

The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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If there is any single work that can be considered central to the evolving canon of modern African literature, it is, without question, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The novel owes this distinction to the innovative significance it assumed as soon as it was published, a significance that was manifested in at least two respects. In the first place, the novel provided an image of an African society, reconstituted as a living entity and in its historic circumstance: an image of a coherent social structure forming the institutional fabric of a universe of meanings and values. Because this image of Africa was quite unprecedented in literature, it also carried considerable ideological weight in the specific context of the novel's writing and reception. For it cannot be doubted that the comprehensive scope of Achebe's depiction of a particularized African community engaged in its own social processes, carried out entirely on its own terms, with all the internal tensions this entailed, challenged the simplified representation that the West offered itself of Africa as a formless area of life, as "an area of darkness" devoid of human significance.¹ Thus, beyond what might be considered its ethnographic interest, which gave the work an immediate and ambiguous appeal--a point to which we shall return--Achebe's novel articulated a new vision of the African world and gave expression to a new sense of the African experience that was more penetrating than what had been available before its appearance.

The second factor contributing to the esteem in which Achebe's novel is held has to do with the quality of his manner of presentation, in which the cultural reference governs not merely the constitution of the novel's fictional universe but also the expressive means by which the collective existence, the very human experience framed within this universe, comes to be conveyed. For the novel testifies to an aesthetic project which consists in fashioning a new language appropriate to its setting, serving therefore to give life and substance to the narrative content and thus to enforce the novelist's initial gesture of cultural reclamation. As a consequence, the manner of presentation became integral to the narrative development to a degree that must be considered unusual in the normal run of novelistic writing. As Emmanuel Obiechina has remarked, "the integrative technique in which background and atmosphere are interlaced with the action of the narrative must be regarded as Achebe's greatest achievement"

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[Obiechina, 1975, 142]. It is especially with regard to this close imbrication of language and theme that *Things Fall Apart* can be said to have defined a new mode of African imaginative expression, hence Kwame Appiah's description of the work as "the archetypal modern African novel in English" [Appiah, 1992, ix].²

The work has acquired the status of a classic, then, by reason of its character as a counterfiction of Africa, in specific relation to the discourse of Western colonial domination, and its creative deployment of the language of the imperium; it has on this account been celebrated as the prototype of what Barbara Harlow has called "resistance literature" [Harlow, 1987].³ The ideological project involved in its writing comes fully to the fore in the ironic ending in which we see the colonial officer, after the suicide of the main character, Okonkwo, contemplating a monograph on the "pacification" of the Lower Niger. Okonkwo, we are told, will get the briefest of mentions in the monograph, but we know as readers that the novel to which this episode serves as conclusion has centered all along upon this character who, as the figure of the historical African, the work endeavours to re-endow with a voice and a visage, allowing him to emerge in his full historicity, tragic though this turns out to be in the circumstances.

Yet, despite the novel's contestation of the colonial enterprise, clearly formulated in the closing chapters and highlighted by its ironic ending, readers have always been struck by the veil of moral ambiguity with which Achebe surrounds his principal character, Okonkwo, and by the dissonances that this sets up in the narrative development; as Emmanuel Obiechina remarked in the course of an oral presentation I had the privilege of attending, the novel is constituted by what he calls "a tangle of ironies." For it soon becomes apparent that Achebe's novel is not by any means an unequivocal celebration of tribal culture; indeed, the specific human world depicted in this novel is far from representing a universe of pure perfection. We are presented rather with a corner of human endeavor that is marked by the web of contradictions within which individual and collective destinies have everywhere and at all times been enmeshed. A crucial factor, therefore, in any reading of Achebe's novel, given the particular circumstances of its composition, is its deeply reflective engagement with the particular order of life that provides a reference for its narrative scheme and development. In this respect, one cannot fail to discern a thematic undercurrent that produces a disjunction in the novel between its overt ideological statement, its contradiction of the discourse of the colonial ideology, on one hand, and, on the other, its dispassionate and even uncompromising focus on an African community in its moment of historical crisis.

I would like to examine here the nature of this disjunction, not only as it emerges from the novel's thematic development but also as inscribed, quite literally, within the formal structures of the work, in the belief that by undertaking a closer examination of these two dimensions of the work and relating them to each other we are enabled to fully discern its purport. For the moral significance of the work seems to me to outweigh the ideological burden that has so often been laid upon it. I believe the implications of the work extend much further than the anticolonial stance that, admittedly, provides its point of departure, but which, as we shall see, eventually yields ground to issues of far greater import concerning the African becoming.

It is well to begin this examination with an observation that situates Achebe's work in the general perspective of literary creation and cultural production in contemporary Africa. This is to make the point that the most significant effect of modern African literature in the European

languages is perhaps the sense it registers of the immediacy of history as a sphere of existence, as a felt dimension of being and consciousness. Achebe's work is exemplary in this regard, in the way he captures in his fiction the inner movement of transition on the continent from an antecedent order of life to a new and problematic collective existence, this new existence contemplated as the outcome of an implacable historical development. Beginning with *Things Fall Apart*, his entire work seeks to measure, in its full range and import for Africa, what Molly Mahood has called, in her study of the same title, "the colonial encounter" [Mahood, 1977]. Achebe's explicit concern with the cultural dislocations, provoked by the harsh circumstances of this encounter, and their far-reaching consequences in human terms suggests at first sight a limited point of view that appears to emphasize the primacy of an original identity owed to cultural and ethnic affiliations.

We cannot but observe however that, as a writer, Achebe is in fact situated at the point of intersection between two world orders, the precolonial African and the Western, or more specifically, Euro-Christian, that impinge upon his creative consciousness. It is important to recall this defining factor of the total cultural situation by which Achebe's inspiration is conditioned, and to stress the directing influence of his Western education and its sensibility upon his fictional reconstruction of the collective traumas enacted by his novels, and the comprehensive process of self-reflection they imply. Thus, an attention to its various inflections indicates that the narrative voice adopted by Achebe in his first novel has to be imputed in large part to his status as a Westernized African, the product of Christian education. This is a voice that speaks often, perhaps even primarily, from the margins of the traditional culture, as is evident in this passage, which occurs early in the novel:

The night was very quiet. It was always quiet except on moonlight nights. Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits....And so on this particular night as the crier's voice was gradually swallowed up in the distance, silence returned to the world, a vibrant silence made more intense by the universal trill of a million forest insects [7].⁴

The passage suggests that the perspective that Achebe projects upon the traditional world is that of an external observer, a perspective that implies a cultural distance from the background of life -- of thought and manners -- that provides the concrete reference of his fiction. We encounter the same stance in another passage where the narrator observes of the community to which the work relates: "Fortunately among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" [6]. Of these and similar passages, the Nigerian scholar David Ker has commented: "Umuofia is simultaneously 'they' and 'we' and this subtle combination of detachment and participation helps Achebe to manipulate point of view" [Ker, 1997, 136].

This is a plausible reading that brings the novel's content into functional relation with its narrative codes, except that the personal testimony Achebe provides of his own education in a Christian household indicates clearly that his identification with the indigenous heritage was a later and conscious development. In other words, Achebe can be said to have undertaken the writing of *Things Fall Apart* out of an awareness of a primary disconnection from the indigenous background that he seeks to recover and to explore in the novel.

The point can be made from another perspective by observing that, as a modern African novelist, Achebe is hardly in the same position as the traditional storyteller, creating his stories unselfconsciously, out of a full sense of coincidence with the culture within which he practices his art, and which provides objective support for his imaginative projections. Moreover, Achebe is obliged to employ a newly acquired tongue, one that is at a considerable structural and expressive remove from the speech modes, habits of thought, and cultural codes of the historical community whose experience he undertakes to record in his fiction. Contrary to the claim by Romanus Egudu that Achebe's art in the novel is continuous with an Igbo narrative tradition [Egudu, 1981], the whole imaginative effort manifested in *Things Fall Apart* was called into play and given direction by a willed movement back to what the novelist regards as the sources of the collective self, which he has had to reconstitute both as a function of the ideological objectives of his novel evoked above and also, and much more importantly, as an imperative of the narrative process itself, a point to which we shall return.

We might observe, then, that the impression of the writer's familiarity with his material and the quality of authentic life registered by his language are in fact effects of this reinvestment of the self on Achebe's part, thrown into relief by the consummate art of the novelist. It is well to bear in mind these factors that are attendant upon the very process of creation from which Achebe's novel proceeds, for they are not without important consequences for its narrative development and, ultimately, for its aesthetic and moral significance, as these are not merely entailed by the ostensible content of the work, its "propositional" ground, to echo Gerald Graff [1980], but are also inherent in its formal organization and language. It is to the relation between these various aspects of the work that we now turn.

Commenting upon his own work nearly forty years after its appearance, Achebe has declared, "The story of Okonkwo is almost inevitable; if I hadn't written about him, certainly someone else would have, because it really is the beginning of our story" [Achebe, 1991].⁵ Achebe's observation concerning his fictional creation draws attention to the allegorical significance that Okonkwo has assumed for the African imagination: he is not merely a character in a novel but the representative figure of African historicity. A determining element of the novel's structure and development is thus the way in which his story is embedded within an elaborate reconstruction of forms of life in the traditional, precolonial culture, specifically, that of Achebe's own people, the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria.

The very tenor and warmth of Achebe's presentation of the traditional world, especially in the thirteen chapters that form the first part of the novel, with their elaborate representation of setting, involving in the process an insistence in positive terms upon the cultural context within which his fictional characters have their being, leaves us in no doubt that a polemical intent informs his reconstruction. The Igbo tribal world emerges here in all its specificity, its daily routines and seasonal rituals attuned to the natural rhythms of its living environment. The language of daily intercourse that Achebe lends his characters endows with a special force the mobilization of minds and sensibilities within the society, animating with its poetic resonance its modes of social organization and cultural expression. The even cadence that marks the collective life in its normal course is summed up at one point in a simple but telling way with "In this way, the moons and the seasons passed" [p.39].

The elaborate account of the New Yam Festival that opens Chapter 5 [26] takes on added meaning in the light of this declaration of a natural order of the communal existence. We are made to understand that the extraordinary coherence that the organic rooting of the tribe guarantees to the social order in its natural environment is an immediate function of an established system of values which regulates collective life. What is more, Achebe's depiction of the prescribed pattern of social gestures and modes of comportment creates an overwhelming impression of a collective existence that unfolds in ceremonial terms, punctuated as it is by a train of activities that enhance the ordinary course of life, serving therefore as privileged moments in a more or less unending celebration of a social compact that is remarkably potent and is in any case fully functional on its own terms.

It is this intense quality of life that is conveyed symbolically by the drum, which functions so obviously as a leitmotif in the novel that it generates a singular connotative stream within the narrative. The omnipresence of the drum in Achebe's image of Igbo tribal life seems at times on the verge of betraying him into the kind of unmediated stereotyping of the African by Western writers to which he himself has vehemently objected. The intrusion into his own writing of the demeaning idiom of colonial discourse is recognizable in a sentence like this: "Drums beat violently, and men leaped up and down in a frenzy" [86]. But such a drop in narrative tone serves ultimately to enforce the larger vision he offers of the community he is presenting, for we soon come to grasp the true significance of the drum as manifesting a vitalism inherent in and interwoven with the community's organic mode of existence:

The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulse of its heart. It throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement [31].

