to ‘pour’ in was therefore created by Okonkwo himself long before the church of the white man arrived in either Mbanta or Umuofia.

It is through similar openings, or spaces of desire – personal, social, as well as economic – that the ‘new order’ establishes itself among the Umuofia people over the course of the novel. But these spaces of desire – which are permitted to exist between potentiality and actuality, in Agamben’s ‘permanent space of exception,’ cannot (like the ‘the centre’ in Yeats’s great poem, ‘The Second Coming,’ from which Achebe’s novel takes its name) hold. Potentiality always moves toward actuality. In Agamben’s terms, the freedom of the constituting force is always quickly ‘consumed’ by constitutive law.

The strength of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, however, is its ability to ‘bend back’ on itself in order to constitute its own ‘punctual determination,’ from which point it is then able to ‘(open) a horizon’ (Agamben, 1995, p.43); or, as Seigle puts it, point ‘everywhere at once’ (1986, p.3). Recall that, according to Seigle’s definition, the reflexive turn not only points back to the sign (so that the sign itself constitutes a sort of ‘dead end’), but also continues *past* that point – in order to complete a ‘reflexive circuit’ whereby the novel ‘turns back upon itself *in the very process of its getting out again* to where it was pointing before it started’ (1986, p.2, emphasis mine). It is this ‘reflexive’ circuitry that Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* powerfully demonstrates on the juridico-political as well as the textual level, revealing in both cases what has arguably always been fundamental to the structure of both language and politics: a constantly shifting relation between potentiality and actuality, between constituting and constituted power.

‘The centre cannot hold’

‘Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’ (Yeats, 1991, p.124). The anarchy that is ‘loosed’ here, however, is an anarchy contained within a greater sovereignty, which, at the end of Yeats’s poem, initiates the reestablishment of order: the beast ‘slouches toward Bethlehem to be born’ again – and history continues. The centre to which Yeats refers collapses from potentiality

into actuality, but – paradoxically – what is created through language is indeed able to ‘maintain itself indefinitely *without ever* passing over into actuality’ (Agamben, 1995, p.47, emphasis mine). This quest for a state of ‘suspension’ (Agamben, 1995, p.47) from actuality defines the entire artistic venture, according to Michael Boyd. He refers to the assertion by the Russian formalists that ‘the technique of art is to [...] increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged,’ and goes on to quote Morse Peckham’s contention that art is a means of assuaging ‘man’s rage for chaos’ by providing the possibility of a ‘disorientation’ and ‘defamiliarization’ not possible in the quotidian everyday (1983, p.25). There is always, explains Boyd, the human desire to ‘break out of the confines of [...] conceptual *stasis*’ (1983, p.26); in other words, there is always the desire to eschew the confines of the story, to bypass the dead ‘end’ of each ‘punctual determination,’ and open, instead, a ‘horizon’ of other potentialities. There is always the desire to inhabit, again, that space of ‘exception’ toward which the story was ‘pointing before it started’ (Siegle, 1986, p.2).

Although, as Boyd writes, ‘living every moment of our lives in this state of disorientation’ (what Agamben would call a ‘zone of indistinction’) would render action impossible, art recognizes ‘the pathological dangers’ of a life lived in total commitment to ‘orderly experience’ (1995, p.26). Okonkwo’s death testifies to these dangers. In honouring the ‘empty contract’ made with Obierika, Okonkwo’s death literalizes the emptiness of language that Obierika attempted to expose. By committing suicide, Okonkwo demonstrates Boyd’s ‘uncontrollable and passionate rage for order’ (1983, p.26). That is, Okonkwo’s ‘desire for death’ can also be understood as a desire for ‘the most perfect order we can imagine, for total insulation from all perceptual disparities’ (Boyd, 1983, p.26). In the end, Okonkwo is shown to prefer the ‘total insulation’ offered by death – by ultimate ‘sovereignty over himself’ – to what he perceives as the ‘mere anarchy’ (Yeats, 1991, p.124) of the new ‘moral order’ (Taylor, 2004, p.10). But what Achebe’s novel makes powerfully clear, in keeping with Yeats’s ‘The Second Coming,’ is that anarchy is part of the governing structure Okonkwo confronts. His attempt to exempt himself from the system through suicide only further establishes him within the paradox of sovereignty – as the ‘double exception’ that, according to Agamben, constitutes the *Homo Sacer*: ‘Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed’ (Agamben, 1995, p.82). Although Okonkwo’s life was sacrificed by the community to the Colonial forces in practical

terms, in religious terms the death does not constitute a sacrifice: as Obierika explains to the District Commissioner, 'It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it' (1958, p.207). A little later on in the same exchange, Obierika adds: 'We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land' (1958, p.208). With this remark, he further establishes the fact that Okonkwo's death cannot be considered sacred. But the ambiguity inherent within the word 'sacred' must here be kept in mind. Agamben points to a 1932 entry for the word 'sacer' in the *Dictionnaire etymologique de la langue latine*, explaining: 'Sacer designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying; hence the double meaning of "sacred" or "accursed" (approximately)' (Agamben, 1995, p.79).

By establishing Okonkwo's death outside of the regular order, and thus, ostensibly, *outside* of the laws of both man and nature, it is at the same time revealed to exist *within* those bounds. The suicide confirms the 'double meaning' (Agamben, 1995, p.79) of the *Homo Sacer* as both sacred ('That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia' [Achebe, 1958, p.208]) and accursed ('... and now he will be buried like a dog' [Achebe, 1958, p.208]). Like Achebe's novel itself, Okonkwo's death exists in a permanent 'state of exception.' In 'turn[ing] back on its turning,' it 'points everywhere at once' (Siegle, 1986, p.2-3). It is by completing this reflexive turn that *Things Fall Apart* reveals the empty centre between constituting and constituted powers – thereby arriving at the shared truth of both juridical law and narrative truth. Both, the novel affirms, are 'everywhere felt but nowhere seen,' existing in the relation between action and reaction, and the unremitting cycle according to which the one informs and becomes the other. Just as the white man's religion provides a shape for a desire already present in Nwoye and the figure of Okwonkwo reveals the 'originary exclusion' through which politics is constituted (Agamben, 1995, p.83), *Things Fall Apart* delineates and 'maintains [...] indefinitely' (Agamben, 1995, p.47) the sovereign paradox of language – a paradox that is, and always has been, the underlying structure of every story. By reflecting and emphasizing this structure, the novel succeeds in illustrating the way that all systems of power – including the historical record – are created and maintained by positioning and enacting themselves both inside and outside their governing forms.

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