

Okonkwo and the Storyteller:
Death, Accident, and Meaning in Achebe and Benjamin

Jonathan Greenberg
Asst. Professor, English
Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

To read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the light of Walter Benjamin's theoretical writings is to invite the charge of repeating on the level of discourse a colonialist gesture whose terrible consequences Achebe's own fiction makes all too clear.¹ Yet while some scholars, such as Anthonia Kalu, assert that understanding postcolonial literatures requires the development of a theoretical framework itself derived from the cultures of peoples victimized by imperialism, K. Anthony Appiah argues that such "nativism" (56) constitutes a nostalgia that, in its Rousseauian origins, is fundamentally Western (60). Appiah maintains that such a standard "seems to accord to African literature a deference that we do not accord the high-canonical works of European literature" because "we do not think [for example] that a feminist or marxian reading of Milton is merely an exercise in cultural imperialism" (65). Moreover, in the case of *Things Fall Apart*, the critic is dealing not with an authentic representative of a monolithic African culture, but rather with what has been called "a complex cultural hybrid that is the product not only of the Igbo cultural traditions [...] but also of the encounter between those traditions and the culture of the West" (Booker 67). One could even argue that the introduction of a critical lens *not* directly derived from Igbo traditions may, by forcing a reading against the grain, open new critical possibilities. Finally, because Benjamin's thought is distinctive for its analysis of a particular phase of modernity, and because the emergence of that modernity is central to Achebe's novel, Benjamin's thought, despite its European focus, might help us to discern

crucial tensions in Achebe's novel. At the same time, Achebe's novel, in its vivid particularity, might illumine the more shadowy corners of Benjamin's thought.

To be more specific, Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," examines the transition from oral to written narrative, a transition he elucidates with the distinction between what he calls "story" and "novel." This transition from the oral to the written is also central to Achebe's novel, and to his writing about literature more generally. Indeed, to put the argument of this essay succinctly, Achebe's novel can be seen as a portrait of Igbo culture precisely at the moment of transition from story to novel.² By this I don't mean merely the commonplace observation that the novel shows us a society in transition, nor that it combines elements of oral narrative practice with novelistic devices and structures—it deploys a European genre, the English language, and the medium of print. My claim is more specific: *Things Fall Apart*, I venture, offers us competing models of the relationship between narrative and meaning, or, better put, competing models of how narrative imposes meaning, models that Benjamin's essay makes explicit on a theoretical level. Thus the terms *death* and *accident* become crucial to this discussion: *death* because, as Benjamin and Achebe both recognize, it is only death, sometimes figurative but often literal, that in ending narrative, can confer meaning on life, or on *a* life; *accident* because accident is precisely that which refuses meaning, and thus, if narrative bestows meaning, then the representation of accident in narrative always threatens an interpretive paradox. I will enlarge on these premises further on, but first it will be useful to review some of Benjamin's key points and their applicability to Achebe's novel.

I.

Benjamin's discussion of storytelling, written in the late 1930s, begins with the observation that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (83). Benjamin attributes the decline of storytelling to the fact that "experience has fallen in value" (83-84), a fall that in turn results from the constitutive conditions of modernity: its new technologies and machineries, its forms of social and economic organization, its irrational yet cynical militarism: "[N]ever before has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power" (84). As storytelling has fallen in value, it has been replaced by a new, essentially modern, form of narrative, the novel, whose very emergence is "[t]he earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling" (87). The difference between story and novel is the difference between speech and writing, craft and art, voice and text, presence and absence. Thus while the novel is at heart a solitary, printed form, a story—even a published story read silently to oneself—belongs to "the realms of living speech" (87):

[T]races of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience.[...] Thus [Leskov's] tracks are frequently evident in his narratives, if not as those of the one who experienced it, then as those of the one who reports it. (92)

As the image of the handprints nicely illustrates, story will always retain a connection to the voice of the teller.

The orality of the story and the literacy of the novel also imply two different kinds of memory. Benjamin distinguishes between "the perpetuating *remembrance* of the

novelist as contrasted with the short-lived *reminiscences* of the storyteller” (98, my emphasis). Remembrance, he writes, “is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle” whereas reminiscence dwells on “*many* diffuse occurrences” (98). The prototype of the storyteller is thus Scheherazade of the *Thousand and One Nights* “who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop” (98).³ Thus even in its written form, story remains—to borrow a phrase from Italo Calvino—as much about “the promise of reading [...] the *incipit* of a book, the first sentences” (256), as it is about the particulars of the story itself. It is in this sense a life-giving, ever-renewing activity, always gesturing beyond itself: “It starts the web which all stories together form in the end” (Benjamin 98). In contrast, the novel would be, by implication, a self-contained artifact that seeks to efface all traces of its authorship, to make itself solid, impersonal and permanent. To invoke Joyce’s famous image, the author “remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork [...] paring his fingernails” (233). Whereas the storyteller leaves his handprints on the story, the novelist operates hands-free. This is indeed an image of the novel that we have come to associate with a central strain of modernist aesthetics and formalist criticism.