Achebe presents us, then, with a dynamic framework of social interactions and interpersonal relations that lay the affective foundation for what, in the language of Durkheim, we might call a collective consciousness, one that is properly commensurate with a sphere of existence and an order of experience that, by the very fact of their being rigorously circumscribed, conduce to its institutional strength. It is instructive in this respect to remark upon the narrow range of the physical setting reproduced in Achebe's novel. This is established in what seems a deliberate manner in the novel's opening sentence, and is associated by implication with the destiny of the central character who makes his appearance at the very outset of the narrative devoted to him:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages, and even beyond [3].

The vagueness with which the narrator indicates the outer limits of Okonkwo's fame reflects the tribe's limited awareness of its location in space, of its specific place in the world. This accords with the curious indefiniteness of its name, Umuofia, or "people of the forest," a name that also doubles as that of the novel's locale, designating a community firmly situated within the natural world. The reduced spatial dimension of the tribe's sphere of existence enables a narrative focus on a world whose very intimacy appears at first sight as a source of strength, the operative factor of an intensity of social experience that underlies an achieved state of equilibrium.

It should be noted that the contraction of the tribe's apprehension of space is closely associated with its bounded experience of time. The same opening paragraph of the novel in

which we are introduced to Okonkwo provides us with a passing view of the tribe's myth of origin. It is not without interest to observe that this myth, in its evocation of a wrestling contest between the eponymous founder of the town and "a spirit of the wild," parallels the Old Testament story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, an encounter that, we are told, leaves him forever lame. The parallel suggests the way Achebe's mind is working through elements of his double cultural experience towards a unified conception of human destiny.

The tribe's myth of origin sets the keynote of its entire mode of self-apprehension and structure of knowledge, what Gikandi has called "the Igbo epistemology" [Gikandi, 1991, 31-38; see also, Nwoga, 1981]. The prominence assumed by rituals of life in the culture, the tribe's periodic enactments of the various facets of its collective imagination, its constant recall of foundations--all this ensures that time is experienced not as a static category but lived continuously and intensely, in the mode of duration. This consciousness of time permeates the collective life, so that the worldview involves a ceaseless procession of a principle of life, in an interpenetration of time and space that is ensured by the eternal presence of the ancestors:

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors [86].

The culture of Umuofia as depicted by Achebe functions through an immanence of its foundational myth in the collective life and consciousness. The immediate and practical implications of this myth and the system of belief derived from it are experienced at every level of the collective existence, for the mythic time of the ancestors serves as the measure of social control, as demonstrated by the role of the *egwuwus*, incarnations of the ancestors, in the administration of justice, a role that endows the laws and customs of the land with a sacred sanction. At the same time, the dialogue that elders such as Ezeudu, Ezenwa, and Obierika engage in with their own culture throughout the novel points to the process by which the principles governing the world concept and value system of the tribe are constantly debated, re-examined, and in this way, retrospectively rationalized. Thus, as represented by Chinua Achebe, and contrary to the discourse of colonial anthropology, Umuofia, the primordial Igbo village, emerges as a locus of reflective civility.⁶

Achebe's attentive recreation of the processes of everyday living in the tribal society that he depicts in *Things Fall Apart* has led to the work being labeled an "ethnographic novel." The term may be appropriate, but only in the limited sense in which it serves to indicate a conscious effort of demonstration, aimed at presenting a particular society and its culture to an audience unfamiliar with its ways of doing and feeling, with its beliefs about the world, and its strategies of response to the imperatives of human existence. The novel endeavors in this sense to create what Hochbruck (1990) has called the illusion of "cultural proximity" for the non-Igbo reader, confronted by the otherness, so to speak, of the human world that its cultural references are intended to designate, or at the very least evoke.

We need to attend carefully to Achebe's handling of the ethnographic element of his novel in order to distinguish the varying modes of its integration into the narrative, for while several instances of authorial intervention intended to enlighten the reader on matters of cultural interest seem merely to provide orchestration for the bare outline of the plot, and thus to lend it

the richness of detail, others are indispensable for a proper comprehension of the narrative development itself, and thus form an integral element of the novel's thematic unfolding. This is notably the case with the banishment of Okonkwo after his accidental killing of a clansman. The narrator points us deliberately to an understanding of the cultural implications of this episode:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land [88].

Further along, describing the organized destruction of Okonkwo's compound by the villagers after his departure, the narrator provides this insight into the mores of the land: "They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend Obierika was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman" [88].

This last quotation illustrates the function that the novel's ethnographic content has usually been held to perform, its project of revaluation consisting in a comprehensive readjustment of viewpoint on a culture that had previously served as an object of Western deprecation. Achebe's conscious effort to project a new light upon the precolonial Igbo world is evident at many points in the novel; there is clearly at work here a resolve to promote an alternative image to its earlier representations in Western discourse, one that affords an inside view not merely of its uncoordinated details as lived in the immediacy of everyday experience, but also of its overall, functional coherence. Thus, the narrative process amounts to a reformulation, in the mode of fiction, of the "scientific" discourse of the ethnographic literature on the Igbo, a process by which Achebe seeks to reclaim a pre-existing Western discourse on his personal background for a new and different ideological purpose.

But we must go beyond the documentary aspect of Achebe's novel to consider the relation it bears to a serious artistic purpose. We need to observe the way in which the language of the novel, the whole bent of its narrative development, gives expression to an imaginative impulse that functions in its shaping, beyond the explicit revisionist intent that we may suppose to spring from its ideological conditioning that we have so far dwelt upon. It needs to be emphasized that this impulse derives in the first place from the formal requirements that Achebe as a writer knew he had to satisfy, those conducing to the quality of verisimilitude that have come to be associated with the rise and development of the conventional western novel. In other words, Achebe's fictional reproduction of Igbo life must be seen in its immediate relation to the diegetic purpose and mimetic function of the novel as a genre.⁷ For the necessity to reproduce in his novel the context of life appropriate to its theme and external reference comes to govern the process of cultural reclamation to which his work bears witness. We can thus restate the connection between the two impulses at work in the novel by observing that it develops as a redirection inward of Western anthropological discourse, toward the true springs of life and expression in the African world obliterated by this discourse.

But it is evidently the primacy of art that predominates in Achebe's construction of his novel; this has a consequence for grasping its moral import that we shall come to presently. For the moment, we may note that Achebe's novel is distinguished by an economy of style and a marvelous restraint in the presentation that endow it with a certain austerity. The novel's ethnographic freight is never allowed to weigh down upon its human interest or to obscure its aesthetic significance. Every scene is vividly imagined and realized, and the more expansive

moments of the narration offer us those powerful descriptions, as of the entrance of the egwugwus or "masked spirits" at the trial and the subsequent proceedings [Chapter Ten, 62-66] which give the novel its dramatic lift at strategic moments. It is this process by which Achebe "naturalizes" his subject matter, to borrow Jonathan Culler's term [Culler, 1975], enabling him to situate the narrative development, and especially the cruel turn taken by Okonkwo's fate, wholly and convincingly within the framework of the Igbo system of belief:

His life had been ruled by a great passion - to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on to a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi. The saying of the elders was not true - that if a man said yea, his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation [92].

The passage hardly serves to inform us about the nature of the chi, a task that Achebe undertakes in a famous essay [Achebe, 1975]; rather, it illuminates the ambiguous relation of Okonkwo to his personal god, a relation that exemplifies, in the specific terms of Igbo apprehension of the world, the grounded insecurity of the human condition that is the mainspring of what Unamuno has called "the tragic sense of life." The novel's imaginative scope thus extends beyond mere documentation to convey, through the careful reproduction of its marking details, the distinctive character of Igbo tribal life as experienced by its subjects, the felt texture from which it derives its universal significance. It is this that gives *Things Fall Apart* its power of conviction and validates the project of cultural memory attested by the novel.

But the effort of recall and recreation, linked as it is to the purpose of the novelist's deployment of form, also involves, as a necessary implication of the fictional process, a critical engagement with the internal dynamics and value system of the very world that he presents, one that, in the event, goes beyond its placid exterior to focus directly upon its deeper tensions, to explore its cleavages and uncover its fault lines. It is at this level of enunciation that the novel enacts what seems to me a veritable crisis of cultural memory.

We are alerted to this crisis primarily by the correlation that the novel suggests between the conditions of existence in the tribal society and the mental universe that prevails within it. Despite its admirable qualities in some important areas of human experience, the world that Achebe presents is one that is closed in upon itself, limited in its capacities and hobbled in certain crucial respects by its vision of the world. We have already remarked upon the way in which Achebe's Western education and Christian background determine a narrative point of view marked by a certain detachment, so that his narrator stands back sufficiently to indicate an external regard upon this world, for it is not seldom that he adopts an angle of vision that lifts a veil upon the grave disabilities by which tribal life is afflicted.

For the image that Chinua Achebe presents in his novel is that of a primary society, one whose low level of technicity leaves it with few resources beyond the purely muscular for dealing with the exigencies of the natural world. Because it is confronted with what is nothing less than a precarious material situation, it has perforce to accord primacy to manliness, as a manifestation of being at its most physical, elevated into a norm of personal worth and social value. The valuation of physical prowess, in play as in war, the emphasis on individual achievement, considered as instrumental to social solidarity, appear then as strategies intended

to ensure the security and permanence of the group. For, like most early societies, this is a society that is dominated by a passion for survival. On this point, Umuofia resembles these earlier societies, alike in their cultivation of the heroic ideal based on physical prowess, an ideal necessitated by their dependence on outstanding individuals for group survival.⁸

This defining feature of the tribe is highlighted by the centrality of the yam to the culture, the symbolic value with which it is invested, over and above its utility as a source of nourishment: a feature that provides a graphic illustration of the continuum from material existence to the collective vision and ethos. Because of the intense muscular effort required for its cultivation, the yam crop comes to represent an annual triumph wrested from nature, the sign of the rigorous dialectic between the human world and the natural environment that governs the communal life and conditions what one might call the social aesthetic--the festivals, the rituals and other forms of public ceremonial--that infuses the tribe's collective representations with feeling and endows them with meaning for each consciousness within the community. Thus, the image of the yam gathers up as it were the force fields of the culture and functions as a metonymic representation of the tribe's mode of relation to the world [Echeruo, 1979]. The organic-ism that we have observed as a fundamental feature of the tribal community is thus related to the fact that it has its being essentially within the realm of necessity.

If then, from a certain idealizing point of view, we come to appreciate the values of intimacy and intensity of living denoted by the closed universe of the novel, such as Gérard Genette postulates for the Cambrai of Marcel Proust [Genette, 1972], the critical current that runs through the narrative soon reveals this universe as one marked by a profound contradiction between the powerful constraints of the social ideal, which privileges the interests of the group, and the truths of individual human yearnings and desires as embraced by a modern sensibility.

It is on this basis that Achebe develops the theme of Okonkwo's struggle for recognition and the larger existential implications of this theme in its evocation of the universal human predicament. This theme, we ought to note, is framed by the triadic structure of the novel involving Okonkwo's rise to prominence at Umuofia, interrupted by his banishment and life in exile at his maternal village Mbanta, and his disastrous return to the scene of his early triumphs. The parallel between the story of Okonkwo and that of his society is thus made central to the narrative development, predicated as this is upon the interrelation between the rise and fall of Okonkwo, on one hand, and on the other, the fortunes of the society and way of life he represents and its unraveling by the forces of history.

