

DESTINY IN ANIEBO'S
THE ANONYMITY OF SACRIFICE

by

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I

As a novel, The Anonymity of Sacrifice, though a first attempt, does much more than show signs of great promise. The novel begins with Benjamin Onwura, a young "army officer in his late twenties" behind the wheel, returning to Oron from Port Harcourt where he had "earlier in the day" proposed marriage to Franca Odunze, a twenty-one year old clerk "at the Savings and Loans Department of the Housing Corporation." Having promised her he would return in three days, that is, the following Sunday, to finalize their engagement, Benjy (as he is popularly known), was driving back to Oron, at full speed, with loud and romantic music booming from his car radio, completely oblivious of the world. And then at a sudden curve, made even more sudden by the gathering darkness, he stamped hard on the breaks and skidded to a halt, barely missing a road-block. "The engine stalled."¹ With that "rude awakening" Benjy got back to the reality of the civil war and the life of the military; and the reader realizes immediately that the story is cast within the background of the Nigerian/Biafran war.

The story is like an incision. When it started the war was already far advanced. The Nigerian soldiers had already captured the University town of Nsukka, the Biafran capital Enugu, and were already threatening Awka, another strategic town. And when the story ended, the war was still going on as we learn from the last sentence: "Meanwhile, the civil war continued." (p. 115) This novel addresses a whole range of philosophical issues. Central among these is the question of human destiny. The aim of this paper is to analyse some shades of destiny put forward in the novel, and also discuss some of the questions raised as well as the answers suggested in the story.

II

In The Anonymity of Sacrifice the concept of destiny is far from being univocal. It is full of nuances ranging from a loose and popular notion of chance to an idea of rigorous and inexorable predestination. And our author makes full and effective use of the various connotations concept. As a working definition however, we can regard destiny as a form of power,

rational or blind, that moves the human agent inexorably towards a certain direction or a fixed end. It is a predetermination of human choices and actions either individually or collectively. It includes the notion of fate, predestination and determinism.

As a popular notion, destiny is used in the novel in a loose and general way. In the first place it is often used to refer to an event or a happening called luck (good or bad), accident or chance in the sense of an unplanned or unanticipated event. For example, when Captain Onwura was assigning Platoon Commanders their junior officers, he felt it would be better to pair up a good and experienced junior officer with a "weak" commander. In this way, he thought, a capable subordinate officer would make up for the weakness of his immediate superior. In this context, it was a pure coincidence that in the process Sergeant Cyril Agumo, a man of ambition was assigned to a platoon commander in the person of Second Lieutenant Ekemezie who would literally and cowardly hand over to him the command of the platoon the very first night of their deployment.

Many a time, this popular notion of destiny in the sense of chance is expanded to include the idea of premonition, a spooky feeling that something (usually unpleasant) is about to happen. When Franca was seeing Benjy off, he promised her he would return the following Sunday and then they would go to see her parents. She pointed out to him that her mother was not at Port Harcourt but at Owerri. Benjy remarked: "We can drive to see your mother too -- Owerri is only sixty miles away. These days one can never be sure of tomorrow." (p. 5). And then, when he finally took leave of her, he drove off for a short distance, taking occasional glances at her through the rear-view mirror. He saw "her standing there, looking young and vulnerable." (p. 5). He probably saw and felt much more than her vulnerability. There was fear in her mind, an eerie feeling that this handsome and considerate young army officer who lately dashed into her life, was dashing away, like a shooting star, out of her reach for good. He must have sensed her fear because "For a while he was tempted to turn back, gather her in his arms and reassure her of the reality of the future his marriage proposal has unfolded before her." (p. 5). He did not turn back to "reassure her" because "the reality of (that) future" was not guaranteed her. In the same way, on the last leg of his trip to Oron, Benjy had a "feeling of deep foreboding." (p. 7). It dawned on him gradually. Before leaving Uyo, he started noticing his mood, a mood he felt was also reflected in the world outside, a sleepy silence with a tinge of uneasiness about it. It was just a little after eight o'clock and yet Uyo was already a sleepy town, but with a difference: "Somehow Benjy felt it was not a peaceful sleep, in

in fact it was not sleep at all, but a waiting, a watchful emptiness, a lull -- like the calm before the storm." (p. 7). Benjy clarified his mood as his feeling became more manifest. He gradually realized that the lull he thought was in the town was in actual fact "more of a brooding silence," and was not in the town but in himself: "filling his limbs with lethargy, emptying his mind of all active thought . . . and making him feel as though he had suddenly become very very heavy." (p. 7). He tried to fight against this depressing mood by switching on his car radio to distract himself. There was nothing interesting on the radio. Besides, there was so much static he had to turn it off. And so he was forced back to reflecting on his mood and thus had more time to see it a little more clearly: "A sense of fatality was his dominant emotion." With the true nature of his mood identified, and also knowing there was not much he could do against fate, he "resigned himself to it." And so he drove to Oron that night with a feeling of fatality hanging over his head.