While such discursive distinctions have been enormously helpful in delineating different strains of narrative, and even different tendencies in the novel itself, they also can hypostatize the historical dimension of Benjamin’s argument, which is a Marxist one. For Benjamin explicitly posits the supercession of story by novel as the result of a transformation in social and economic structures. Story is a communal, often pre-capitalist mode—indeed one of Benjamin’s prototypical storytellers, which has direct bearing on *Things Fall Apart*, is “the resident tiller of the soil” (84-85), the man “who knows the local tales and traditions” (84). Because storytelling “is always the art of repeating stories” (91),

it makes no claims to the bourgeois individualist values of creativity, originality or genius—values Benjamin describes elsewhere as “outmoded concepts” (218). In fact, Benjamin quotes Leskov himself to attest that storytelling is “no liberal art, but a craft” (92). As a craft, it is passed down, learned, inherited within a stable and coherent society. In contrast, the novel is the predominant narrative form of print culture and capitalist individualism: “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns” (87). This bourgeois individualism shares very little with the communal activity of storytelling: “A man listening to a story is in the company of a storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader” (100). And thus, even as the novelist removes his fingerprints from his own work, he inscribes his own authority, his own authorship.

This distinction between story and novel is very similar to one that Achebe makes in his own critical writing. In “The Writer and His Community,” Achebe maintains that the transition from oral to literate culture is necessary to bring about the concept of authorship. Invoking a very Benjaminian image of narration as a social, communal activity, he remarks: “The story told by the fireside does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth. But the story composed by his spiritual descendent, the writer in his study ‘belongs’ to its composer” (*Hopes* 47). Because it lacks the materiality of a book, a story is inextricable from the moment of its telling, a moment which implies a physically present storyteller and audience, a specific community situated in time and space. But this fact of the book’s materiality, its existence as “a commodity” (47), “cannot by itself adequately account for the emergent notion of proprietorship” (47-48). For a story told to a

community performs a very different cultural *function* from a novel created and read in isolation. Not only is a book a commodity that becomes the physical property of its purchaser and the intellectual property of an individual author, its very existence is “rooted in the praxis of individualism in all its social and economic dimensions” (48). Traditional Igbo culture, Achebe claims, values the individual but subordinates him or her to the community. Achebe offers the example of *mbari*, a ritual re-enactment of creation, for which the Igbo create an “extravagant profusion” (48) of paintings and sculptures. The creators of these works are not, properly, considered to be the human beings who do the physical labor of bringing them into being, but rather the gods who commanded the ritual.⁴ Traditional Igbo culture, according to Achebe, not only lacks the ideas of individual authorship and intellectual property, it deliberately disavows them.

II.

In turning to *Things Fall Apart*, it is important to emphasize that Benjamin does not call for, nor does Achebe try to write, a communal narrative story that denies the modern conditions of its production and reception. Although both, especially Benjamin, have their elegiac tendencies, they both also recognize the printed nature of the medium and find value in the developments of modernity. Yet Achebe does of course extensively *represent* the oral aspects of pre-colonial Igbo culture, embedding in his novel many folk tales and proverbs. In fact it is a commonplace by now to mention that the novel presents not only the portrait of an individual but also the portrait of a village, and indeed a whole civilization.⁵ Achebe achieves this communal portrait in part by including description of a

full range of social activities, including various rituals, songs, and, most crucially for my purposes, scenes of storytelling.

For storytelling, as it appears in *Things Fall Apart*, is itself a kind of ritual, fully integrated into the communal life of the people. To use Benjamin's terms, then, Achebe presents (Igbo) story, but he presents it wholly *within* the boundaries of (his) novel. In other words, despite its inclusion of stories, *Things Fall Apart* as a whole belongs to the category of novel. While Achebe has rightly been credited for developing techniques through which he expands, complicates, or disturbs the European novel form, and while these techniques frequently can be seen as incorporations of African cultural practices, Achebe never attempts to pass himself or his narrator off as a mere "hearer" of the tale; to use Benjamin's figure, he never lets his handprints remain on the vessel.⁶ As B. Eugene McCarthy has noted, "the narrator's distance from his characters and his reluctance to intrude his views" constitutes an "important departure from strict oral procedure" (245); the narrator "is not a *griot*, or oral historian" (244). Indeed, the very gesture of writing about the Igbo past for a present-day audience (whether African or Euro-American) implies a historical rupture and forgetting that would quite simply make story in Benjamin's sense impossible. If Achebe's declared intention to "teach [his] readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (*Hopes* 45) is realized in the novel, then the narrative itself originates in a world that is already post-story, a world that already recognizes that the cultural totality and continuity suggested by "story" has been destroyed.

What Achebe does attempt, then, is not the creation of story in the guise of a novel but instead something that might seem surprisingly close to Benjamin's project, something

like a *theorizing* of story, a discussion and demonstration of the *function* of story within the Igbo culture. Appiah suggests that “Achebe is a fine example of someone who draws on the reserves of his native orature, but we misunderstand those uses if we do not see them in their multiple contexts” (71), and I will tentatively suggest here what some of those multiple contexts might be. Appiah very clearly delineates some of the problems of *audience* that arise in reading Achebe: how we define the imaginary or ideal reader, whether we take him or her to be Nigerian or Euro-American, might significantly alter both our interpretation and evaluation of the novel.⁷ But I want to make a different distinction—one between the function of orature, or story, *within the fictional world of the novel* and its value or function *within the context of the reception of the novel*. In short, for a contemporary reader, whether she be Nigerian, European, American, or anyone else, the inclusion of storytelling may have a realist, pedagogical or anthropological function⁸, showing the texture of life in a lost civilization; it may underscore wider themes of the novel or contribute to the narrative’s overall patterns and structures; indeed it may well take part in a kind of “nationalist historiography” (Begam 397) by which postcolonial literature makes a political gesture simply by taking control of the representation of its own past. However, for the Igbo—for the pre-capitalist, pre-colonial culture—the functions of story are entirely different. It is almost too obvious to point out that, whatever Achebe’s didactic aims may be, the *Igbo* surely have little desire to teach *us* about their rituals, or to restore recognition to their *own* culture, which, I hardly need to say, at the time in which the novel takes place had not yet been lost.