It is useful at this point to consider the salient details of Okonkwo's story as recounted by Achebe, and its bearing on the underlying theme of his novel. This story really begins with that of Okonkwo's father, Unoka; indeed, the elements of the singular dialectic that links Okonkwo with Unoka, on one hand, and with his own son, Nwoye, on the other, determine the temporal axis of the novel, indicating the succession of generations concerned by the action. This dialectic relates in a fundamental way to the structure of images and moral propositions contained by the novel. Unoka plays a double role here: not only does his fate and its effect upon his son provide the key to the latter's psychology, he also embodies the countervalues that stand in opposition to the inflexible social ideal of the tribe. For there is a real sense in which Unoka can be considered a rebel against the rigidities of tribal society. His unorthodox style of living is a

conscious subversion of the manly ideal, to which he opposes the values of art, along with a playful irony and an amorality that accords with his relaxed disposition to the world. It is true that his improvidence turns him into an object of general contempt, and that he comes to a particularly disagreeable end that seems at first sight to vindicate the severe reprobation of the tribe. But even his end in the Evil Forest constitutes a triumph of sorts, a form of defiance that the narrator emphasizes with this significant detail: "When they carried him away, he took with him his flute" [13]. In the end, he attracts the reader's sympathy by his unprepossessing attitude and by a certain humane simplicity that is associated with his type, for the portrait we have of Unoka is that of a folk hero whose insouciance stands as a constant rebuke to the vanities of the great and powerful of this world.⁹

In the immediate context of the novel, Unoka's refusal to conform to the prevailing ethos of the tribe is of course considered in wholly negative terms. More important, its subversive significance is forcefully repudiated by his son, Okonkwo, who wills himself into becoming the antithesis of all that Unoka represents, so that he comes to assume what can only be judged a fearful aspect:

He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head, and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions, such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head [8].

It is this portrayal of Okonkwo that prompted Thomas Melone to propose, in his pioneering study devoted to the first four novels of Chinua Achebe, an evaluation that both captures the essence of the character and exaggerates its import, when he describes him as a "complex and unsettling personality" ("une multiple et déroutante personnalité") [Melone, 1973, 64]. Unsettling Okonkwo certainly is, but not exactly complex; given his delineation in *Things Fall Apart* one would be inclined rather to consider him as a "flat" character, to use E. M. Forster's term. It is true that, in the particular context in which we encounter the character, the novelist nudges us to the edge of what could have been a powerful psychological portrait: considering his problematic relation to his father, who throws a long shadow over his life, Okonkwo's inordinate obsession with self has all the makings of a deep neurosis generated by a tenacious and consuming existential project, that of self-realization.

Things Fall Apart can be summed up as largely the narrative of the process of self-fashioning by which Okonkwo is transformed into the somber inversion of his father. But the mental condition into which he falls as a result is not really explored, so that we are not led into the inner workings of his mind as a fully realized individual. Even at his moment of greatest mental turmoil (in the immediate aftermath of his killing of Ikemefuna), we are provided with hardly any insight into the happenings within his troubled soul. The point here is that, despite the occasional glimpses the narrative affords into states of mind that are also occasions for introspection on the part of the character, the narrative narrows our gaze, to focus upon what is presented as essential to his make-up: "Okonkwo was a man of action, not of thought" [48].

It is not, therefore, the psychological depth of his portrayal that lends Okonkwo his power of fascination, but rather his very physicality, all projected outward ("he was tall and huge," the narrator informs us [3]) in such a way as to constitute him as the incarnation of his society's ideal of manhood. This is the ideal that Okonkwo translates in his attitude and manners into an

overbearing masculinity. Even then, we cannot but respond, at least in the beginning, to what we perceive as his immense vitality,¹⁰ made all the more intriguing by its sexual undercurrent, an element of his total personality clearly indicated through the seductive power this exerts upon Ekwefi.

The allusion to Okonkwo's sexuality raises the issue of gender and its narrative implications, for it is this element that seems to have inspired the most inattentive reading of Achebe's novel, especially by some feminists, who object to what they perceive as the work's undue focus on the masculine principle and a corresponding depreciation of the feminine. The feminist view is exemplified by Florence Stratton's negative interpretation of what she calls the novel's focus on "gender ideology" [Stratton, 1994, 164-70]. More pertinent is the critique by Susan Z. Andrade, who remarks upon "the category of the masculine" in Achebe's novel, which, as she says, "attempts to avoid the representation of colonial relations in gendered terms by inscribing an excessively masculine Igbo man." She goes on to observe:

In the Manichean allegory of anti-colonial struggle...the colonial /European side is characterized as masculine, while the weak and disorderly native/African is necessarily feminine. ...Paradoxically, Achebe's preoccupation with the implicitly gendered pattern of colonial relations means that he can only imagine a negative masculinity; he has no room for a celebratory feminism [Andrade, 1996, 255-256].

It is plain that these readings and others of the same stripe ignore the evidence of the novel itself, which foregrounds the distortion of the communal ideal by Okonkwo in such a way as to suggest a narrative commentary upon the social and moral implications of this ideal. Far from endorsing what might be termed a cult of Igbo masculinity, Achebe's novel offers ample evidence of a narrative preoccupation with the less than reassuring features of what may be considered a "basic personality type"¹¹ fostered presumably by the work's reference culture and exemplified so forcefully by the character of Okonkwo.

We are more than once alerted to the fact that Okonkwo's adoption of the manly ideal is excessive and even wrongheaded, as when Obierika emphatically expresses to Okonkwo himself his lack of enthusiasm for the prowess in wrestling demonstrated by his own son, Maduka. Obierika seems to have been conceived as a foil to Okonkwo, serving as a kind of Menenius Agrippa to his Coriolanus, so that his attitude indicates the possibility of an alternative stance. This opposition enables us to discern a disavowal of Okonkwo at the level of the novel's system of connotations, a level at which we sense the imaginative direction of Achebe's novel and the moral sense it carries working towards a confounding of Okonkwo's exaggerated sense of self.

This critical focus is gathered up in the folktale that functions both as an interlude and as a narrative commentary upon Okonkwo's egoism, a device that is fully in line with the convention of storytelling in the African oral tradition. In this sense, it serves Achebe in formal terms as an intertextual resource in the construction of his novel, within which it is deployed, through a process of *mise en abîme*, both as a supplement to its ludic function, and as metafiction, in a redoubling of its narrative code [Obiechina, 1993]. As a direct comment upon Okonkwo's hubris, it points beyond the immediate action to the moral problem involved in the tense dialectic between collectivity and individual. We must recall in this connection the function of the imagination as what may be termed the preconceptual foundation of the

"lifeworld" in traditional society, a function that gave to the art of storytelling its significance in the deepest sense, as a mode of critical reflection upon the vicissitudes of human existence [Towa, 1980].

The relevance of the folktale interlude to the imaginative discourse elaborated by the novel is that it affords a clear pointer to a critical preoccupation manifested explicitly as a distinct thematic cluster centred upon the issue of gender in the novel. As Solomon Iyasere has pointed out, Okonkwo is confronted at every turn by the female principle as it informs the organization of collective life and the communal consciousness of Umuofia [Iyasere, 1978]. The female principle functions indeed as a major trope in *Things Fall Apart* and constitutes a significant dimension of its system of ironies.

A striking instance of this is provided by one of the most dramatic episodes in the novel, the abduction of Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma, by Chielo, the priestess of the Earth goddess Agbala [70-77]. Chielo retains the girl an entire night in her cave while the great warrior Okonkwo is obliged to wait outside, unable to intervene to recover his daughter until the priestess is ready to return her to him in the morning. When we consider Okonkwo's affective investment in Ezinma, in whom he discerns the male qualities whose absence he bemoans in his son, Nwoye, Chielo's act, in its very challenge to Okonkwo's manhood ("Beware Okonkwo! Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks?" [71]) presents itself as a pointed recall to his attention of the gender category to which Ezinma properly belongs, and the possible calls upon her that the distribution of gender roles determines within the culture. More concretely, it is Chielo's way of designating Ezinma as her successor, of reclaiming the girl and restoring her to a realm of feminine mysticism from which she is beginning to be separated by Okonkwo's projection upon her of a male essence. The reaffirmation of the female principle signified by the Chielo episode is reinforced by other indications that suggest a consistent undermining in symbolic terms of Okonkwo's masculinity throughout the novel. As Carole Boyce Davis has rightly observed:

The Chielo-Ezinma episode is an important sub-plot of the novel and actually reads like a suppressed larger story circumscribed by the exploration of Okonkwo's/man's struggle with and for his people. In the troubled world of *Things Fall Apart*, motherhood and femininity are the unifying mitigating principles [Davis, 1986, 245; see also Jeyifo, 1993].

The second part of the novel, devoted entirely to Okonkwo's life in exile in his mother's village after his accidental killing of a clansman, can be read as an extended development of this secondary theme that subtends the narrative at its primary level of development. For Okonkwo's refusal to reconcile himself to the turn of events that leads to his exile provides an occasion for another reminder of the significance of the female principle, when he is instructed by Uchendu, his maternal uncle, in the culture's veneration of the mother as source of life, its association of femininity with the vital principle, enunciated in resolute terms in the dictum "Nneka" ("Mother is supreme").

Okonkwo's glum acquiescence contrasts with the enthusiasm that accompanies his return to Umuofia, where his loss of social standing soon reveals itself as irreparable, and a tragic fate awaits him. The irony that attends Okonkwo's embodiment of manhood is that, pursued by the feminine principle as if by the Furies, he is finally vanquished by a destiny that culminates in

his committing what we are pointedly informed is a "female" fault that leads first to his exile and finally to his downfall.

In its "deconstruction" of Okonkwo's masculinity, the novel also draws directly upon a significant feature of its reference culture for validation. For while it reflects, in its account of individual behavior and group attitudes within its fictional world, the reality of male dominance as an empirical fact of the social system--the order or precedence denoted by the seating arrangement at the trial scene provides a graphic visual demonstration of this point--the novel also directs our attention to the ways in which this fact is controverted in other spheres of the collective life and imagination, especially at the level of religious belief and experience. For, although the society upholds the notion of manliness as a fundamental social norm, it is also compelled to recognize the controlling effect of biology upon its life processes and the obvious bearing of this factor upon group survival. If the social dominance of the men is unequivocally asserted, the parallel valorization of women in the symbolic sphere, demonstrated by the cult of Ala, emerges as a presiding topos of "the social imaginary," one that sets up a countervailing cultural and moral force to the massive investment of the social sphere by the men. The male-female dialectic thus serves to maintain an affective and ideological balance of the group; in this, it corresponds to a certain primary perception of a felt duality of the cosmic order as a principle of the universal imaginary.¹²

This conceptual scheme is crucial for an understanding of Okonkwo's psychology as depicted in Achebe's novel, for it is against the feminine term of the gender dialectic, as understood and expressed in the culture--the nurturing instinct as opposed to the destructive, the tender as opposed to the violent, the aesthetic as opposed to the practical, in a word, the diurnal as opposed to the nocturnal--it is against these values associated with the female principle that Okonkwo has resolutely turned his face. The terms in which his cutting down of Ikemefuna is narrated suggest that behind the gesture of confident affirmation of male resolve that he intends his act to represent lies a profound discomfort in the presence of femininity. We are told that he is "dazed" with fear at the moment of the boy's appeal to him, but it is a fear that has been bred in his unreflecting mind by the image of his father, one of having to reckon with the nuanced reformulation of established social meanings by the symbolic values associated with the female principle. Indeed, for Okonkwo to be reminded anew of his father's image by Ikemefuna's artistic endowments and lively temperament is to be impelled toward a violent act of repression.