Another dimension in this loose notion of destiny is the belief that the when and the how of the realization of man's cravings is a matter of divine dispensation. This belief or conviction is often expressed in the popular saying that man proposes but God disposes, and that the way God disposes an event, that is the way it is going to be. Thus Benjy had felt for a long time that he was due for promotion to Battalion Commander and since it did not come his way when he expected it, he "at times had despaired of ever getting it." (p. 4). When it did come, he got the news under unusual and unexpected circumstances. "Oh God", he exclaimed, "how devious your ways always are! What a time to grant me one of my most fervent wishes!" (p. 4). When he was promising Franca earlier in the evening that he would return the following Sunday, little did he know he would, in a few hours, be promoted and sent to the front and so would not be able to fulfil his promise to her. "My Franca! there goes all our plans!" (p. 4).

An underlying factor of these nuances of destiny as an unplanned or unanticipated event is the feeling that somehow a conscious someone or something is behind it all. In addition, they are portrayed in the novel without prejudice to the possibility or actual presence of divine providence or universal determinism. In fact the two coexist as our analysis will soon show how the story moves from a loose notion of destiny to a rigorous predetermination.

III

There is another dimension to the development of the concept of destiny in the story. When Captain Onwura realized, on his way to Oron, that a feeling "of fatality was his domin-

ant emotion," and at the same time that he could do nothing against fate, he resigned himself to it. This brought him a measure of peace of mind. This is a new phase in the development of the notion of destiny in the novel. It introduces the factor of the consciousness of being predetermined on the part of the human agent as well as the consequent resignation to or acceptance of the way things are.

Prior to that realization, Benjy had been unconsciously following the path mapped out for him by fate with some internal struggle, especially after the road block incident. After leaving Franca, Benjy was bent on driving straight to Oron. However, after the "rude awakening" of the road block, he decided to pass the night at Uyo his brigade headquarters, instead of driving straight to Oron. There was no obvious explanation for this sudden change of mind mid-stream. As it turned out however, "something very important" was awaiting him at Uyo. The main point is that his decision to stop over at Uyo was made with some internal reluctance and irritation consequent upon the road block incident. Strictly speaking, his irritation over that road block was not really an irritation. There was no apparent reason an intelligent man and an army officer like Benjy would feel as irritated as he did over the mounting of road blocks during a civil war. And yet it took him a long time indeed to get over it. It would seem to be not so much an irritation as a feeling of anxiety, an internal struggle against fate over the control of his decisions and actions. After realizing the presence of fate in his life and the subsequent acceptance of his destiny, things became different with him, and clearer to us. From that point on, most of his decisions would not present any serious problems because he would be making them according to a predetermined plan. We begin to understand from this point of view why he made the decisions he made. If he had driven straight to Oron without the stop over at Uyo, he would probably not have got the news of his promotion that night, nor the order to report at the Army Headquarters immediately. On his way from Oron to the Army Headquarters he was tempted to detour to Port Harcourt to see Franca first before reporting to his superiors. He however decided to drive straight, "an instinctive decision. It is true that these decisions and subsequent ones were his decisions, but he was more or less following a path mapped out for him, with clearer perception and less resistance. From now on he would decide to act or not to act depending on whether or not it is in accordance with a line of action that would bring him to a predetermined end, namely, premature death in the hands of his own junior officer. Seen from this perspective, certain actions and omissions on the part of Benjy that otherwise would not have made any sense begin to take on some texture of logic and consistency.

He was by training, experience and temperament a realist as well as a reflective soldier. His realism enabled him to see things in their proper perspective, assess and evaluate situations objectively, and develop a healthy and balanced attitude towards events. He was never under any illusion regarding the actual strength of the Biafran military organization. He could estimate accurately the might of the Nigerian army; and knew from experience that the federal troops invariably reached their objective once they were determined. He was not therefore deceived by the exaggerated optimism often found in some of the Biafran situation reports. From experience also he has come to know the enemy's mode of operation namely, "shell a defended locality intensively and when the defenders have been driven away, move in and occupy." (p. 49). He was equally aware of the attitude of the Biafran "higher authorities," that they were not searching for a way to counter this well known strategy of the enemy. "All they think of is to find a scapegoat on whom every piece of lost ground can be conveniently blamed." (p. 49). His awareness of all these facts notwithstanding, he remained undaunted, dedicated and conscientious. And so, without being either a coward or a saboteur, he felt one should not take unnecessary risks. He thus advocated a cautious conservation of energy especially since he knew the Biafran resources both in men and ammunitions were quite limited.

