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.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Doubleday, 1989. Print.

———. *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. New York: Penguin, 2012. Print.

———. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.

———. *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Exeter: Heinemann Educ., 1984. Print.

Cobham, Rhonda. "Problems of Gender and History in the Teaching of *Things Fall Apart*." *Canonization and Teaching of African Literatures*. Ed. Raoul Granqvist. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990. 25–39. Rpt. in *Chinua Achebe's* Things Fall Apart*: A Casebook*. Ed. Isidore Opekwho. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 165–80. Rev. rpt. as "Making Men and History: Achebe and the Politics of Revisionism." *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's* Things Fall Apart. Ed. Bernth Lindfors. New York: MLA, 1992. 91–100. Print.

Harris, Wilson. "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination: Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*. Ed. A. J. M. Bundy. London: Routledge, 1999. 237–47. Print.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.

Soyinka, Wole. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. New York: Random, 2007. Print.

Winter, Ariel S. "Chinua Achebe: *How the Leopard Got His Claws*." *We Too Were Children, Mr. Barrie*. N.p., 4 May 2010. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.

"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

© 2014 UZOMA ESONWANNE
PMLA 129.2 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290016821X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Igbo masquerade, whose dynamism, like that of *mbari*, he repeatedly cites (*There* 59). If *mbari* and the masquerade are his aesthetic prototypes, is he not contradicting himself by claiming that his style is consistently measured? How could the style in which his art is rendered be consistently measured if his art is dynamic? These questions are especially significant in the light of the proposition that intertextual references to *Things Fall Apart* in "third generation" Nigerian writing "point to a drive for a new literacy" capable of "sensing the new nuances of postcoloniality" (Osinubi 160). Is it possible that Achebe, whose literary career overlaps with the careers of these later writers, fashioned no "new literacy" to interpret these "nuances"? How could a restrained style crafted to chronicle the life of Okonkwo, a nineteenth-century protagonist more suited to war than to "the art of negotiation" (Osinubi 160), equally serve for *There Was a Country*, Achebe's memoir and last work, which chronicles the process by which the peoples of a postcolonial African state asphyxiated themselves by embracing war?

There Was a Country belongs to Achebe's late period. If his style is invariably measured, then it is at odds with current thinking about late style. According to that thinking, late style does not seamlessly complete or harmoniously conclude its antecedent. On the contrary, far from seeking to reach out beyond itself, late style "*only*" deepens lateness; the consciousness of "late figures" (e.g., Theodor Adorno) is exilic, irascible, and "ferociously" iconoclastic; and their style, which is "episodic," "discontinuous," "wayward and eccentric," deepens lateness by breaking with convention (Said 13, 10–24, 148). To accept this view is either to reject the proposition that Achebe's tone is consistently measured across his career and across genres or to argue that his is the exception in late style. The latter proposition is undoubtedly viable, but I would like to argue that in his late works, particularly in *There Was a Country*, the deliberative restraint of the earlier writing yields to a defiant restraint that is nonetheless mournful. Ideally, this argument should be based on an analysis of Achebe's fiction, essays, poetry, and journalism, but I will focus on *Things Fall Apart* and *There Was a Country* because they bookend his career.

Achebe's prose in *Things Fall Apart* proceeds at a leisurely pace, its rhythm set by the seasonal cycle of agricultural labor and ritual festivities that structure daily life in Umuofia. The following passage, taken from the scene in *Things Fall Apart* in which we first encounter Okonkwo, is exemplary: "The drum beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat" (5). "Spare" and "elegant" (Adichie x), each of the first three sentences consists of multiple clauses aggregated complementarily or contrastively, all building up, as in a musical performance, to the climactic simple declarative sentence: "In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat." It is almost as if, here, Achebe's prose is striving for the pulsive rhythm of the drum. Enhancing this effect is the diction: in a literary mimesis of the clean, sharp beats of the drum, the reader's vocal emphases fall on the verbs *beat*, *sang*, and *held* before modulating into the balanced syntax of the sentences that precede the violent climax. Just as graceful as the prose is the imagery: pitted against each other, Okonkwo's piscine slipperiness and Amalinze's feline wiliness acquire mythic resonance. So when, finally, the slippery fish overcomes the wily feline, readers, like the village audience watching the match, are as exhilarated by the triumph of the former as they are deflated by the defeat of the latter.