As Keith Booker has remarked, the killing of Ikemefuna represents a pivotal episode in the novel [Booker, 1998, 70] not only as a reflection of Okonkwo's disturbed mental state, but in its reverberation through the novel, as a result of its effect upon his son, Nwoye. It marks the beginning of the boy's disaffection toward his father and ultimately his alienation from the community that Okonkwo has come to represent for him. We hardly need to ponder the cleavage between father and son to realize that it provides the most potent sign of the disintegration of Umuofia society, provoked by the introduction within it of the Christian religion. Over the three years of their companionship in Okonkwo's household, Ikemefuna has come to embody for Nwoye the poetry of the tribal society, which is erased for him forever by the young boy's ritual killing, an act against nature in which his father participates. The fate of Ikemefuna, its stark revelation of the grim underside of the tribal ethos, engenders the

emptiness in his heart that predisposes Nwoye to Christian conversion. The terms in which his conversion is described make clear the conjunction between social and moral issues as the determining factor in this conversion. It is not without significance that the conversion itself is presented as an inner drama of sensibility, in which a new poetry takes the place of the ancient, filling a spiritual and affective void and thus coming to satisfy a need to which the traditional order is no longer capable of responding:

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 persistent question that haunted his young soul - the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled [104].

The purple prose is integral to the language of Christian evangelism that Achebe adopts in the passage, setting in relief the last sentence that arrests its lyrical flight with its abrupt reference to Nwoye's "callow mind." The effect of the juxtaposition verges on bathos, but its purport is unmistakable, for we are left in no doubt that this phrase describes a condition for which Nwoye's tribal background is responsible. His conversion thus represents the prelude to the refinement of mind and sensibility that the new religion promises.

Nwoye's adoption of a new name, Isaac, with the significance it carries of a rebirth, consolidates his sense of allegiance to the new religion. But the particular name he takes suggests an import beyond its immediate meaning of individual salvation, for the name recalls the Biblical story of the patriarch Abraham and his substitution of an animal for the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, an act that inaugurates a new dispensation in which we are made to understand that fathers are no longer required to sacrifice their sons to a demanding and vengeful deity. Nwoye's adoption of this name in effect enacts a symbolic reversal of the killing of Ikemefuna, and gives its full meaning to his conversion, as primarily the sign of his release from the constraints of the ancestral universe.

Nwoye's story closes a family history that revolves around the troubled relationships between fathers and sons.¹³ Centered as it is on the personality and tragic fate of Okonkwo, this family history constitutes the novel's narrative framework and functions as an allegory of the very destiny of the society they inhabit, and to which they relate in diverse ways. What this allegory signifies, in the particular historical and cultural context of Achebe's novel, is the state of internal crisis into which this society is plunged, a crisis that we have come to appreciate as intrinsic to its presiding ethos. This crisis is only rendered especially acute by the arrival of the white man, so that a major irony of the novel is that it is this historic event provides a resolution, an outcome that we sense as highly ambiguous, insofar as it marks the harsh intrusion of the outer world upon the tribal universe, leading to the loss of its autonomy as a sphere of existence and expression.

Achebe's understanding of the epochal significance of this turn of events represents the conceptual foundation of the novel's narrative development. Its burden of historical truth derives from its external reference, the large correspondence of the events it narrates to the internal history of the society and culture with which it deals, the profound upheaval in the

Igbo world and indeed the entire region of what is now Southeastern Nigeria that culminated in the imposition of British colonial rule.¹⁴ The formal working-out of this understanding consists of the way it determines a double perspective of point of view that is reflected in the narrative devices through which the drama of events unfolds in the novel and by which its moral import is clarified. This is evident in what we have called the novel's diegetic function, which relates to the explicit realism associated with the genre, the imperative of representation to which it responds. On one hand, it enables a positive image of tribal society to emerge, with its coherence and especially the distinctive poetry of its forms of life. On the other hand, we are made aware that this coherence is a precarious and even factitious one, deriving from an inflexibility of social norms that places an enormous psychological and moral burden on individuals caught up within its institutional constraints, imprisoned by its logic of social organization, and inhibited by its structure of social conformities. The split that this occasions within the writer's creative consciousness makes for a profound ambivalence that translates as a productive tension in the novel's connotative substratum.

We come to some idea of this deeper layer of meaning in the novel by considering the complex of images through which it develops.¹⁵ At the risk of a certain reductionism, it can be observed that the structure of images in the novel revolves around the theme of contradiction, which functions as its organizing principle, amplified through the structure of ironic reversals by which the narrative is propelled. This feature is well illustrated by the contradictory meanings assumed by the image of the locusts on the two occasions it occurs in the text. The first, which recounts an actual invasion of the village by locusts, provides what may be considered the high point of the novel: contrary to expectations, the normal association of this pest with agricultural disaster is reversed as the entire population goes into a festive mood collecting locusts and feasting on them.

The irony of this episode is deepened by the fact that it immediately precedes the account of the consultations among the elders regarding the disposal of Ikemefuna and the narration of his ritual killing. It is not without significance for the narrative scheme that Okonkwo's participation in this ritual marks the precise moment at which his fortunes commence their downward spiral. The connection is directly established between his reverses and the fall of the clan in the second occurrence of the image of the locust, which reinforces the dark irony intimated by this narrative scheme by returning us to the conventional meaning of the image of the locusts in Obierika's designation of the white men, whose appearance on the scene he interprets as the ominous event it turns out to be:

I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and the first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain [97-8].¹⁶

Within this scheme, the progression of events in the novel is organized around a system of dichotomies and their transformations. We move in particular from the pre-established hierarchy of values implied in the opposition between the village of Umuofia and the "Evil Forest"¹⁷ to a dramatic reversal of this hierarchy. The binaries by which the unfolding of events is plotted in the novel, and the ironies entailed by the process, is especially marked here, for it is in the Evil Forest, which starts out as the negative marker of social space in the community depicted by the novel, that the Christians establish their new religion, destined to triumph over

the ancestral religion. It is here that they succeed in creating a new community cemented as much by the enthusiasm called forth in them by the new faith as by its rhetoric of liberation [112]. It is pertinent to remark here that the pattern of reversals itself draws upon an eminently Christian trope, encapsulated in the Biblical sayings about the last coming to be the first, and the meek inheriting the earth, a trope that, we may recall, prompted Nietzsche's repudiation of Christianity as the religion of the weak and powerless in the world.

With these reversals as they occur in *Things Fall Apart*, the Evil Forest gradually becomes invested with moral authority, thus acquiring a new and positive significance. Furthermore, the historical connection between the Christian mission and the incipient colonial administration and their collaboration in the overthrow of the tribal system constitutes this new space as the domain within which a new social order is to be elaborated. The account of this connection in the latter part of *Things Fall Apart* propels the Evil Forest to a position of centrality in the novel's system of meanings, so that, in its association with Christianity, it comes to represent the source of new humanizing values and, in this sense, simultaneously, as an image of a transformation that prefigures a new future. In short, the Evil Forest comes to signify a new and developing realm of being.

The future to which this transformation is projected is clearly intimated in Mr. Brown's exhortations to his wards, exhortations that provide a temporal complement to the spiritual justification of his missionary activity: "Mr Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He said that the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write" [128]. The remarkable prescience ascribed here to Mr. Brown is of course the product of narrative hindsight, propounded ex post facto, as it were, and thus prospective to the historical moment of the events depicted in the novel. It is an imaginative anticipation of the modernity that rises on the horizon, determined by the nexus between literacy and the new cash economy, and destined to flow out of the veritable process of social reconstruction set in train by the advent and diffusion of Christianity:

Mr Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers; and from Umuofia, labourers went forth into the Lord's vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand [128].

Achebe's novel looks forward self-consciously here to the formation of a new Westernized elite and the emergence of a new national identity enabled by literacy and predicated on an ideology of modernization. The nationalist project that in the general consensus would devolve upon the Westernized elite finds a discreet echo here within Achebe's novel, giving it a thematic resonance that, as we shall see, extends its range into the field of utopia.¹⁸

Thus, by a strange and unpredictable turn of events, the Evil Forest comes to gather to itself these various intimations, so that it functions as the marker of the historical consciousness that underlies the narrative development of the novel. The peculiar imbrication of theme and imagery here enlarges the novel's field of reference and suggestion, in such a way as to point up the deep intuition it expresses of the compelling force of history.

But it is especially at the level of language that the double movement of Achebe's imagination in *Things Fall Apart* is fully manifested. It is revealing of the novel's thematic

direction to observe and follow the course charted by the language, which proceeds from the vigorous rhetoric of traditional life that infuses its early chapters with their peculiar energy, to the bare discursiveness that predominates in the later chapters. It is primarily the language of the early chapters that endows Achebe's novel with an epic resonance. The impulse to a reevaluation of Igbo culture is clearly discernible here, for we are left in no doubt that the language of Achebe's characters is one that is constitutive of the culture, woven into the fabric of social experience. This language, in which social life is "objectified," becomes expressive of its seamless whole, of its tensions as well as strategies for their resolution, a language that may be said to found a whole register of the collective being. It is to this interrelation of speech mode to communal life that Bernth Lindfors draws attention when he describes the language of Achebe's world as "a grammar of values" [Lindfors, 1973, 77].

We sense then, behind Achebe's handling of language, an ideological *parti-pris*, which is not without its aesthetic pay off, as it were. There is an obvious delectation in language in the early chapters that betrays a large measure of complicity with his subject matter on the part of the novelist. It is this that conditions that felicity of style that has so often been remarked upon as a distinctive quality of Achebe's writing.¹⁹ And it is indeed this aesthetic dimension—distinct from the novel's documentary or ethnographic interest—that qualifies it as creative endeavour, as a notable instance of poesis.

But alongside what one might call the performative style reflective of oral discourse, and as counterpoint to its expressivity, Achebe adopts the tone of objective narrative, a tone derived from the western convention of literate discourse, whose impassibility reflects the distance that he is obliged to take with regard to his subject. This tone is evident in the direct accounts of customs and of beliefs and other notations related to the tribal way of life, passages in which the skepticism natural to the rational viewpoint is barely held in check, masked only by the neutral tone of the narrative voice. We sense the way in which this skepticism is held back in the long description of the search for Ezinma's *iyi-nwa* [53-61], but reaffirmed in the matter-of-fact account of Okonkwo going into the bush to collect herbs that he will administer to Ezinma to combat her fever. This report of an eminently pragmatic behavior serves as a coda to the exuberance of the story of Ezinma's stone, dispelling the air of verisimilitude that seems to attach to this story with a sober notation of fact. Similarly, Ekwefi's reminiscence of her encounter with an evil spirit is juxtaposed with a realistic, almost banal explanation of her visions:

She had prayed for the moon to rise. But now she found the half light of the incipient moon more terrifying than the darkness. The world was now peopled with vague fantastic figures that dissolved under her steady gaze and then formed again in new shapes [75].