How, then, does story *function* within the novel? I want to answer this by pointing out three ways in which Achebe’s representation of storytelling corresponds with

Benjamin's theory. First, Achebe shows storytelling as a craft rather than a "liberal art." The novel offers a detailed scene of Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma, telling stories with her mother, Ekwefi—a process that takes place among all three of his wives and their daughters, and we can assume, among mothers and daughters throughout the village: "Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives' huts as each woman and her children told folk stories" (96). The scene in fact shows us Eznima *learning* how to tell stories according to a prescribed form. When the daughter interrupts her mother, Ekwefi urges patience, since Ezinma's question will soon be answered by the story itself. At another point, Ezinma astutely points out that her mother's story should include a song; her mother accepts this criticism, revealing the importance of adhering to the ritual forms. Finally, Ezinma attempts her own tale, and we see the halting, slightly confused speech of the inexpert teller trying to recall how exactly to begin the story in just the right way. In this scene, then, Achebe represents storytelling as precisely the kind of inherited craft that Benjamin describes, passed down within the daily rhythms of a communal life.

Second, Achebe illustrates Benjamin's insight into the distinction between an author and a teller, of the importance in "story" of the teller whose handprints cling to the vessel of the story. When Nwoye hears Ikemefuna tell stories he thinks: "Ikemefuna had an endless stock of folk tales. Even those which Nwoye knew already were told with a new freshness and the local flavor of a different clan" (34). Not only is storytelling again situated within communal life, but Achebe also here suggests the ways that stories take on the accidental marks of each teller who repeats them, the ways they change as they travel in space and time.⁹ In addition to the "resident tiller of the soil," Benjamin's other prototype

of the storyteller is “the trading seaman” (85), the man “who has come from afar” (85). When these two “archaic types” are mixed, Benjamin continues, an “artisan class” of storytellers emerges: “In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place” (85). Ikemefuna, although he has only come from a nearby village, thus shows the growth and change of the living story. Later in the novel, a more ominous tale reaches Okonkwo, the tale of the mysterious massacre of Abame. On hearing the story, Okonkwo’s uncle, Uchendu, remarks: “There is no story that is not true. [...] The world has no end and what is good among one people is an abomination with others” (141). In linking the truth of all stories to the infinitude of the world, Uchendu echoes Benjamin’s claim that each story “starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties onto the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown” (98). Story and world alike are unending, lacking the finitude of the printed text. (Ikemefuna’s stock of tales is also called “endless.”) Story remains open and self-perpetuating, gesturing beyond itself to an endless supply of sharable experience.

Third, and perhaps most significant, stories in *Things Fall Apart* also are carriers of a kind of “wisdom” or “counsel” that Benjamin sees as inherent in his concept of story.

When Uchendu first hears about the Abame massacre, he responds with a story:

Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. “You have done very well,” said Mother Kite to her daughter, “but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?” “It said nothing,” replied the young kite. “It just walked away.” “You must return the duckling,” said Mother Kite. “There is something ominous behind the silence.” And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. “What did the mother of this chick do?” asked the old kite. “It cried and raved and

cursed me,” said the young kite. “Then we can eat the chick,” said her mother. “There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.” (140)

The tale arises specifically for the purpose of offering wisdom. In fact, it offers wisdom *in the art of interpretation itself*; Mother Kite teaches her daughter how to “read” the omen of the mother duck’s silence. In this, Achebe again illustrates one of Benjamin’s central points about the difference between story and novel:

An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers. [...] [Every story] contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today “having counsel” is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. (86)

Counsel is only possible in a society in which experience is shared and sharable; in Benjamin’s view of modernity, the individual is so isolated, society so fragmented, that wisdom or counsel is not merely irrelevant, but actually impossible. But for the Igbo in *Things Fall Apart*, offering such counsel is the very impetus for storytelling. The story provides a way to assimilate new experience by connecting a new story to an old one, and thus to make sense of otherwise meaningless or enigmatic events.¹⁰

III.

It is precisely the loss of the wisdom that stories offer that Benjamin sees as the most significant casualty of the transition from story to novel. For if the story is characterized by counsel or practical wisdom, the novelist “is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others” (87). Benjamin holds up *Don Quixote* as a perfect example: “In the midst of life’s

fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom” (87-88). Instead of practical wisdom, the novel attempts to offer no less than the meaning of life. In making this point, Benjamin cites Lukacs’ famous idea of the novel as the genre of transcendental homelessness and offers his own gloss:

The meaning of life is really the center about which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life. Here “the meaning of life”—there “moral of the story”: with these slogans novel and story confront each other, and from them the totally different historical co-ordinates of these art forms may be discerned. (99)

The point is not that novels do not offer their own “morals” or meanings, but rather that novels mean *differently* from stories. Richard Wolin explains this idea well:

The striking absence of a self-evident meaning to life in the novel results in the novelist’s concerted attempt *to procure a meaning synthetically*.[...] It is because of the lack of a readily apparent meaning of life that the novel so often assumes the form of a search for meaning; whereas in the world of story, something as fundamental as “the meaning of life” is never openly thrown into doubt, the *problem* of meaning never needs to become explicitly thematized. (Wolin 222)

Novels and stories mean in diametrically opposed ways. A novel is *itself* a struggle for meaning, created in an age when meaning is missing but still sought.¹¹ A story, however, is set against the backdrop of a taken-for-granted meaning of life, and thus encapsulates a kind of self-evident, communicable wisdom.¹²