Collectively, Achebe's protagonists are figures through which his narratives allegorize (the perversion of) power in public life as in private life. In thrall to it, they lose their sense

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290016821X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of self-restraint. Always this proves fatal: their ambition undercut, their social relationships estranged, they spiral into madness or die. In all we encounter a discrepancy between the measured tone of the narrative as reflected in its style and the excesses of the protagonists as depicted in plot events—thus, for example, the incongruity between Odili's nationalist aspirations in *A Man of the People* and the cliché-ridden idiom and disjunctive syntax in which he articulates them (Gikandi 121–22). Indeed, these discrepancies are stark and disconcerting because, emerging against a self-effacing prose that functions as a contrastive backdrop, they loom before us like a vivid counterpoint.

In *There Was a Country*, the discrepancy between event and style shrinks. Achebe's style is still measured. The mood has shifted, however, and no wonder, this being an elegiac jeremiad addressed to the "country" that, having secured its territorial integrity at great cost to life and property, now seems resolved to asphyxiate itself. Whereas the prevalent mood in Achebe's fictional prose was cogitative, now it is mournful. Consider the following passage:

> The post Nigeria-Biafra civil war era saw a "unified" Nigeria saddled with a greater and more insidious reality. We were plagued by a homegrown enemy: the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, and corruption of the ruling class. Compounding the situation was the fact that Nigeria was now awash in oil-boom petrodollars, and to make matters even worse, the country's young, affable, military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, . . . proclaimed to the entire planet that Nigeria had more money than it knew what to do with. A new era of great decadence and decline was born. It continues to this day. (243)

Taken from part 4, which briefly reappraises the country's rapid descent into anarchy before turning even more briefly to its future, this passage exhibits the same stylistic features I identified as typical of Achebe's prose: the syntax taut and graceful, the idiom formal and hortatory, and the imagery luminous. The tone is as measured as it is in the passages analyzed earlier. However, the voice is strained and the mood mournful. Contemplating a country afflicted by "homegrown" disease and tended to by an unscrupulous and misguided leadership that is drowning in the national wealth it expropriates, Achebe equates contemporary Nigeria with the betrayal of the promises of "freedom," security, dignity, and democratic self-governance that the country had held out to its peoples on the eve of independence (*There* 39–40, 108).

For Achebe, nowhere is that betrayal more painful than in the country's repression of knowledge of its genocidal past, a repression apt to engender repetition (228). In the interjection of the desire for a "new national consciousness" into a national history that censors the memory of its collective past (253), we encounter the measured irascibility that is the signature of Achebe's (postcolonial) late style.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "Group Interview with Chinua Achebe in 1969." *Early Achebe*. Ed. Bernth Lindfors. Trenton: Africa World, 2009. Print.

———. *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. New York: Penguin, 2012. Print.

———. *Things Fall Apart*. *The African Trilogy*: Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God. New York: Knopf, 2010. 1–146. Print.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. Introduction. *The African Trilogy*: Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God. By Chinua Achebe. New York: Knopf, 2010. vii–xiii. Print.

Cole, Herbert M. *Mbari: Art and Life among the Owerri Igbo*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982. Print.

Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction*. London: Currey, 1991. Print.

"Restraint." *Compact Oxford Thesaurus*. 2008. Print.

Osinubi, Taiwo Adetunji. "Literacies of Violence after *Things Fall Apart*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11.2 (2009): 157–60. *Scholars Portal*. Web. 30 Sept. 2013.

Said, Edward W. *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*. New York: Pantheon, 2006. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290016821X Published online by Cambridge University Press