These juxtapositions reflect the workings of the novelist's mind as it hovers between fascination and unbelief, between an impulse toward an embrace of the cultural values suggested by his imaginative exploration of setting and narrative elaboration of context, and a positivist outlook inseparable from a liberated consciousness. We have no better evidence of this ambiguous subtext than the wry report of the *egwugwu* who is rooted to the spot for two days for daring to cross the path of the one-handed masquerade [86]. And Obierika's expression of awe at the potency of a neighboring village's "medicine" indicates that even the intelligence of a wise elder like him can be preyed upon by the superstitions of the tribe. Thus, while it is

evident that the passages in which Achebe reports these beliefs and the practices associated with them imply a certain measure of understanding of their ways, it would be clearly absurd to suggest that he identifies with them at any level of his intellectual make-up.

It is especially instructive in this regard to note the way in which the bewilderment of the villagers at the survival of the Christians in the Evil Forest affords Achebe scope for an indulgent satire upon their conceptual naïveté, as determined by the collective belief system. This naïveté takes on a more ominous character in Obierika's account of the killing of the white man by the people of Abame, who tie up his "iron horse" to prevent it from running away to call his friends [97]. It is significant that later in the novel, as a demonstration of the inadequacy of the traditional world view, we are informed of the test of efficacy passed by the new medicine introduced by the missionaries: "And it was not long before the people began to say that the white man's medicine was quick in working" [128]. The term "medicine" is now employed in the sense of a technology of healing grounded in verifiable science, in other words in association with an objectifying, "instrumental" rationality.²⁰

The insistence of the narrative voice on the fundamental weakness of the traditional cognitive system is thus unmistakable and it raises the issue of the skeptical distance that, as novelist, Achebe is obliged to maintain from this system, and indeed the intellectual detachment from the world he presents, despite his deep sense of cultural involvement in and affective engagement with his material. The shifting perspectives we encounter in the novel and the varied tones of the narrative voice afford pointers to the fact that *Things Fall Apart* is written out of a consciousness that is no longer at one with the indigenous order of apprehension. We are constantly made aware that the traditional background functions for Achebe not as a reference for an objective structure of knowledge but rather for the novelist's narrative construction and imaginative purpose, as touchstone of an aesthetic, as a stock of imaginative symbols endowed with an affective value that does not depend on belief or devotional commitment for force of appeal. The relation of Achebe to his material is thus comparable in some important respects to that of the Western writer to pagan mythology, and even to aspects of Christian belief that are no longer capable of commanding the writer's intellectual assent or even emotional identification.

The fact that Achebe's second, objective style is often marked by irony does not detract from its value as the instrument appropriate to the function of chronicler that, as novelist, he assumes in those passages when he turns to this style, moments when he is concerned above all with registering the facts as they present themselves to his consciousness as a dispassionate observer of history. The interaction between the evocative parts of his novel and the realistic mode of its thematic progression is thus expressive of the interface between the oral and the written that is central to his double cultural awareness. In formal terms, this interaction marks the transition from the epic to the novel to which Bakhtin has drawn attention as distinctive of the evolution of narrative [Bakhtin, 1981; see also Ong, 1982; and Goody, 1987].

The significant point about this interaction is the tension produced in the novel between what one might call a romanticism of its oral style, which derives from a personal attachment of the writer to his African antecedents, and the realism of the western style, which corresponds to his awareness of their supersession in a new dispensation. The deep "mechanisms" at work in the novel thus come to the surface in the language, enabling us to grasp the full connotative

weight and rhetorical direction of the narrative. This is a story that begins in the register of myth and ends on a note of chronicle, a transformation that is reflected in its narrative style, which becomes progressively "de-poetized," as Thomas Melone has rightly pointed out [Melone, 1973, 65].²¹

The "downward" progression of Achebe's expression thus charts the course of the depletion of language, brought on by events, in the community to which the novel refers, a process that is registered within the work by the transition from a textualised orality through which the characters and the world of the novel are not so much represented as evoked, called forth into being, to the passive record of events imposed by the conventions of literate discourse. For the interaction between styles, the play of language on which the narrative development turns, forms part of the movement of history traced in the novel. As the story advances, we witness a linguistic process that culminates in the triumph of the culture of literacy, a process that also signals the engulfing of the indigenous voice, carried exclusively through the oral medium, by the discourse of colonialism.

It is this latter discourse that finally calls attention to itself, at the very end of the novel, in the total coincidence of the linguistic vehicle of the text with the actual language in which the thoughts of the colonial officer are formulated. The passage is remarkable in many respects, not least for the way it draws attention to the differentiated use in Achebe's novel of the device of indirect speech. For in its bare matter-of-factness, it stands in marked contrast to the remarkable stream of interior monologue through which, as he is led to his death, Ikemefuna's forebodings are translated, in a dramatic counterpoint between an immediate sense of personal danger, rendered through indirect speech, and the reassuring formulations of communal lore. The loss of the vivid quality of Ikemefuna's monologue in the colonial officer's reported speech indicates that we now have to do with the disembodied voice of history, manifested through this faceless, nondescript character. The historic turning signified by the end of Okonkwo's personal story is thus registered at the very level of language: from being subjects of their own discourse, Okonkwo and his people have now become the objects of the discourse of another, elaborated in a language foreign to them.

There is a sense, then, in which the advent of the imperial moment is developed in Achebe's novel as a linguistic experience, as more or less a misadventure of language that unfolds through the discursive modes of its narration. In line with this development, the temporal scheme of the novel appropriately shifts from the cyclic plane, associated with a rich organicism and an intense vitalism, to the strictly linear, the precipitation of events in the third part of the novel contrasting markedly with the unhurried pace of the telling in the earlier parts. At the same time, the spatial scheme itself becomes transformed, enlarged and, in the process, impoverished: from the affectively charged compactness of the nine villages to the impersonal perspectives of the Lower Niger, evoked in the ruminations of the colonial officer that bring the narrative to its close.

Things Fall Apart displays in its own peculiar way what Frank Kermode has called "the ambiguous innocence of the classic text" [Kermode, 1983, 74]. Kermode's phrase itself is a suggestive one, for we might conceive of the classic text in terms of its centrality to a tradition, either one that is fully established but must still accommodate new works for its reinvigoration--the sense of T.S. Eliot's celebrated essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"--or one that is

emerging, advertising itself by its novelty, as is generally held to be the case with modern African literature in the European languages. The poetics of *Things Fall Apart* seem in a curious way to unite both these senses of the classic text. On one hand, its economy of style derives from what seems like a complete adherence to the norms of the conventional novel, exemplified by its strictly linear structure with a beginning, a middle and an end, leading inexorably to the final catastrophe, the progression clearly marked by the novel's triadic structure. Moreover, it achieves its effects by means that refuse to call attention to themselves. This makes for an austerity that places it alongside that other classic of the African canon, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*. At the same time, it has claims to a uniqueness that derives from its departure from the western model in fundamental ways. For, as the discussion above indicates, a tension exists between the surface fluency that distinguishes Achebe's text and the resonances set up within it by its hidden places of signification. For although *Things Fall Apart* presents itself at first sight as what Roland Barthes has called a "readerly" rather than a "writerly" text [Barthes, 1970], the indications I have provided of key elements of its internal features indicate that there is more to its transparent texture than is at first sight perceptible. These deeper promptings of the text indicate that its apparent simplicity is belied by the complexities of reference and suggestion that lie beneath its directness of enunciation.²²

The tension that these complexities generate in the text proceeds largely from the fraught relation that obtains between theme and form, reflecting an ambivalence that informs the fictional inspiration and therefore structures its formal expression. Simon Gikandi has endeavored to address this issue by claiming that this feature of the work derives from the writer's cultural background, which recognizes a plurality of discourse and admits different points of view, varying formulations of the truth of experience or reality [Gikandi, 1991, 44-50]. But the ambivalence in the novel is so profound as to carry much more weight than Gikandi seems willing to allow. Rather than a function of cultural habit, it seems to me that this ambivalence stems from the critical consciousness inherent in Achebe's recourse to the novel as a narrative genre. The point can be made directly by observing that Achebe presents Igbo society "steadily and whole," to borrow Matthew Arnold's expression. For while this society is indeed marked by an internal coherence of its organization and a poetry of its expressive modes, it also betrays profound inadequacies and grave internal contradictions that account for the disintegration that the novel records. Thus, *Things Fall Apart* does not merely embody a willed recall of cultural memory, but develops also as an exploration of the specificities of life within the universe of experience it unveils, an exploration that amounts ultimately to a reassessment of its nature and presiding ethos. In other words, Achebe brings to his task of historical recollection a moral intelligence.

The moral issue in *Things Fall Apart* seems to hinge upon how far Okonkwo can be considered representative of his society, how far he can be held to be its embodiment. For William Walsh, the centrality of Okonkwo to the issue is clear, as he says, "because of the way in which the fundamental predicament of the society is lived through his life" [Walsh, 1970, 52]. But any categorical answer one way or the other skirts the questions, since in fact, in real societies, individuals only partially embody the values of the community even when these are presumed to have been fully internalized, for in the very process of acting out these values, they can also be found to strain against them. It is this dialectic between the individual and the

society, inherent in what Durkheim termed "social constraint" (*la contrainte sociale*) that is so well mirrored in Achebe's novel in its depiction of Okonwo's relation to his society.

This is a dialectic that is of course very much within the province of the novel. Indeed, as Sunday Anozie has pointed out, Okonkwo as a character corresponds in some respects to Lucien Goldmann's concept of the "problematic hero"; in Anozie's reading, Okonkwo emerges as something of a romantic hero, the bearer of a cult of the self [Anozie, 1970, 00-00]. It is easy to see how this attribute can constitute a menace to the kind of society that Achebe constructs, a potential factor of disaggregation in a tribal community. For the assiduous cultivation of individual self can only disturb the system of obligations and solidarities on which the sense of community is founded.

Okonkwo's personal attitude and social conduct as we encounter them in the novel amount in fact to an idiosyncratic interpretation of social rules and lead irresistibly to a state of moral irresponsibility, despite his apparent conformity to norms. His self-absorption is of such a magnitude as to test the limits of the dominant ideology and thus to reveal its points of weakness. It is this paradox of his situation that is dramatized by his exile, which can be read as a symbolic expression of the necessity to rein in his passionate individuality by its exclusion from the social sphere. This aspect of his character is presented as directly related to the simplified and totally unreflective approach to the world by which he lives and acts, in striking contrast to his friend Obierika. The same unreflective commitment to the communal ethos in his killing of Ikemefuna is manifested in his cutting down of the court messenger. Okonkwo's blinding passion leads him to a final act of egoism that finally marks him with a tragic solitude, rendered tersely in the line in which we finally glimpse him: "He wiped his machete on the sand and went away" [145].