For this reason, too, story and novel treat death in different ways. “Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell” (94), claims Benjamin, and Peter Brooks

uses this claim to argue for the pre-eminence of endings in determining narrative meanings. “Benjamin,” Brooks asserts, “thus advances the ultimate argument for the necessary retrospectivity of narrative: that only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality” (Brooks 22). Moreover, it is important to discern that when Benjamin discusses the importance of death in the construction of narrative meaning, he explicitly contrasts novel to story. He quotes a line from the German writer Moritz Heimann, “A man who dies at the age of thirty-five is at every moment of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five,” an apothegm Benjamin takes to mean that:

A man [...] who died at thirty-five will appear to *remembrance* at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the “meaning” of his life is revealed only in his death. But the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom he derives “the meaning of life.” Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share the experience of death. [...] The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else’s fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger’s fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.

Because the novel gives us a finished life, a closed book, a completed narrative, it allows the satisfaction of meaning. But we know as novel-readers that this is precisely the satisfaction that our own lives can *never* give. The novel is thus a response to the chill of modernity, an age in which lives patently *lack* meaning. Thus despite its efforts to offer meaning—or, better put, *through* its efforts to offer meaning—the novel in the end only signifies the vicariousness of our reading experience. The novel’s synthetically procured

meaning (to use Wolin's phrase) does not resolve our own perplexity but rather indicates its persistence.¹³

This theorization of the relation of the novel to death we can now bring to bear on *Things Fall Apart*. Put most simply, a crucial question put before a reader is how to interpret Okonkwo's death, what meaning to assign to it. Richard Begam usefully suggests that Achebe offers not one but three "endings" to the novel, each of which suggests a different point of view on the death and a different kind of interpretation. First is a "tragic" or "heroic" ending (399), seen from an African point of view, in which Okonkwo's demise is identified with that of his people; second, an "ironized" (401) ending from the point of view of the British District Commissioner who sees in the death a valuable example of how to pacify resistant natives; third a "metahistorical" (398) revision of the narrative that occurs not in *Things Fall Apart*, but in the "sequel" *No Longer at Ease*, from the point of view of Okonkwo's grandson, who suggests a narrative of his grandfather's death that conforms to a more modern notion of tragedy derived from English writers such as Auden, Greene, and Waugh. For Begam, depending on the point at which the narrative is "closed," and from whose point of view it is closed, the meaning will change; Achebe, he argues, masterfully presents these endings as three competing meanings rather than privileging a single one (406).

Begam's threefold reading valuably clarifies numerous interpretive ambiguities, and in fact draws on an idea of death as meaning-giving not far from Benjamin's. Yet even this enumeration of three readings is hardly complete. To begin, the District Commissioner's perspective is clearly *deprivileged*, indeed it is implicitly mocked, and cannot stand as an equal to the other two interpretive possibilities. I will say more about the District

Commissioner in a bit, but for now, the more important point is that even within the first, “African” point of view, a profound ambiguity remains. It is true that Okonkwo’s death can be taken as the heroic death of a warrior identified with his people, and a symbol of the tragic demise of a great people. Yet it is equally true that he is seen by his own people to have died in shame. Because he takes his own life, he has committed an abomination against the Earth and cannot be buried by his own clansmen (*Things* 207).¹⁴ The “proper” African view would see the death not as heroic, as Begam argues, but as shameful; to see it as heroic is already to impose, retrospectively, a narrative form. Obierika’s final indignant words to District Commissioner retain a genuine ambiguity even *within* an Igbo perspective, recognizing at once the heroism and the disgrace of Okonkwo’s suicide: “That man was one of the greatest in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog” (208).

IV.

There is, however, an even more profound ambiguity in the meaning of Okonkwo’s death. For an obvious Sophoclean irony resides in the fact that Okonkwo, as a man of action, dedicates his life to avoiding the shameful death that his father suffered, yet ultimately ends in a similar disgrace. Like Sophocles’ Oedipus, his effort to avoid a particular fate leads him into—indeed *constitutes the very fulfillment of*—that very fate. And this irony, that his death should so resemble that which he ardently sought to avoid, can itself be looked at in two incompatible ways. It can be seen *as* fate, as something pre-determined (by gods, by his unconscious, by the dialectical progression of History), or as mere *accident*; it may be seen as inescapable, and hence meaningful, or simply as bad luck, and hence meaningless.

This question about the very *possibility* of accident is one that *Things Fall Apart* returns to time and again.

One way to resolve this question might be to understand what Jude Chudi Okpala calls “Igbo metaphysics,” and specifically the concept of the *chi*, or personal god. Early on, the novel raises the issue of whether Okonkwo is lucky. At one point Okonkwo fails to demonstrate humility and the elders react angrily:

The oldest man present said that those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. [...] But it was not really true that Okonkwo’s palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself. Anyone who knew his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky. If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo. At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. (27)

The concept of *chi* appears to be invoked here to eliminate the possibility of accident.

Okonkwo, the narrator tells us authoritatively, is not lucky but strong; he creates his luck.

Good fortune is a result of a good personal god.

