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Chasms and Silences: For Chinua Achebe

RHONDA COBHAM-SANDER

Achebe valued the power of silence. His work insists that seemingly unbridgeable chasms in a text or a culture alert us to possibilities beyond our grasp. Like the Caribbean novelist Wilson Harris, Achebe understood that such chasms leave us space to imagine how "eclipsed bridges and potential bridges exist between divorced or separated or closed orders and worlds, bridges that are sometimes precarious, never absolute, but which . . . engender a profound awareness of the numinous solidity of space, inner space/outer space, space as the womb of simultaneous densities and transparencies in the language of originality" (Harris 239).

When I first wrote about *Things Fall Apart*, I argued that Achebe's silences finessed moments where the competing literary expectations of British anthropologists and Western romance readers intersected with a new Nigerian elite's modernist aspirations, as well as its nostalgia for those unnamed *things*, whose existence no one had thought to articulate until they fell apart. For examples of this architecture and process, I focused on the novel's strategic silences around gender issues. However, *Things Fall Apart* contains other moments where silence registers possibilities beyond representation. Okonkwo brings us to the brink of one such chasm when he contemplates his son Nwoye's defection to join the Christians:

> Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. (153)

The novel does not counter this haunting image of cultural annihilation, and Okonkwo's ignominious death seems to realize his worst fears. Yet the fact that a Christianized author orchestrates such anxieties suggests that ideological bridges a previous generation could not have foreseen already had begun to crisscross the chasm Okonkwo feared would engulf his memory.

Conversely, in delineating Nwoye's consciousness the novel acknowledges Christianity's potential, even though in *No Longer at Ease* that potential never materializes. The new religion's poetry unearths memories of unnamed twins and missing sacrificial vic-

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tims who, like the spirits crowding around Okonkwo's ancestral shrine, waited "in vain for worship and sacrifice and [found] nothing but ashes." The novel never really identifies what the return of those repressed bodies portends. Nevertheless, their absent presences stir up desires in Nwoye beyond mere oedipal resistance or a hankering after modernity. They intimate unnamed possibilities "felt in the marrow" (147).

For Achebe, too, aporia remained. In "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," he comments on his Christian father's relationship—cordial and tolerant—with an unreconstructed pagan relative. After recounting his father's description of a dream in which this relative engages Achebe *père* in conversation about a modern zinc roof, Achebe *fils* reflects:

> There was something between those two that I find deep, moving and perplexing. And of those two generations—defectors and loyalists alike—there was something I have not been able to fathom. That was why the middle story in the Okonkwo trilogy as I originally projected it never got written. I had suddenly become aware that in my gallery of ancestral heroes there is an empty place from which an unknown personage seems to have departed. (*Hopes* 33)

As Achebe tells it, neither man sees the other in terms of cultural betrayal. Moreover, the uncle, whose praise name Udo Osinyi means "Udo who cooks more than the whole people can eat," seems rather taken with the possibilities for ostentatious display that modern zinc roofing offers (32). Nor can we be sure which of the two men Achebe sees as "defector" and which as "loyalist." The bridges thrown across generational chasms in Achebe's first novel can neither reconcile these cultural positions nor assign them to opposing camps. A Christian father capable of amiable chitchat with a pagan traditionalist about zinc roofing remains beyond representation.[1]

In *There Was a Country*, Achebe's final memoir, all these ghosts come crowding back, jostling one another for attention until their "densities and transparencies" take on a "numinous solidity" (Harris 239). Yet, even as Achebe launches his exposé, which he implies will tell all, he pauses to invoke and embody silence's value: "Mother was neither talkative nor timid but seemed to exist on several planes—often quietly escaping into the casements of her mind, where she engaged in deep, reflective thought. It was from her that I learned to appreciate the power and solace in silence" (9). As Achebe's halting, partial account of the Nigerian civil war and the failure of the Biafran state unfolds, his mother's silence takes on proverbial significance, framing without naming the issues at stake in his decision to break his personal silence about his involvement in the secessionist struggle and its effect on his family, friendships, and professional alliances.[2]

To gauge the intractability of Achebe's reticence, one has only to compare *There Was a Country* with Wole Soyinka's parallel memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. Soyinka prides himself on having "crammed [his] lines" as a messenger between the Biafran rebels and the federal forces so successfully that decades later he can still confound revisionist accounts by delivering those lines verbatim (132). Achebe, by contrast, dwells on how often, even as an emissary of the Biafran state, he did not understand what was happening and how unfathomable the changes in his personal status seemed: from a respected Nigerian broadcaster, living in affluent Lagos suburbia, to a stateless refugee, retreating into the Biafran bush. Observing his unraveling, we begin to understand why as a writer he finds both solace and power in silence.