Contrary, then, to Gikandi's contention, the ambivalence by which the novel is governed inheres in the text itself, emerging clearly in the portrayal of Okonkwo. We must go further to observe that the largely negative thrust of this portrayal comes close to undermining the polemical intent of the novel. For if Okonkwo's tragic fate marks him as a symbol of the passion of the African in modern times, the ironic devaluation of the character and the ethos he embodies suggests a profound sense of unease on the part of his creator regarding many issues of moral import raised by the habits of mind and social practices that define the traditional universe of life and expression. There is thus a sense in which the sustained imaginative reflection upon Igbo society in Achebe's novel begins to tend toward a subversion of its ideological premises. It is as if Achebe's intellect and sensibility and his sense of artistic integrity had entered into contention with his primary affections for his cultural antecedents, thus bringing into peril his conscious project of bearing witness to the poetic quality of the universe in which they are rooted. For although it would be extreme to read Achebe's novel as the expression of a repudiation of the tribal ethos, as a form of recoil from the tribal universe, to consider the text in light of its ambivalence is to recognize it for what it is: nothing less than an uncompromising reappraisal of the tribal world.²³

It is important to stress that this revaluation has nothing to do with the diminished conception of African humanity and capacities constitutive of colonial ideology but arises as an immediate factor of the historical process represented in the novel. We appreciate the intense feeling of insecurity of the Umuofia elders as they sense the world with which they are familiar

going out from under them. We sympathize, therefore, with the claim to cultural integrity defended by Okonkwo and others, more so as the novel establishes a parallel between their attitude and that of Mr. Smith, whose intransigence on behalf of the Christian cause mirrors that of Okonkwo on behalf of the traditional world. They are the true protagonists, embodying each in his own way the logic of the cultural conflict enacted in the novel, the logic involved in the drama of the colonial encounter. Moreover, this conflict is situated within the perspective of a cultural pluralism that is at first rehearsed in a good humored way in the theological disputations between the Umuofians and Mr. Brown, but which soon assumes an agonistic character in the confrontation with his successor, Mr. Smith; it is this later development that is voiced by one of the elders, Ajofia:

We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish, because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his [134-5].

But this balanced view of cultural relativism hardly represents the level of the novel's groundwork of ideas or the resting place of its ideological or narrative progression. *Things Fall Apart* complicates singularly the issues so often raised in the context of debate within which it is usually situated, that of the Tradition/Modernity framework. It goes beyond the series of dichotomies so regularly invoked in this debate as to have become platitudes: established custom versus change; cultural loss versus reproduction; accommodation versus revolt; acculturation versus cultural nationalism, and the like. These issues are obviously implicated in the total discursive range of the novel's narrative development, but they do not in the end, it seems to me, constitute the real heart of the matter. For it is not enough to see *Things Fall Apart* as simply a statement of cultural and racial retrieval, as a novel that embodies a discourse of nativism. Rather than a unilateral reevaluation of the past, the central preoccupation of this novel, as indeed of Achebe's entire work, revolves around the deeply problematic nature of the relationship of past to present in Africa. What is at issue here, in the most fundamental way, is the bearing of that past upon the present, fraught as this is with implications for the future perspectives of the continent.

Kwame Anthony Appiah's summing up of the novel is pertinent to this question when he remarks that, in *Things Fall Apart*, "Achebe's accounting includes columns both for profit and loss" [Appiah, 1992, xii]. Given what we have seen as its ironic stances and the key of ambivalence on which the narrative is rung, it seems to me that if the novel translates a sense of loss, this cannot be overwhelming. *Things Fall Apart* can hardly be read as a wistful lingering over an elusive past: nostalgia is not a determining or even constitutive element of its atmosphere. The intellectual disposition of the writer, if not his imaginative consciousness, operating at a level deeper than any ideological conception of his function, seems here to apprehend a decided lack of congruence between the past of the novel's reconstruction, reanimated as a function of cultural memory, and the imperatives of the present, even as the claims of that past to aesthetic significance are upheld, and its psychological value in countering the debilitation of the colonial situation is activated.

We are made aware of the inadequacy of the overarching ethos by which the past was regulated, its limitations as embodied in historical forms, the inadequacy of this ethos and of these forms arising precisely from their mode of insertion in the world. Moreover, as Pierre

Nora has pointed out, the phenomenon of memory exceeds the purview of history [Nora, 1989]. In this particular context perhaps more than in any other, the dynamics of cultural memory involve much more than reaching into a past; they also engage the present, insofar as the traditional culture upon which they are focused remains a vibrant contemporary reality. But while it continues to exert its force upon minds, the question remains how far the past can be invoked to legitimize the present, how far it is capable of functioning as a practical reference in the contemporary circumstances of African endeavor.

These, then, are some of the issues raised by Achebe's work. The point is that the novel genre serves Achebe as a mode of reflection upon the nature and significance of the African past, and its relevance to the African present. In *Things Fall Apart*, this reflective tone is made evident in the conversations and dialogues he attributes to the elders of the tribe, who are thereby presented through the course of the narrative as minds engaged in a sustained deliberative process. The novel takes on a discursive character as it stages a running debate on customs and practices, on institutions and values, on systems of belief: a debate that is in reality conducted as an interrogation of the human possibilities offered by the material world and mental landscape that together compose the tribal culture and stamp it with a distinctive quality.

But although this interrogation is presented as internal, it amounts ultimately to an objective scrutiny, in the light of an alternative set of values that, in the nature of things, were not available to the subjects themselves. This scrutiny forms part of the implicit ideology of the novel, of the system of ideas presiding upon its organization, for which the Euro-Christian system of values begins to function as touchstone and measure. This is not to imply that the emphasis on Christianity as a factor of liberation authorizes us to read the work as a justification of the new religion, much less of colonial imposition, but rather as a mirror held up to African society, enabling a process of self-apprehension. In other words, a new African consciousness emerges through the mediation of the Christian/Western vision of the world.

The tension generated by the fundamental ambivalence of the novel's "propositional" content can be grasped at its most intense at this level, for the process of self-reflection manifested in the novel is traversed by what one might call a deep cultural anxiety. This is nothing like the self-contempt displayed Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, but it testifies to the way in which the need to validate the tribal culture in some emotionally satisfactory way runs up against the question of value, a question that is central to the order of meaning proposed by the novel. It is in this light that Obierika, who stands as the manifest antithesis of Okonkwo, can be said to function as the moral center of the novel. He comes closest among the novel's characters to a representation of what Valdez Moses has called a "modern sensibility" [Valdez Moses, 1995, 113].²⁴ It is perhaps not far-fetched to suggest that we have in Obierika not merely the one character with which, as Jeyifo points out, the novelist seems to identify, but rather a subtle projection of the critical consciousness that Achebe himself brings to the imaginative conception of the novel [Jeyifo, 1990]. The evidence of the novel lends such weight to this view as to make it a matter of more than mere speculation.

Whatever the case, the debate enacted within the novel gives the work an analytical bent to which its initial ideological inspiration is ultimately subordinated, for *Things Fall Apart* testifies to a clear recognition of a decisive break in the African experience of history occasioned by the

colonial fact. It hardly needs to be stressed that this recognition is far from committing Achebe to an acquiescence in the methods of subjugation employed by colonial agents, whether white or black, exemplified by the deception and humiliation described in the latter pages of the novel, in which the historical grievance of Africa is vividly represented, dramatized in the martyrdom of Okonkwo and the Umuofia elders. The pathos of their situation resonates through the entire society, takes on wider meaning as nothing less than the suspension of the entire culture, the arrest of those activities that gave both energy and poetry to everyday life in Umuofia. All this portends the stifling of the tribe's spirit by a collective trauma: "Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air, and not knowing which way to run" [139].

The anti-colonial thrust of the novel is unmistakable here, but it becomes evident as we reflect upon the novel as a whole that this is not all there is to the story of Okonkwo and Umuofia, as recounted by Chinua Achebe. The novel ends with the hero's suicide, but there is no real closure, for we are intimated by the white colonial officer's musings with the fact that it opens onto a new and unpredictable future for the Umuofians and for the continent of which they form an integral and indeed representative part. The import of the novel arises from this intimation, for what *Things Fall Apart* registers ultimately is an acute consciousness of historical and cultural discontinuity occasioned by the colonial encounter in Africa, and of its ontological implications: the necessity for a new mode of being, of relating to the world.

It is one of the of the novel's peculiar traits that the historical realism that directs the narrative progression harmonizes readily with the elegiac mood that serves as its groundbase, a conjunction that is registered in one of the most remarkable passages in the novel: That night the mother of the spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming - its own death. [132].

The epochal significance of the passage is intensified, assumes cosmic resonance, in the lament that pours out of one of the characters, Okika, at the final meeting of the clan: "All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping. Ogwugwu is weeping. Agbala is weeping, and all the others..." [143]. Okika's lament directs us to the heart of Achebe's novel: it is as an elegy that incorporates a tragic vision of history that *Things Fall Apart* elicits the strongest and deepest response.

Things Fall Apart inaugurates the imaginative reliving in Achebe's work of those significant moments of the African experience traced in his five novels to date. Given this comprehensive perspective of inspiration and reference within which they are situated, these novels compose a historical vision. Consequently, they pose the general theoretical question of the formal relation of the novel as a genre to the substantive fact of history, a relation within which the purport of Achebe's work can be said to inhere. Because of its unique place in Achebe's corpus and in the African canon, *Things Fall Apart* presents itself as the indispensable point of departure for an examination of this question.

The transition of Achebe's style from an epic mode to one associated with the novel provides an indication of the changing modes of this relation. This stylistic evolution of the novel may be interpreted as the scriptural sign of a corresponding adjustment of the writer's

vision, reflecting his sense, as the narrative develops, of the pressure of history as it begins to exert itself upon the community that is the subject of the novel. This seems to accord with a Hegelian conception of history as the unfolding saga of modernity, with the modern novel as its imaginative equivalent. The received opinion stemming from these sources has tended to understand modernity as a historical phenomenon arising primarily from the Western experience and as the paradigm that commands the writing of scientific history, and, as a consequence, the emergence of the novel, the literary genre that is thought to be most closely associated with modern culture. In this view, the novel as a specific modern genre affords a new medium for the construction in aesthetic and moral terms of a vision of a totality no longer immediately available to consciousness in the fragmented, reified world of modern civilization [Lukács, 1977].²⁵

For the conception of history that underwrites the status of the novel alluded to above, the society depicted in Achebe's novel, along with the culture it sustains, appears as prehistoric, subsisting, as far as the record of its existence is concerned, on mythical narrative orally transmitted, and therefore unworthy of attention of serious historical scholarship. Consequently, it seems hardly appropriate as the subject of a novel in the normal understanding of the term.²⁶ *Things Fall Apart* challenges this conception, for the whole purpose of Achebe's novel is to bring the existence of this culture into view as a historical reality, one that bears witness to the human world realized within it. The narrative mode, in both its epic aspect and at the novelistic level of articulation, affords Achebe the means of restating the grounded historicity of the African experience, in a creative reconstruction of stages of the collective being.