Yet understanding the Igbo concept of *chi* does not stabilize interpretation nearly as much as it might promise to. Achebe himself writes that, for the Igbo, “there is a fundamental justice in the universe and nothing so terrible can happen to a man for which he is not somehow responsible” (165), thus reinforcing the notion that character, morality, and fortune neatly align. Yet in the same essay Achebe also writes that “when we hear that a man has a bad *chi* [...] we are talking about his fortune rather than his character. [...] *Chi* is therefore more concerned with success or failure than with righteousness and wickedness” (166). This statement seems to take an opposing view, linking the actions of

one's *chi* not to any cosmic justice but instead to mere accident or whim. Thus Achebe in his essay offers the same proverb that appears in the novel, but with a twist worthy of Kafka: "[T]he Igbo believe that when a man says yes his *chi* will also agree; but not always" (166). Those final three words allow just enough wiggle room to keep interpretation open. Hence, two critics can both invoke the idea of *chi* for diametrically opposed readings. Okpala argues that Okonkwo's bad *chi* enforces a kind of "spiritual justice" (561) and suggests that Okonkwo dies in shame because he "excised himself from [his] complex community, from the interconnection of things, to pursue his aggrandized individual ego" (563). In contrast, Emeka Nwabueze sees the workings of Okonkwo's *chi* as arbitrary and hence exculpatory; he attributes Okonkwo's fall not to moral shortcomings but to "Okonkwo's paternal imago and the machinations of capricious fate" (168).¹⁵ By calling fate "capricious," Nwabueze reinstates the possibility of accident in the world of the Igbo.

If analyzing the concept of *chi* fails to resolve interpretive ambiguity, locating the novel within the generic tradition of tragedy, as many readers have attempted to do, is no more help. For while the novel can, as mentioned, be read as a kind of Sophoclean tragedy, even this generic category can be ambivalent.¹⁶ For as Naomi Conn Liebler has noted, the common conception of the tragic hero whose flaw or failing results in his demise is a misinterpretation of both Aristotle's *Poetics* and of the workings of Athenian drama. Liebler comments that Aristotle's idea of *hamartia*, often translated as "flaw," is better translated "missing the mark," or "misrecognition," and that the very concept of flaw amounts to a moralization of tragedy tantamount to blaming the victim (20-22; 40-44). Indeed, this misreading originated with Renaissance and neoclassical theorists who,

reading Aristotle through Horace, sought to impose a morality onto the demise of the hero (44). Thus naming *Things Fall Apart* as tragedy leaves open the questions of whether one uses an ancient or neoclassical understanding of the genre.

It is important to emphasize that this tension between accident and meaning exists on two separate levels. On the one hand, this is a problem internal to the Igbo culture, a question of how the Igbo interpret their own world, including their own fortune or misfortune. On the other, it is a problem in the contemporary reader's interpretation of Achebe's novel as a whole. For, as I suggested outset, the very idea of accident within narrative contains a latent paradox. If a narrative event is *merely* accidental then its position in the narrative can only suggest the imperfect correlation of narrative and meaning. A narrated accident, especially but by no means exclusively when it exists in a work of fiction, always *wants* its status as accident to be revoked, it always asks for a more complete assimilation into the structure of narrative. In other words, it wants interpretation. Within the world of the Igbo, then, one sort of ambiguity exists, that of whether to see the incidents of the narrative as a meaningful events or mere accidents; in the fictional world of the novel as a whole, additional ambiguities—those that Begam discerns among precolonial Igbo, British, and (future) colonial Igbo—come into play; and finally, in our reading of the novel, still further ambiguities arise, because, approaching Okonkwo's story as a novel, we are heavily biased toward making meaning of every detail for ourselves, or assuming that Achebe has attempted to do so. These ambiguities, moreover, tend to reinforce each other: the thematization of the tension between accident and narrative for the Igbo provides a kind of illustration of the problem that the reader encounters, while that the reader's position of being caught between meaning and non-

meaning helps her to experience the crisis of meaning that arises when things fall apart within the fictional world.

On further inspection, the novel proves rife with this tension between accident and meaning. We find it in the novel's many oracles, prophecies, and predictions. Michael Wood's study of oracles, *The Road to Delphi*, suggests that oracles (like deaths for Benjamin and Brooks) are *narrative* phenomena. Oracular statements initiate a story and create expectations; and their meaning only becomes clear when the story is complete. Indeed, in narrative an oracle or prophesy functions something like the gun in Chekhov's famous quip – if you see it in the first act, you can bet that it will be fired in the third.

Although *Things Fall Apart* is not driven by a single oracle in the way that *Oedipus* or *Macbeth* is, it still offers multiple examples of omens and warnings that create narrative expectation—both for characters and readers. When Okonkwo beats his youngest wife during the Week of Peace he is upbraided by the priest of the earth goddess: “The evil you have done can ruin our whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we shall all perish” (30). While we should note the hint of doubt—the goddess *may* refuse to give us her increase—the priest nonetheless suggests a cosmic order in which transgressions bring punishment in the form of bad fortune. In another crucial moment, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves decrees that Ikemefuna be killed and Ezeudu warns Okonkwo not to participate in the killing. Yet Okonkwo still ends up striking the fatal blow, and it is tempting, retrospectively, to see his disobedience as the source of his future demise.

As Wood points out, however, oracles are never completely clear; if they were, they wouldn't make for very interesting stories. (If the oracle doesn't look equivocal, its

apparent clarity usually proves to be a trap.) Thus Okonkwo and Obierika can debate the wisdom of Okonkwo's action, offering competing interpretations of the oracle's words, and the Earth goddess's will. Obierika sees Okonkwo's actions as a defiance of the oracle that will invite devastation, while Okonkwo, reading more literally, argues that he has in fact carried out the oracle's command. Once again, critical debate—between those who see Okonkwo's participation in the killing as a moral error that brings doom, and those who see it as merely bad luck—only recapitulates an ambiguity inherent in the text.¹⁷ I would argue that the text licenses both readings, and that the discussion between Okonkwo and Obierika offers a parallel to the reader's own inner debate on the meaning of the oracle and of the killing within the larger narrative.