Benjy was therefore a highly disciplined and reflective army officer whose every major decision as well as action was guided by reason based on an objective assessment of his total situation. He was therefore furious when the commander of "A" Company, Sergeant Cyril Agumo instead of obeying his orders to withdraw was asking for urgent reinforcement "to maintain present position." Benjy therefore decided to get over there in person before it got too dark and "teach the bastard a lesson."

When Cyril appeared, looking tired but deliberately slow and arrogant, he asked without even saluting: "You want me, sir?" (p. 99). Benjy thought to himself that the man standing before him looking hostile and arrogant was "A dangerous character to be handled carefully." (p. 99). Yet he decided to interrogate him alone, sending away his orderly. When he asked Cyril to surrender his weapons that he was under close arrest, Cyril made no move to comply with his orders. Benjy sensing imminent danger called his orderly, using the time Cyril looked in the direction of the approaching orderly to get his gun ready, pushing "the safety-catch forward," without cocking it. "Not necessary," he thought. On arrival the orderly was ordered to disarm Cyril. He made a move to carry out the order. Cyril pretending to unbuckle his belt, pulled out and cocked his pistol in a simultaneous movement, "fired

three shots in quick succession." Benjy came crashing down. And so he went the way he was destined to go.

IV

There is yet another sense in which the death of Captain Benjamin Onwura can be seen as predetermined, namely, from the side of the agent. Sergeant Agumo's action would seem to have been predetermined in the sense that there were preconditions that more or less determined the way he would react to a given situation. He was completely different from Captain Onwura in temperament, education and even in his attitude towards the army as well as the present civil war and how to prosecute it. He had not been quite successful both as a married man and as a soldier. He had joined the infantry to prove to his unfaithful and unloving wife that he was a man. He had been quite morose, and took refuge first in alcohol and lately in Bible reading "as a cure for his peculiar sadness." (p. 26). Not being well educated nor basically religious, his Bible reading tended to confirm his belief in predetermination or divine predilection. Moreover, he could point to certain events in his life that would seem to confirm that belief. He had earlier escaped from Northern Nigeria, and a comparison with others "made him feel that God had paid special attention to his own escape." (p. 26). He had been promoted a sergeant, not long after he joined the Jehovah's Witnesses; before that, he spent eight years without promotion. As events developed, his conviction that God had singled him out became more and more confirmed in his mind. With the death of his platoon commander, Cyril took over the platoon command. He had no doubt that God was with him and was continually hearing his prayers. Even as company commander he continued to experience what appeared to him special cases of divine protection. His company kept pushing back enemy attacks, and Cyril and his batman, kept escaping death in miraculous ways. Even when John, his batman was killed by a sniper's bullet, Cyril deliberately exposed himself. He was still unhurt.

Unfortunately, his ignorance of logistics and the real Biafran situation coupled with his limited mental capacity made him suspicious. And so, as his conviction about God's special design for him grew, his suspicion and distrust of everybody, including his battalion commander increased in proportion.

The night he was promoted a company commander, the captain had explained to him that the Biafrans could not "counter the enemy shelling" because there were neither shells nor mortar bombs, the supply of these things being controlled by the highest authorities outside the country. Cyril could not understand all this and so was rather unconvinced. Besides,

the enemy had said the previous day that his captain was a saboteur. So he started to suspect the captain. Having just beaten a third enemy attack, he was greeted with what he considered the most unbiafran attitude, to "withdraw immediately." Now he was convinced beyond doubt that he was dealing with a saboteur. The only question now was how best to handle him. His reply to the withdrawal order was that his company had beaten back three enemy attacks and needed reinforcement urgently to maintain present position. Of course he did not quite see himself as disobeying orders. He was not obedient by nature. "One would have thought that he, Cyril, would have learnt to obey . . . He alone knew how much efforts it cost him to say 'Yest, sir', without an argument." (p. 61). Besides, he had made up his mind much earlier what to do when given wrong orders. "If he was given what he felt was a wrong order he would accept it and then do what he thought was right." (p. 30). There was also in him a little of the self-righteousness of a religious fanatic. So when the captain's orderly came to fetch him, Cyril thought the time has come to deal with this saboteur. His strategy was to irritate the man, or rather the boy, to the point where he might hopefully lose his temper and hit him. Then Cyril would have the excuse to beat him up and arrest him as a saboteur. Unfortunately, the captain controlled himself and talked about arresting and courtmartialling him. At that point Cyril felt he had to do what he had to do. There was a time for everything including the shooting of one's superior officer.