It is of course true that the sequence of events narrated, and the society and culture represented, are products of an individual imagination, detached from any function of pure predication; the narrative unfolding of events conducted along a definite plot line is thus sustained by an aesthetic faculty that is fully engaged in Achebe's reconstruction. It is evident therefore that, despite their historical focus, *Things Fall Apart*, as well as *Arrow of God*--the two novels need to be considered together on this point--are not only not histories in any ordinary sense of the word, they cannot be considered historical novels either, in the conventional or narrow sense of their dealing with real events in the past, featuring real historical personalities as characters.²⁷ But this sense is hardly satisfactory for an understanding of the narrative function, hence the need for a more inclusive conception, such as the one propounded by Hayden White, which posits a fundamental relationship between fiction and history as modalities of the narrative activity and process. The point is well clarified in the following observation regarding the significance of narrative as a universal phenomenon:

The affiliation of narrative historiography with literature and myth should provide no reason for embarrassment...because the systems of meaning production shared by all three are distillates of the historical experience of a people, a group, a culture [White, 1987, 44-45].²⁸

This suggests that the assimilation of fiction to history is authorized not merely in formal terms--what Hayden White calls "emplotment"--but also of content, insofar as in both cases, the real world of concrete experience features as referent of the narrative. But here, we work with a special notion of referentiality peculiar to fiction, deriving from its enhanced value as symbolic representation of experience. To quote Hayden White again: "Thus envisaged, the narrative

figurates the body of events that serves as its primary referent and transforms these events into intimations of patterns of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce" [45].

These remarks bear directly on Achebe's two novels, for they present themselves as acts of remembrance that entail an intense engagement of mind and sensibility upon a collective experience and thus move towards what, to quote him once more, Hayden White calls "an order of meaning." In specific terms, the two novels manifest an understanding of the essence of history as being bound up with momentous events which alter the collective destiny in ways that are unpredictable but prove ultimately definitive. These novels are informed in other words by a profound sense of the radical contingency of history.

It is this deep intuition of history that, it seems to me, distinguishes Achebe's work from that of every other African writer. This distinction emerges clearly when we contrast the tone of *Things Fall Apart* with that of francophone African writing roughly contemporaneous with it, especially in the works of Camara Laye, Leopold Senghor, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, all of whom have created in obedience to a paradigm of the self that privileges the ideal of wholeness. This accounts for the nostalgia for the past that pervades their work, an impossible longing for an earlier state of being, denoted by Senghor's "le royaume de l'enfance," a nostalgia further deepened by the religious cum theological dimension it assumes in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*. It is not without interest to observe that a similar aspiration for an enhanced quality of being animates Soyinka's mythical evocations of origins [David, 1995].

Achebe's work registers on the other hand a severe recognition of the compulsions upon the human estate of the historical process itself--what he has called "the power of events"--a compulsion that admits of only narrow margins for the play of human agency. It is this that I have called elsewhere the "humane pessimism" that I believe Achebe shares with Joseph Conrad [Irele, 1988].²⁹ It must be understood, however, that this pessimism is not by any means a disabling one, for it does not imply a resignation born out of a passive suffering of events. It calls rather for a purposive adjustment to those great shifts in the structure of the world that destabilize established constellations of thought, initiating a new historical process and enforcing therefore a new adventure of mind.

This seems to me the direction of meaning in Achebe's fiction, which, in its immediate reference, represents an imaginative remapping of the African experience within the space of history, the literary mode deployed as a means of shaping consciousness for the confrontation of the new realities on the horizon of African being. The ironies and the ambivalence that underscore the drama of cultural memory in his first novel emerge in a new light from this perspective, attesting to a sombre consciousness but one resolutely oriented towards a future envisioned as pregnant with new possibilities. In other words, a utopian component underlies the expressive modalities and encompassing vision in *Things Fall Apart*.

In a limited sense, the utopianism of the novel is inseparable from the nationalist vein that, as I have suggested, informs the narrative and the project of modernity that is its concomitant. This is not to imply that Achebe's nationalism in this or his other works advertises itself as a programmatic fixation upon an ideal future. However, the understanding of history that, as we have seen, underlies its system of ideas implies, as its necessary complement, a vision of African renewal. Thus, a tacit correlation exists between Achebe's imaginative discourse in its utopian

implications and what Arjun Appadurai has called "the mega-rhetoric of developmental modernization" of African and Asian anti-colonial nationalism [Appadurai, 1996, 22]. It is well to remember that Achebe continues to sustain in his fiction right up to the present moment this vision of new beginnings in Africa, as demonstrated by the conclusion of *Anthills of the Savannah*.³⁰

But the utopianism of Achebe's fiction, as it begins to declare itself in *Things Fall Apart*, has a broader scope than is suggested by the materialist and utilitarian preoccupations of nationalism. It involves what the Manuels have called "an idealizing capacity" as a defining property of the utopian imagination [Manuel, 1979, 5]. In this respect, it accords fully with the universalist interpretation of the utopian function of literature propounded by Fredric Jameson, whose reformulation of Lukács's categories of "conservative" and "progressive" expands their meaning in a new dichotomy between "ideology" and "utopia." In this reformulation, intended to refurbish the terms earlier proposed by Karl Mannheim for historical and sociological understanding, the term "utopian" comes to designate the way in which literature, as a socially symbolic act, envisions the realm of freedom as a human possibility [Jameson, 1981].³¹

We might conclude then with the observation that what cultural memory delivers in Achebe's first novel is not so much a revalued past, recollected in a spirit of untroubled celebration, as, ultimately, the opening out of the African consciousness to the possibility of its transcendence, to the historic chance of a new collective being and existential project. The sense of the tragic clings nonetheless to this consciousness, for Achebe is aware that this historic chance, if real, is at best limited and fragile. His vision is probably best expressed by the voice of the "Oracle" in his poem "Dereliction" (in the volume *Beware Soul Brother*) inviting his questing worshippers to a form of action, perhaps a collective affirmation, in the precarious space constituted by the strip of dry land between sea and shore at the ebbing of the tide:

Let them try the land
Where the sea retreats
Let them try the land
Where the sea retreats

Achebe's tragic vision of history is presented in these lines in tension with his utopianism. But to invoke the tragic dimension of Achebe's first novel is not merely to seek to uncover the full scope of its statement of the colonial encounter in Africa, but also to reach for its contemplative character, the sense it contains of the general human condition.³² It is this sense that is conveyed by Roland Barthes's summation of the tragedies of Racine as "the aesthetics of defeat" ("l'art de l'échec") [Barthes, 1963, 61]. The description applies equally to all the great tragedies of world literature, among which *Things Fall Apart* must now be seen to occupy a distinctive place. Beyond its reference to the personal dilemmas of Racine's characters, Barthes's phrase points to the apprehension by the tragic imagination of the essential fragility of our human condition. The deep insight that tragedy provides into this condition may well shake our being with fear and trembling, but it is the illumination and psychic release it generates that enable humanity to keep going. As a necessary component of its exploration of the African experience, *Things Fall Apart* embodies this fundamental truth of the imaginative vision.

Notes

1. The phrase is of course an echo of V. S. Naipaul's title for the first of his three books on India. For a comprehensive discussion of the image of Africa in the western imagination, see Fanoudh-Siefer, 1968.
2. Achebe's example spawned a cluster of novels in anglophone Africa focused on the theme of reevaluation and cultural conflict. This is especially the case in the work of a group of Igbo writers who may be said to constitute a school deriving its inspiration and method from his work. Among these may be cited, as the most prominent, the names of writers like Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, Onuora Nzekwu and Elechi Amadi; Buchi Emecheta's work bears an indirect relation to this "school." [See Emenyonu, 1974] The long shadow cast by Achebe over these writers is best illustrated by the insufficient and even scant attention that has been paid to Elechi Amadi's powerful novel, *The Great Ponds*, in my view one of the masterpieces of modern African literature. Further afield, we may cite the case of Ngugi wa Thiongo who has acknowledged his debt to Achebe. To recognize the innovative significance of *Things Fall Apart* to which its wide influence on other African writers testifies is, however, far from stating that Achebe "invented" African literature, as Gikandi claims in his 1991 study of Achebe, a point he repeats in the introduction to the annotated edition of the novel published in 1996. Unless the anglophone area is to be taken as representing the whole field, and the novel as the privileged medium, African literature cannot be said to have begun with the publication of Achebe's novel in 1958. To do so would be to discount the whole area of African literature in the indigenous languages, beginning with the oral tradition itself, and extending to the written literature in the vernaculars, with the work of Thomas Mfolo and D. O. Fagunwa, for example, as major landmarks. Moreover, as regards African literature in the European languages, even if we set aside the work of African writers of European extraction (considered in my 1990 essay "The African Imagination"), the francophone writers had established a new tradition of African literary expression before the publication of the significant texts in English. It is of course possible to consider such figures as René Maran and Paul Hazoumé as precursors, but not Léopold Sédar Senghor, whose first volume of poems, *Chants d'ombre*, was published in 1945. The volume itself testifies to a conscious project of African literature, explicitly stated in the poem "Lettre à un Poète" dedicated to Aimé Césaire, a poem that presents itself as a veritable manifesto for the creation of a new literature expressive of the African environment, a point Senghor later elaborates in the essay "Comme les Lamantins vont boire à la source" which serves as postface to his 1960 volume, *Ethiopiennes*. Indeed, if we seek a precise reference for the "invention" of African literature, this can only be the historic *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, compiled by Senghor and published in 1948. The point is that African literature in the European languages had been constituted as a distinct area of modern African expression well before Achebe came on the scene.

3. Achebe himself has sought to clarify this ideological project by presenting it as a vindication, in the face of persistent western denigration, of the African claim to human achievement. According to him, the novel was motivated by the desire to demonstrate that the precolonial order in Africa was not "one long night of savagery" ["The Novelist as Teacher." *Hopes and Impediments*, 45]. Furthermore, he has indicated that, in its elaboration as a work of fiction, *Things Fall Apart* represents his corrective response to the portrayal of Africa in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ["Named for Victoria, Queen of England" and "An Image of Africa," in the same volume, and Achebe's Preface to *An African Trilogy*]. To these names must be added H.Rider Haggard, Edgar Wallace, and John Buchan, whose works were staples of the colonial literature in Nigeria and other African territories in the former British Empire.
4. *Things Fall Apart*, 1996, p.7 All further references will be indicated in the text by page number.
5. We might note that Achebe's observation about Okonkwo applies equally to Ezeulu, the focus of his third novel, *Arrow of God*; both function as characters in what Biodun Jeyifo [1993] has described as "fictional genealogies of colonialism" in Africa.
6. Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*, 1962, provides a prime example of this discourse of anthropology by which the colonial ideology was sustained. It is intriguing to observe the parallel between Turnbull's title and the name given by Achebe to the community described in *Things Fall Apart*. For an extensive discussion of the relation between Achebe's recreation of Igbo culture in his novels, and the ethnographic literature on the Igbo by Western anthropologists (Basden, Talbot, Meek and others), see Robert Wren, 1980. Talbot's *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* has been the standard work on the subject.
7. I have in mind here Ian Watt's thesis concerning the association between a realist convention and the modern novel in its genesis, this convention arising from the diversified forms of experiences ushered in by the change from an agrarian to an industrial mode of production [Watt, 1957]. According to Watt, this made it imperative for the novelist to provide the reader with background information (down to the baking of bread) related to the context of the narrative. The example he cites of the build-up of detail in *Robinson Crusoe* is especially illuminating, insofar as the economic rationale for realism is disguised in this tale of a fantastic, exotic appearance. The same propensity towards realism is also evident in the novels of Jane Austen, in which it serves a critical purpose: despite a homogenous public (or because of it?) the reproduction of everyday life and manners as part of the fabric of social experience in her time was intended to foster immediate recognition by the reader, a response conducive to the creation by the novelist of an ironic distance necessary for her critical reflection on the characters and situations she presents. The apogee of this realism was attained in the nineteenth century French novel, which combined the same ironic function with a "documentary" character. For, despite the scorn poured by Roland Barthes in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* upon the French realistic novel, its immediate connection to history and to the social transformations of the age constituted it into a powerful channel of social criticism, providing, according to Richard Terdiman a challenge to the repressive institutions of an

ascendant bourgeoisie [Terdiman, 1985]. As a genre, the novel has of course moved beyond this convention of formal realism, toward the modernist reflexive model in which we witness a reciprocal relation between its narrative content and a critical reflection on the art by which this is constituted [Boyd, 1983].