For it is never made explicit whether Okonkwo is punished for this transgression. Later, when Okonkwo shoots Ezeudu's son, the killing clearly seems to be an accident, and therefore Okonkwo is given a lesser punishment: "It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent" (124). Yet although it is "inadvertent," the crime is still punished. To Obierika, this seems unjust: "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?" (125). To Obierika, then, Igbo justice does not seem to adequately account for the possibility of accident.

Moreover, there remains a possibility that the "accident" of killing Ezeudu's son, is itself a fatal or necessary consequence of Okonkwo's earlier transgression. Just before the

killing, Okonkwo remembers Ezeudu's warning against assisting in the killing of Ikemefuna and "a cold shiver [runs] down his back" (121). Although no causal connection is ever explicitly articulated, it remains a possibility—not only for characters *in* the novel, who might see divine will in Okonkwo's bad luck, but also for readers *of* the novel, who might see poetic or tragic or ironic justice imposed by Achebe. Indeed, the exile that follows from the killing sets in motion the last third of the novel, in which the village of Umuofia is colonized by British missionaries. When Okonkwo returns, his clansmen have lost their warlike spirit, and he wonders whether the British would have made such inroads had he not been exiled. By this logic (by no means the only logic available to the reader), the very success of British imperialism in Umuofia can be traced to Okonkwo's transgressions against the earth goddess.

V.

What I am arguing is that *Things Fall Apart*, by raising the problem of accident, invites the reader to question the process by which individuals and cultures make meaning through narrative. Let me recall once more Benjamin's opposition between "the moral of the story" and "the meaning of life." A culture in which story predominates is one whose stories can offer morals or wisdom precisely because the culture has no need to seek the meaning of life. In contrast, the modern culture in which the novel emerges and flourishes is perpetually perplexed; it reads novels for the temporary warmth of the false totality that they provide. Now it is tempting to suggest that a "traditional" culture, which we might call "story culture," will see a particular event as the will of God or gods, whereas a modern one will see the same event as cosmic accident; but this, I think, puts things too

simply. Achebe's novel shows us that a traditional, oral storytelling culture such as the Igbo experiences its own uncertainty about the meaning of events, and his satiric representation of Christianity reminds us that contemporary Western culture has its own superstitions and beliefs in higher powers.¹⁸ But for traditional culture, as we see it in Benjamin's somewhat nostalgic discussion, and even in Achebe's less nostalgic reconstruction, the bigger questions have dependable answers. And these answers will at least allow the culture to make meaning of an accident *retrospectively*, to turn the accident into something meaningful, a sign. A culture of story already possesses a narrative to which the details merely need to be assimilated; in a culture of novel, it is the narrative itself that has to be made and remade. Thus again my claim that while *Things Fall Apart* shows us a world governed by the values of story, the novel itself is, it sounds too obvious to say, a novel. While the pre-modern Igbo world can use stories to transmit wisdom and share experiences, the novel *Things Fall Apart* can only warm our shivering lives with the promise of making meaning out of Okonkwo's death.

I want to push this claim one step further, in fact, by suggesting that the novel itself gives us reason to assert that its own story is the story of *the very moment of transition from story to novel*. The point is not simply that it is about the arrival of forces of modernization in the form of British missionaries, but that it narrates the emergence of a need for an explanation of the meaning of life. In *Things Fall Apart*, stories cease to yield their morals, and novels like *Things Fall Apart* become necessary. Achebe shows the beginning of the end of the Igbo culture by showing the deterioration of the Igbo narrative system, and the ways in which their beliefs in the meanings of events are tested and changed. To be sure, before the arrival of the British, Achebe shows the reader many moments in which

misfortune causes characters to question their belief system. But this doubt only reaches a point of crisis (less for Okonkwo than for his clansmen) when white men set up their church. In fact Part Three of the novel consists of a series of tests as to whether the Igbo gods will protect their people, whether they will punish the transgressions of the converts, who commit unthinkable acts—Okoli’s killing of a sacred python, Enoch’s unmasking of an ancestral spirit—so transgressive that no code of punishment even exists for them. At times, such as the sudden death of Okoli, the gods do seem to take action, and faith in them is temporarily restored, but at other times they do not, such as when they fail to kill the African Christian Mr. Kiaga when he takes in twin children who had been left to die.¹⁹ Less and less frequently do beginnings (warnings, omens, prohibitions) lead to the expected endings (revenge, punishment). What results is a glimpse of a world in which an overall narrative coherence is obliterated.²⁰

I will conclude with one brief point. If *Things Fall Apart* shows us the transition from story to novel, it even goes further, and gestures at a third “form of communication” that Benjamin discusses—what he calls “information.” Information, which Benjamin links to journalism, opposes story because of its emphasis on verifiability. Information should be true, and should prove its truth. Moreover, information explains itself: “No event any longer comes to us without being already shot through with explanation.” This ready-made explanation that accompanies the narrating of events destroys the “amplitude” or resonant suggestiveness of a story or parable. Thus “the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new” (90). Achebe, I suggest, gives us precisely a picture of Benjaminian information in the brutal ironies of the novel’s final paragraphs. After the British District Commissioner orders his African messenger to take down the hanged

corpse of Okonkwo, the narrative shifts, for the first time, to his point-of-view as he contemplates a book he is planning to write. Achebe's novel ends with his thoughts:²¹

As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (208-09)