The main argument here is that the way a person is likely to react to events and situations in his or her conscious moments is pre-determined to a very great extent by his or her psychological disposition. If one's psychological make-up is considered not an acquired habit, but rather a natural attribute, then when a person is psychologically determined, he or she naturally thinks and acts in a certain way. The problem is whether such a person could act otherwise in a given situation. If he could not, then he is not free; and if he is not free, he is not a responsible agent.

Assuming that Sergeant Agumo was psychologically determined would the meaning and value of his actions change, including the shooting of Captain Onwura? And there are plenty of indications in the story that he was a psychological case, as well as being a semi-religious fanatic. The question then is to determine to what extent he was moving (or being moved) to an inexorable and predetermined end. The story gives us hints that would allow us room for some distinction. There are levels of psychological determinism. In some psychological cases, an individual might follow certain obvious lines of action which are dictated not by an invincible predisposition but rather by subjective caprices. In such a situation, an

intended action might appear to the agent objectionable, improper or down right wrong. In order to continue with the action in question the agent would have to find "reasons", would simply rationalize it. This shows that not only is the agent aware of the difference between right and wrong in the projected action, but that he could have acted otherwise. This would seem to be the case with Sergeant Agumo. He seemed sufficiently aware, and in control, of his actions to be considered free and responsible. The author presents his case in such a way that we are not persuaded that his own psychological determinism, if it is one, is such that his actions were inexorably leading to a predetermined end.

Even the argument about his religious fanaticism is not convincing enough. One gets the feeling that his religious conversion was neither genuine nor complete. He got involved in religion and Bible reading only after drinking "proved expensive and eventually ineffective." (p. 23). When he was drinking heavily he was never embarrassed being seen in a bar, but hated being seen (caught) reading the Bible. It would seem he merely substituted the Bible for alcohol as a temporary "cure for his peculiar sadness." (p. 23). But he never really gave up drinking completely. As a matter of fact, on one occasion he was on his way to church when he met "some friends and acquaintances who diverted him to a palmy bar." (p. 27). It never occurred to him at any time during his prayers and Bible reading to examine his conscience and motives, or ask himself what the passage really meant. All his religious practices seemed to have centred around the reading of the Bible and only one passage for the most part. And all he could get out of it revolved around the fact that the Bible said there is a season for everything, to which he added his own exegesis: "Yes, there was definitely a particular time for a particular thing. At such a time anyone who opposed got crushed." (p. 24). Thus his superstitious reading of the Bible coupled with his semi-illiteracy under war conditions tended to lead him towards fatalism and away from perfection.

Our author would seem to suggest that Sergeant Agumo does not qualify, neither on the ground of psychological pre-disposition nor on that of religious fanaticism, as a case of determinism. The fact that he was tried and executed would seem to support this view. But not completely. The author seems also to have some reservations about this straight-forward conclusion that makes life as simple and clear as Benji's Kaikai (p. 85). His trial and execution would seem to indicate only that the law court (the military in this case) and society in general have decided that he was guilty of a serious crime and must be executed. But that does not completely pre-empt the issue of determinism. The law court and society operate under certain assumptions, namely, that under normal circum-

stances, (whatever that means), a person is responsible for his or her actions willed and knowingly executed; and so must bear the consequences thereof, punishment or reward. This does not seem to establish beyond doubt that the court and society can always determine when a person is predetermined and therefore not a free agent. Nor does it prove that an agent cannot act freely and therefore responsibly while remaining predetermined. The assumption is that predetermination implies a form of pathological or at least abnormal situation where an agent does not act freely and knowingly. And so when somebody considered normal willingly and freely does something, he is regarded as un-determined and responsible. The question the author raises is whether that says it all, whether it is not conceivable that an agent could be free and responsible in a determined world. It is quite possible to imagine, the author seems to be saying, a form of determinism in which everything in the universe is controlled in accordance with its nature. In such a situation, what we normally call an accident in the sense of unplanned event might not be completely accidental except to us who do not see its place in the total scheme of things. Similarly, the actions of brute animals and inanimate objects would be the immediate consequences of a remote cause.