Two anecdotes in Achebe's memoir illuminate this paradox. One recounts how the Citadel, the publishing house Achebe and the poet Christopher Okigbo established in Biafra, suppressed a manuscript it had received from an army major involved in the coup that killed Nigeria's president and precipitated

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civil war. Achebe recalls that he doubted the manuscript's veracity and was dismayed by its cavalier attitude toward assassination, while Okigbo pronounced it "lyrical." The account does not say how that debate ended, reporting only that "the manuscript seems to have disappeared." Achebe claims to regret not having published the major's memoir, since if he had "at least a version of what happened, however flawed . . . would be available for debate," yet he makes no attempt to summarize its contents (179). Instead, he leaves it to the reader to fill in the blanks, to imagine what about the war this missing memoir, characterized as both lyrical and a lie, might have clarified for him and us.

Initially, the second anecdote, describing the Citadel's involvement in publishing a children's book, reverses the silencing the first enacts. Working from John Iroaganachi's folktale about how the dog became domesticated, Achebe and Okigbo created a fable, called *How the Leopard Got Its Claws*, "that challenged the very essence of the Nigerian federation's philosophy" (185). After the war a Scandinavian press published the story with illustrations by the Norwegian artist Per Christiansen. However, Achebe compresses this time frame, placing the account of the book's publication just before the description of how the Citadel was bombed to rubble.[3] Achebe attributes his decision "to [walk] away from the site and from publishing forever" to this near-death experience (185).

Achebe's rationale for withdrawing from the arena of wartime propaganda leaves unsaid what his memoir's uncertain chronology cannot mask: that the Citadel attack and its aftermath may have helped propel Okigbo into battle, where he was killed almost instantaneously. The juxtaposed stories about the children's book and the Citadel's bombing, like the differing reactions to the major's unpublished memoir, expose unresolved tensions in the two writers' responses to responsibility and risk. "Don't let him die," Achebe's son pleads when news of his favorite uncle's death reaches him (184). Achebe's work circles back repeatedly to that impossible charge and its unanswerable question: whether he did in fact fail in his duty to his comrade, whether his caution might have left the more impulsive Okigbo more vulnerable. The poet's obliterated body exposes the relational chasms that destroyed the country that was: the unified Nigerian nation, which initially signified unlimited aspiration for Achebe's golden generation, as well as the doomed and quixotic but no less precious homeland that secessionist Biafra came to represent.

Achebe's completed artistic trajectory tempts us toward hagiography. Achebe was neither saint nor prophet, however, for writers can never anticipate all the possible readings their works conceal. He used silence strategically in his celebrated first novel to reconcile conflicting ideological currents in the discourse of his historical moment, but his oeuvre leaves other chasms unbridged. Although he did not know how to cross them, Achebe was too scrupulous to deny their existence. Even as they continue to exceed articulation, Achebe's silences allow us, with Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*, to intuit "something felt in the marrow," which future readers eventually may retrieve (147).

Notes

1. The homology between Achebe's act of paternal recall and Lacan's account of Freud's reference to a man who encountered his father in a dream and "did not know that he was dead" is uncanny (Lacan 801–02). In *Reading Lacan*, Jane Gallop offers many compelling responses to the question of which father or which son is dead or displaced in Lacan's account. From the perspective of Achebe's narrative, what seems most striking is the way that Lacan and Achebe invoke Freud and Achebe *père*, respectively, as putative narrators only to displace their narrative authority. In the end Lacan's dreamer and Achebe's traditionalist ancestor have more substance than either of the narrating father figures who recall them into the text.

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2. The memoir's fragmented structure and the choppiness of its writing, as compared with the prose of the earlier essays in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, suggest that sections of the text were retrieved from Achebe's dictated notes or from an unfinished manuscript. That possibility shapes my reading of the memoir as an incomplete attempt to come to terms with what must have remained for Achebe and many others an unresolved trauma.

3. For a full account of the book's publishing history, see Winter.

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"Restraint . . . My Style": Deliberative and Mournful

UZOMA ESONWANNE

. . . I am a protest writer, with restraint.
—Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe's literary ideology is unambiguous: literary production in Africa must be committed, must speak, must protest. Not for him *l'art pour l'art*. Declaring in *There Was a Country* (2012) that writing is morally obliged to ally itself with the "powerless," Achebe calls himself "a protest writer, with restraint" (58). He had said this in an interview in 1969: responding to the notion that he showed too much restraint to be a protest writer, he said, ". . . I *am* a protest writer. Restraint—well, that's my style, you see" ("Group Interview" 246–47). So if he repeated it, he must have believed that the tone of his prose was consistently restrained. According to the *Compact Oxford Thesaurus*, *restraint* means "constraint," "restriction," "moderation," "judiciousness," "understatedness," and "subtlety." But since Achebe's theory of art derives from *mbari*, "a festival of life" (Cole xv), I suggest that for him *restraint* meant "measured." But what, literally, could a consistently measured style be? Could it be so stable that it is the same across multiple texts?

To say Achebe's prose is measured, then, is to claim that all the elements of his writing are carefully selected and calibrated for rhetorical effectiveness. Few readers of Achebe's fiction, particularly *Arrow of God* (1964), would contest this. But Achebe seems to be saying that his style in his nonfiction writing is consistently measured as well. Along with *mbari*, his theory of art is also indebted to

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