The novel the reader has just completed, the story of Okonkwo's life, will be reduced to a single paragraph in a book that aims to perpetuate the imperialist-missionary work whose horrific effects the reader has just witnessed. This promised reinscription will erase not only Okonkwo's life but in a sense his entire culture, and the Commissioner's stringency as an editor, we can gather, reflects his general principles of governance. That such words as *pacification* and *primitive* should be in the title of the book only adds a final insult to these injuries. Of course, it should be remembered that this book is *not* the story we have from Achebe; Achebe's novel is in fact a recovery of Okonkwo's story and of Umuofia's. But it does suggest that Achebe's novel, in representing Benjamin's concept of story and showing its end, also, despite its efforts at preserving history, recognizes the fragility of narrative meaning: it recognizes how quickly the meaning of a life, however enigmatic, can be reduced to a piece of information.

¹ In what follows, I leave aside the obvious rebuttal that literary critics after Foucault, in their desire to emphasize the importance of discourse, often too easily conflate symbolic with real violence.

² This of course does not mean that oral or folk culture ceases to exist; both in traditional forms and in popular subcultures, oral culture is everywhere today. What changes is the position of oral culture in an overall social formation, that is, the way in which oral forms, especially "story," operate. In the same way

that Fredric Jameson has argued that even the most radical avant-garde can lose its political power when resituated in a new context of reception (abstract expressionists decorating corporate lobbies), so a story told by Igbo to their families serves a different function to a story embedded in a twentieth-century novel.

³ The classical epic, according to Benjamin, combines both of these types of memory.

⁴ Indeed, according to Achebe, if an individual maker of one such artwork were to assume credit for making it, he would fear that he has invited the real maker, the god, to kill him.

⁵ One of Achebe's oft-stated (and oft-cited) aims in writing this novel was to remind contemporary Africans of the existence of a pre-colonial civilization that Europeans writing about Africa had ignored: "The nationalist movement in British West Africa after the Second World War brought about a mental revolution which began to reconcile us to ourselves. It suddenly seemed that we might too have a story to tell. [...] At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa [...] and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned" (*Hopes* 38).

⁶ The degree to which the novel conforms to the model of an oral "text" has been the subject of much debate. McCarthy discusses various kinds of rhythm as a gesture toward the oral, including the practice that Walter Ong described as "backlooping" (245); Booker cites arguments by Obiechina for the importance of the embedding of oral tales in the novel, and by JanMohamed for the novel as a synthesis of oral and written practices (Booker 67). Certainly one crucial element in this debate is the understanding of voice and point-of-view, which are not wholly consistent in the novel. The narrator sometimes takes a communal point of view, describing and evaluating events from the perspective of the Igbo community, while at other times—such as when he glosses Igbo terms and practices—sounds closer to an author-figure explaining things to a Western or modern readership.

⁷ Because the novel is already a historical novel, set well before Achebe's birth and after both colonization and the beginnings of decolonization, Achebe's inclusion of anthropological or ethnographic "data" may not necessarily indicate a Euro-American audience; a Nigerian audience might equally be ignorant of details of its own past—hence Achebe's desire to teach his own people about their past. Second, Appiah notes a double standard in the reading of Achebe versus, say, Thomas Hardy, in whose novels the inclusion of local detail is regarded as an essential narrative component rather than mere travelogue. Third, what looks like ethnography in Achebe may not be ethnography at all: "The provision, in traditional narrations, of information already known to the hearer does not reflect a view of the hearer as alien. Otherwise, oral narrations would not consist of twice-told tales" (71). Recognition of the familiar, in other words, hearing the old formulas, can be one of the functions and pleasures of storytelling. (Appiah 65-72).

⁸ Gikandi, among others, discusses the temptations and dangers of reducing African literature to anthropological data. Such a reduction tends to devalue the formal artistry of the text.

⁹ For a related discussion of stories as objects that travel in space as well as time, see Greenberg.

¹⁰ Even more frequent in *Things Fall Apart* than full-blown stories are proverbs; the novel offers Igbo proverbs in virtually every chapter, including a proverb that communicates the importance to the Igbo of proverbs themselves: "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (7). Proverbs, in other words,

permeate Igbo culture, and lubricate social interactions. Proverbs are also closely related to storytelling, a connection, once again, that Benjamin explains: “A proverb is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall” (108). The proverb functions almost as a shorthand for the story; and many of the Igbo proverbs cited in *Things Fall Apart* include the same sort of talking animals that characterize the folk tales. It is also worth mentioning that part of what gives Benjamin’s writing its old-fashioned charm is own linguistic effort to invoke the vanishing world of “story” by offering its insights in pithy metaphorical generalizations that suggest the very wisdom of proverbs that Benjamin sees as on the edge of extinction. For example: “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” (91).

¹¹ Wolin enlarges on this point with a discussion of Benjamin’s essay, “The Image of Proust,” in which Benjamin claims that Proust’s fiction puts into starkest terms the contrast between life and art, that it makes wholly explicit the dire necessity of the novelist, working through memory and narrative, to “invest[] the events of life with the aura of significance they lacked in mere life” (Wolin 233). (One could make the same claim about psychoanalysis, whose efficacy rests on the joint ability of patient and analyst to shape experience into a meaningful narrative.) The storyteller on the other hand “merely takes it upon himself to describe events as they happen, [...] convinced that their significance will shine through on their own” (Wolin 223). Thus Benjamin’s emphasis on “the totally different historical co-ordinates” of story and novel.