The real problem facing this view is how to explain human actions, especially the meaning of the processes man goes through to arrive at what we call voluntary and human actions. In other words, if man is determined, how would one explain his deliberations, choices and consequent decisions, supposedly arrived at spontaneously and freely. The interpretation of the author's suggestion would seem to be that whatever controls the universe controls also man in accordance with his nature. Since it is the nature of man to act rationally, to go through a process of deliberation before making a decision, he will be so determined that after due deliberations he chooses "freely" what he has been destined to choose. It is in this light that we have to understand Benjy's decisions: to stop over at Uyo instead of driving straight to Oron; to drive straight to report to his superiors instead of detouring to see Franca at Port Harcourt; not to cock his rifle just before he was shot. This does not seem to resolve the problem satisfactorily since it would seem to contradict what we normally understand by freedom namely, the capacity to go one way or the other where there are two or more really open alternatives. According to this interpretation, the alternatives might be there, but are they really open to the human agent? This brings us back to the trial and execution of Sergeant Agumo. If his actions were predetermined in the sense just explained, then he would seem to have been the victim of a grave injustice; unless of course we are up against a cynical situation where he was destined to act the way he did and the court was equally destined to condemn him. Ultimately, there would seem to be no way of

knowing with absolute certainty whether or not this is the case

V

One of the merits of The Anonymity of Sacrifice is the way the author dovetails philosophical problems with artistic creativity without subordinating one to the other. He first of all chooses what is perhaps the most suitable environment to portray a consciousness of destiny in action namely, soldiers in a war situation. As Professor Harold Titus points out: "In time of war, fatalism often has a noticeable revival. It is likely to be prevalent among soldiers under fire. The first reaction to danger may be panic or fear or worry, but soon the attitude of fatalism may emerge as an adjustment or defense or escape reaction. The individual may say to himself, 'if there is a bullet with my name on it, I'll get it anyway. If there isn't I'll come through unscratched, so why worry?' From then on he may settle down and take events as they come."² Our author could not have chosen a better setting. Above all, he brings out clearly the major issues involved in the problem of human destiny, gives answers by way of tentative suggestions knowing very well that he is writing a novel and not a philosophical treatise. The big advantage his method has over a philosophical treatise is that since his position is not a philosophical doctrine he does not strictly speaking have to formally defend it. In addition, when a philosophical treatise runs into a logical impasse there would seem to be no way out of it. For example, it is very difficult if not impossible to explain rationally how something illogical and contradictory could be accorded some meaningfulness. The method our author has adopted is not to argue but to go around the impasse by demonstrating an actual situation. The author would seem to be saying that there is a possibility that something which appears illogical to man might still make sense in the scheme of things. This would seem to be what Banjy had in mind when he recalled with seeming acceptance the admonition he once got from a priest: "Besides, one can only explain what one understands and God is too unfathomable for any mortal to claim to understand Him." (pp. 82-83). It might sound illogical (and perhaps unjust) that Sergeant Agumo was condemned and executed for following to its logical conclusion a line of action he was destined to follow. It would seem that Judas Iscariot was destined to betray Jesus, and yet he was damned for doing just that. And Jesus Himself swore to it: "The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to the man by whom the Son of man is betrayed."³

When all is said and done, the person who understood all this much earlier in the story was Captain Onwura. As soon as he fully realized on the last leg of his trip to Oron, that there was destiny hanging over his head, and that there was

nothing he could do about it, he resigned himself to it without giving up his rationality and his conscience in the performance of the duties of his status. This would seem to be the main difference between him and Sergeant Agumo, between the normal and the abnormal, between the morally good and the morally bad, namely, to follow the generally accepted norms of conduct and the dictates of one's conscience in the discharge of one's duties. This may not completely satisfy all our philosophical questionings regarding whether or not we are predetermined, but it does give us some meaningful guidelines in our practical daily living. This is, I think, the point of the story. While the debate over human freedom and consequent responsibility continues, we have to live in accordance with the demands of our nature as rational and moral beings.

FOOTNOTES

¹Aniebo, I.N.C. The Anonymity of Sacrifice, London & Ibadan Heinemann, 1974, p. 1. Subsequent references to this book will be to this edition and will be incorporated in the text and enclosed in parenthesis.

²Living Issues in Philosophy, New York, American Book Company, Fourth Edition 1964, p. 189.

³The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version/Catholic Edition, Collegeville, Minnesota; Thomas Nelson & Sons for The Liturgical Press, 1957; St. Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 26 verse 24.