8. Arnold Toynbee's observations regarding what he calls "military virtues" are relevant to a consideration of Achebe's world: "If we wish to understand either the value of the military virtues or the sincerity of the admiration which they win, we must take care to look at them in their native social setting...The military virtues are cultivated and admired in a milieu in which social forces are not sharply distinguished in people's minds from the non-human natural forces, and in which it is at the same time taken for granted that natural forces are not amenable to human control" [Toynbee, 1950, 15].
9. The type as represented in Igbo culture reappears in the character of Danda in Nkem Nwakwo's novel of that name; the closest parallel in Western literature would be perhaps the good soldier Svejk, in Jaroslav Hasek's famous antiwar novel.
10. François Mauriac has remarked upon the procedure he terms "hypertrophie" by which novelists and dramatists tend to exaggerate specific moral or psychological traits in their characters at the expense of others, so that each one of these characters (a Iago, a Goriot, a Raskolnikov) strikes us as representative of a singular aspect of life or experience. We observe a similar process in the creation by Achebe of Okonkwo as an "outsize" character.
11. The expression served as methodological focus for the investigations in social psychology undertaken by Kardiner and Ovesey [Kardiner, 1945; see also Dufrenne, 1953].
12. It is in this light that Claude Lévi-Strauss has interpreted the Story of Asdiwal as a dramatization of the tension between the masculine and the feminine principle; the myth thus reflects, according to him, a perception of the dualism of the natural order and its resonances within the imagination [Lévi-Strauss, in Leach, 1977]. The contradiction between the symbolic representation of women and their social position is of course a feature of most traditional cultures; for a discussion as this applies to India, see Kumari, 2000.
13. As a matter of comparative interest, we might note the parallel between Achebe's treatment of the father-son conflict in *Things Fall Apart* and Samuel Butler's treatment of the same theme in *The Way of All Flesh*. The family story in *Things Fall Apart* is taken up again in the sequel, *No Longer At Ease*. We now know that Achebe's original plan was to write a trilogy based upon a family saga, a plan that he abandoned with the writing of *Arrow of God*, the work that is, without question, his masterpiece. The irony of history is explored more fully in this work, in a fictional register that incorporates a religious element, and is focused on a hero, Ezeulu, who assumes the dimension of a world historical figure, and whose tragic stature is underlined by the intertextual resonance of his bitter return, like Shakespeare's *Lear*, in a raging storm, accompanied by a character who functions as his shadow.

14. For this historical background (not directly considered in Achebe's novel) see K. Onwuka Diké's classic work, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*; also, Wren, already cited.
15. For a preliminary approach to an explication of the structure of imagery in *Things Fall Apart*, suggestive of the possibility of a Bachelardian analysis, see Muoneke, 1994, 101-102.
16. The first title of the Italian translation is based on the imagery in this passage: *Le locuste bianche*. Tr G. De Carlo. Milan: Mondadori, 1962. The title has since been changed in a more recent translation: *Il crollo*. Tr S.A. Cameroni. Milan: Jaca Book, 1994.
17. The notion of "Evil Forest" is not unknown in English, in which the equivalent is "Devil's Dyke."
18. The implications of the historic connection between Christianity and education form the subject of J.F. Ade Ajayi's study, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. 1966. As indicated by its subtitle, the study is not merely a historical account of the Christian evangelical effort in Nigeria, but also a sociological analysis of its major consequence, the formation of a new Westernized elite in the country. A concrete testimony of this connection is provided by Wole Soyinka's biography of his father in Isarà. As with similar elites in other parts of the world, it is to this social group that we owe the national idea in Nigeria. It should be noted that for this group, an ideology of modernity is inseparable from its anti-colonial stance. [Geertz, ed, 1963]; the tension between this stance, and the movement for cultural revival is discussed in my "Dimensions of African Discourse" [Irele, 19]. Despite the particular circumstances of its rise in the context of British colonial rule and within a multi-ethnic framework, Nigerian nationalism illustrates the determining influence highlighted by Ernest Gellner [1983] and Benedict Anderson [1983] of literacy and the role of intellectuals for the emergence of ideas of national identity. [For Nigeria, see in particular Coleman, 1958; Echeruo, 1977; and Zachernuk, 2000].
19. For an extended analysis of Achebe's style and its effect upon the organization of the novel, see Cook, 1977, 75-79. Kwame Appiah for his part remarks on Achebe's "mastery of form and language" [ix], while Margaret Lawrence comments in these terms upon his prose: "a prose plain and spare, informed by his keen sense of irony" [Lawrence, 1968, 107].
20. The logic that underlies the reference here to the potency of the white man's medicine is of a piece with the argument of efficacy advanced by Charles Taylor [1982] and others, in favour of the superior epistemological status of western rationality. See also Wilson, 1970, and the three essays in Lukes, 1977, Part 2, "Rationality and Relativism." 121-174.
21. Marjorie Winter's analysis [1981] in which she discerns an evolution of Achebe's style towards the dry prose of official documents, calls to mind Max Weber's observation on the development of institutional bureaucracy and its impersonal character as a sign of the "disenchanted world" of modern society.
22. Barthes associates the "readerly" text expressly with the established classic, requiring hardly any strenuous engagement on the part of the reader, whereas Kermode's phrase draws attention to the inherent complexity of such texts. We might observe here that the

recourse to orality gives Achebe's novel what, following Gates, one might call a "speakerly" quality [Gates, 1989].

23. It is well to place Achebe's appraisal of his own society's less flattering aspects against his now celebrated critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in his essay "An Image of Africa" [Achebe, 1988, 1-20]. Achebe assails Conrad's work as a "racist novel" though he is far from calling for its elimination from the canon of the Western canon, as David Denby asserts in his 1995 article, "Jungle Fever." While Achebe does not altogether ignore the anti-imperialist thesis of the novella, he seems to equate Conrad's compassion for the Africans of his story to the kind promoted by the RSPCA on behalf of domestic animals. This seems hardly fair to Conrad, but Achebe is not alone in missing the serious moral import of the novella as registered in the epigram to the first edition. It is regrettable that this epigram is not always reproduced in current editions of the work, the notable exception being the Norton edition edited by Robert Kimbrough, which also contains Achebe's essay as well as responses to it. On this question, see Robert Hamner, 1990. See also Cedric Watts's Introduction to the Oxford edition of *Heart of Darkness*, and more recently, Peter Edgerly Firchow, 1999.
24. It is instructive in this regard to consider the comparison suggested by Valdez Moses between the world depicted in Achebe's novel and the image of early Greek society that emerges from the great classical epics of the western literary tradition. Valdez Moses speaks of the "strikingly Homeric quality of *Things Fall Apart*" and discerns "certain similarities between particular Greek and African civilizations in a way that breaks down the Manichean dualism of the West and its Other." He adds: "In fact, the differences between the ethos of Homer's Mycenaean heroes and that of their Igbo counterparts in Achebe's novels are far less striking than those between either of them and the moral standards and political norms that prevail among contemporary European, American and African intellectuals." [Moses, 1995, 113]. Valdez Moses might have added that in both Homer's *Iliad* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we witness a distancing of the narrator from the hero, amounting to a questioning of the dominant ethos. In both, we sense a marked distaste for the violence accepted in earlier societies and reflected in epic narratives, carried to remarkable heights in the wanton violence and atrocities of the Norse sagas. This narrative distance in the *Iliad* reduces somewhat the analytical value of the distinction so often proposed between epic and novel in terms of the degree of the narrator's investment not only in the action and atmosphere of the narrative, but in the moral values of the world it represents.
25. Fredric Jameson has sought to get beyond this privileging of the novel on the part of Georg Lucáks by recovering for critical practice a sense of wholeness for all forms of literary expression: "Indeed, no working model of the functioning of language, the nature of communication or of the speech act, and the dynamics of formal and stylistic change is conceivable which does not imply a whole philosophy of history" [Jameson, 1981, 59].
26. This conforms with Hegel's contemptuous dismissal of the literature of earlier societies as creditable historical material, a view given expression at the very outset of his *Philosophy of History*: "The historian binds together the fleeting rush of events and

deposits it in the temple of Mnemosyne. Myths, folk songs, traditions are not part of original history; they are still obscure modes and peculiar to obscure peoples. Observed and observable reality is a more solid foundation for history than the transience of myths and epics. Once a people has reached firm individuality, such forms cease to be its historical essence" [Hegel, tr Hartman, 1953, 3-4.]

27. The conception summarized here is that of David Daiches [1965].
28. The point is made even more succinctly and more pointedly by Michel Zérafra with regard to the novel: " Sont en cause, dans le roman, notre historicité et son sens" [Zérafra, 1971, 15].
29. For a discussion of the mental landscape that forms the background to Conrad's pessimism, see Jameson, 1981, 251 ff.
30. It is always a hazardous move from reading the work of fiction to speculating about the author's options in the real world. However, Achebe's nonfictional works confirm his embrace of modernity as a necessary dimension of African renewal. And as his own novels relating to post independence demonstrate, he takes full cognizance of the problems and dilemmas involved in the process of Africa's accession to modernity. Nevertheless, his commitment has remained firm, despite the frustrations and disappointments that seem indeed to have given an even sharper edge to sense of commitment; the title of his 1988 collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments*, is sufficiently eloquent to indicate this direction of his sentiments. It seems therefore safe to say that for Achebe, the African personality is not incompatible with a modern scientific culture. Thus he asks rhetorically, "Why should I start waging war as a Nigerian newspaper editor was doing the other day against 'the soulless efficiency' of Europe's industrial and technological civilization when the very thing my society needs may well be a little technical efficiency" ("*The Novelist as Teacher*" *Hopes and Impediments*, 43). Add to this the lament at the end of *The Trouble with Nigeria*, about Nigeria having lost the twentieth century and running the risk of losing the twenty-first as well.
31. In a fine passage written shortly before his death, Irving Howe expands on Jameson's notion when he defines utopianism as "a necessity of the moral imagination." He continues: "It doesn't necessarily entail a particular politics; it doesn't ensure wisdom in current affairs. What it does provide is a guiding principle, a belief or hope for the future, an understanding that nothing is more mistaken than the common notion that what exists today will continue to exist tomorrow. This kind of utopianism is really another way of appreciating the variety and surprise that history makes possible—possible, nothing more. It is a testimony to the resourcefulness that humanity now and then displays (together with other, far less attractive characteristics). It is a claim for the value of desire, the practicality of yearning—as against the deadliness of acquiescing in the given, simply because it is there" [Howe, 1993, 133].
32. The idea of *Things Fall Apart* as a tragedy in the classical sense was broached in an early essay of mine [Irele, 1965; see also Alastair Niven, 1990]. Jean Séverac discusses various responses to my classification of Achebe's novel as a tragedy [Séverac, 1997, 506-507].

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