¹² Jeyifo writes: In “[t]he first part of the novel [...] Achebe describes the precolonial, precapitalist African village society in a manner so totalized it would meet Lukacs’s rigorous standards” (116). JanMohammed reads the novel in relation to Lukacs’s idea of realism.

¹³ In contrast, story embeds death into its narrative with a rhythmic regularity.

¹⁴ Achebe, in an essay, suggests that the suicide is indeed a shameful act: “In Okonkwo’s world suicide is a monumental issue between an individual, on the one hand, and, on the other, society and all its divinities including titular gods and ancestors—indeed the entire cosmos. People who commit suicide put themselves beyond every conceivable pale” (“Teaching” 23). Nwabueze reads the suicide “dualistically,” suggesting it can be regarded as either catastrophic or heroic, but concludes his essay with a strong endorsement of the “heroic” reading. (172)

¹⁵ Nwabueze’s invocation of Freud here is interesting but problematic. For psychoanalysis too, as its reliance on the Oedipal myth makes evident, can either support or contradict an idea of fate. On the one hand, it locates fate internally as the unconscious that drives us to perform those very actions which we believe we are avoiding, while on the other it naturalizes the supernatural when it relocates the agency of fate from gods to the unconscious. Moreover, both Okpala and Nwabueze seem to me to conflate the statements of the narrator—which seem to often slide into free indirect discourse, giving either a character’s or the community’s judgments—with the judgments of the author. The narrator in fact tells us *both* that Okonkwo is a victim of bad fortune and that he is a victim of his own moral failures.

¹⁶ The relevance of Greek tragedy to *Things Fall Apart* has been discussed by Begam and Moses, among others. Begam cites nine books or articles that address the topic.

¹⁷ Obiechina attempts to stabilize the text, claiming that Achebe “leaves no ambiguities or ethical fluidities in matters requiring definite and precise judgment” (33), and that although he might “justif[y]” the clan’s killing of the boy, “he condemns Okonkwo’s participation” (35). Nwabueze, in contrast, emphasizes Okonkwo’s benevolent motives in accompanying Ikemefuna, his efforts to avoid direct participation, and the role of accident (“capricious fate”) in the events that lead to Okonkwo’s slaying of his adopted son.

¹⁸ Achebe talks about receiving a letter from an American high school student “happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe” while remaining “unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions” (*Hopes* 2). For an excellent discussion of Achebe’s analysis of the ideological advantages that Christianity allows the British missionaries, see Moses.

¹⁹ Okpala discusses Okoli’s killing of the python and subsequent death, and takes this as evidence that within the fictional world of *Things Fall Apart*, a kind of “spiritual justice” does hold. As mentioned, I think Okpala too easily confuses the narrative point-of-view, which in this case is that of the Igbo community in general, with statements that carry the weight of the author’s authority. Moreover, although the Igbo belief system seems to hold in this case, in other cases, such as Kiaga’s taking in of twins, it does not.

²⁰ Thus, on every level, from the smallest incident to Okonkwo’s life to the fate of the Igbo society and then indeed to the fate of Africa itself during the era of European conquest, *Things Fall Apart* invites the reader to ask questions of accident, narrative, and meaning. Such a questioning ultimately leads to the broadest questions of whether indeed patterns of colonial conquest were necessary or accidental, whether or not history has its own necessary logic. The very way in which we view history—our own, others’, the history of nations and cultures—becomes open for debate; we can look on the past as a closed book, in which small decisions would matter little in the course of great events, or an open one, in which myriad alternative possibilities can be imagined.

²¹ McCarthy points out that the arrival of the District Commissioner brings about a shift not only in narrative point-of-view but in narrative language, which abandons the rhythms and oral devices such as Ongian “backlooping” that characterize most of the novel. Indeed, the Commissioner himself expresses scorn for the language patterns of the Igbo and their “love of superfluous words” (McCarthy 255).

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- _____. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975.
- _____. "Teaching *Things Fall Apart*." Lindfors, 20-24.
- _____. *Things Fall Apart*. 1959. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.
- Begam, Richard. "Achebe's Sense of an Ending: History and Tragedy in *Things Fall Apart*." *Studies in the Novel* 29.3 (1997): 396-412.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, 1968.
- Booker, M. Keith. *The African Novel in English: An Introduction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984.
- Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler...* Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt, 1979.
- Gikandi, Simon. "Chinua Achebe and the Signs of the Times." In Lindfors, 25-30.
- Greenberg, Jonathan. "'The Base Indian' or 'The Base Judean'?: Othello and the Metaphor of the Palimpsest in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*." *Modern Language Studies* 29.2 (1999): 93-107.
- Jefiyo, Biodun. "The Problem of Realism in *Things Fall Apart*: A Marxist Exegesis." In Lindfors, 112-117.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Kalu, Anthonia. "African Literature and the Traditional Arts: Speaking Art, Molding Theory." *Research in African Literature* 31.4 (2000): 48-62.
- Lindfors, Bernth, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991.
- Liebler, Naomi Conn. *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

-
- McCarthy, B. Eugene. "Rhythm and Narrative Method in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 18.3 (1985): 243-256.
- Moses, Michael Valdez. *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995.
- Nwabueze, Emeka. "Theoretical Construction and Constructive Theorizing on the Execution of Ikemefuna in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Study in Critical Dualism." *Research in African Literatures* 31.2 (2000): 163-173.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. "Following the Author in *Things Fall Apart*." In Lindfors, 31-37.
- Okpala, Jude Chudi. "Igbo Metaphysics in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *Callaloo* 25.2 (2002): 559-566.
- Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982.
- Wood, Michael. *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2003.