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JONATHAN GREENBERG

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alter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" famously examines the transition from oral to written narrative, a transition Benjamin elucidates with a dichotomy between what he calls "story" and "novel." This transition from the oral to the written is also central to Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, and to Achebe's writing about literature more generally. This essay brings Benjamin's trenchant analysis of narrative, and its functioning within an emergent modernity, to bear on Achebe's work; its primary aim is to use Benjamin's theory to discern crucial tensions in Achebe's novel. At the same time, however, it might offer the additional benefit of demonstrating how Achebe's novel, in its vivid particularity, can illumine the more shadowy corners of Benjamin's terse and gnomic prose. What I argue, in brief, is that Achebe's novel can be seen as a portrait of Igbo culture precisely at the moment of transition from one Benjaminian discursive category to another, from story to novel.¹ By this I emphatically don't mean merely that the novel shows us a society in transition, or that it combines elements of oral narrative practice with novelistic devices and structures: it deploys, after all, a European genre, the English language, and the medium of print.

1. Oral or folk culture still exists, of course; 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.

My claim is more specific: *Things Fall Apart* is by no means a Benjaminian “story,” but rather a novel that *theorizes the concept of story* much as Benjamin himself does. It does so, I venture, by offering 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 in 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, and “accident” because accident is precisely that which refuses meaning. If narrative bestows meaning, 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.

• 1 •

Benjamin’s discussion of storytelling, written in the late 1930s, begins with the observation, “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 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 realm 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 pre-

sensation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience. . . . Thus [Nikolai 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). Remembrance, he writes, "is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle," whereas reminiscence dwells on "*many* diffuse occurrences." The prototype of the storyteller is Scheherazade of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, "who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop." (The classical epic, according to Benjamin, combines both types of memory.) 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). (Harold Scheub concurs with this general principle: "Story provides insight but never closure" [*Story* 3].) 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 James Joyce's famous image, the novelist "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.²

2. To be sure, this understanding of modernist aesthetics is by current definitions rather narrow, but whether in Joyce's formulation, or in T. S. Eliot's idea of the impersonality of the artwork in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," or in William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's "intentional fallacy," the erasure of the contingencies of the artist and the circumstances of production has often been linked to modernism.

Although 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. Benjamin explicitly posits the supersession of story by novel as resulting from a transformation in social and economic structures. Story is a communal, often precapitalist mode; indeed, one of Benjamin's prototypical storytellers (with a 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 the 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 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 descendant, the writer in his study, 'belongs' to its composer" (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," "cannot by itself ade-

quately account for the emergent notion of proprietorship" (47–48). For a story told to a community performs a very different cultural function than does a novel created and read in isolation. Not only is a book a commodity that is the intellectual property of an individual author and becomes the physical property of its purchaser; its very existence is "rooted in the praxis of individualism in 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 reenactment of creation, for which the Igbo create an "extravagant profusion" of paintings and sculptures. The creators of these works are not, properly, considered to be the humans who do the physical labor of bringing them into being, but rather the gods who commanded the ritual. (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.) Traditional Igbo culture, according to Achebe, not only lacks the concepts of individual authorship and intellectual property but deliberately disavows them.

• 2 •

In turning to *Things Fall Apart*, I think it 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 authors have their elegiac tendencies, they also recognize the printed nature of the medium and find value in the developments of modernity.³ Achebe does of course extensively *represent* the oral aspects of precolonial Igbo

3. There is critical debate among readers of *Things Fall Apart* about the extent to which Achebe idealizes premodern Igbo culture as a kind of prelapsarian utopia. In a Heideggerian reading, Christopher Wise tries to distinguish between "ontological" and "theological" aspects of the novel, arguing that while *Things Fall Apart* does suggest that a "pre-colonial" Africa "was in many ways creatively superior to its historical European counterpart," it does not portray Igbo culture as "essentially Edenic or mythical" (1058). I concur that Achebe seems to take pains to resist idealization in his picture of Igbo traditions that have their own injustices, patriarchal and otherwise, while at the same time rendering the cultural vitality of the society; however, I am skeptical about the tenability of the ontological/theological distinction Wise wants to uphold.

culture, and critics often mention that the novel presents not only the portrait of an individual but also that of a village, indeed a civilization.⁴ Achebe achieves this communal portrait in part by describing a full range of social activities, including various rituals, songs, and, most crucially for my purposes, scenes of storytelling.

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, he never attempts to pass off himself or his narrator as a mere "hearer" of the tale; to use Benjamin's figure, Achebe never lets his handprints remain on the vessel.⁵ As one critic has noted, "the narrator's distance from his characters and his reluctance to intrude his views" constitutes an "important departure from strict oral procedure"; the narrator "is not a *griot*, or oral historian" (McCarthy 245, 244). Nor is there any gesture toward a first-person frame narrator

4. One of Achebe's oft-cited aims in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to remind contemporary Africans of the existence of a precolonial 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 too might 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" ("Named for Victoria" 38).

5. The degree to which the novel conforms to the model of an oral "text" has been the subject of much debate. B. Eugene McCarthy discusses various kinds of rhythm as a gesture toward the oral, including the practice that Walter Ong describes as "backlooping" (245); M. Keith Booker cites arguments by Emmanuel Obiechina for the importance of the embedding of oral tales in the novel and by Abdul R. JanMohamed for the novel as a synthesis of oral and written practices (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—he sounds closer to an author figure explaining things to a Western or modern readership.

with an independent historical particularity. Indeed, the very act 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 first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" is realized in the novel ("Novelist" 45), 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. Kwame Anthony Appiah states, "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 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 our evaluation of the novel.⁶ 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.

6. 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" does not necessarily indicate a Euro-American audience; a Nigerian audience might be equally ignorant of these details. Appiah also notes a double standard in the reading of Achebe as compared to the reading of a European novelist such as Thomas Hardy, in whose novels the inclusion of local detail is regarded as an essential narrative component rather than mere travelogue. Finally, 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).

In other words, for a contemporary reader, whether she be Nigerian, European, American, or anyone else, the inclusion of storytelling may have numerous functions. It may assume a realist, pedagogical, or anthropological task, showing the texture of life in a lost civilization.⁷ It may function elegiacally, cultivating nostalgia for that lost culture and thereby, as Christopher Wise claims, suggesting a still unrealized utopian possibility.⁸ It may in various ways underscore wider themes of the novel or contribute to the narrative's overall patterns and structures. Biodun Jeyifo, for example, through a brilliant Freudian interpretation of a tale that Okonkwo recalls hearing from his mother, suggests that this particular story (of Mosquito and Ear) indicates Okonkwo's repression of his maternal legacy, and of the value of story itself, predominantly identified with the feminine ("Okonkwo" 184–86). Finally, the attention to African cultural practices surely also contributes to the writing of what Richard Begam calls a "nationalist history" (397) in which postcolonial literature makes a political gesture simply by taking control of the representation of its own past. Yet I want to stress that despite all these useful understandings of how story functions for Achebe, for the Igbo—for the precapitalist, precolonial culture—the functions of story are entirely different. Whatever Achebe's didactic aims may be, the late-nineteenth-century Igbo surely have little desire to teach us about their rituals or to restore recognition to their culture, which at the time when the novel takes place had not yet been lost.

How, then, does story *function* within the novel? I want to answer this question 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

7. Simon Gikandi, among others, discusses the temptations and dangers of reducing African literature to anthropological data.

8. Wise maintains that through its look backward to a moment of cultural totality, *Things Fall Apart* "functions as a prophetic affirmation of post-colonial Africa's future by offering a teleological vision of a post-Cartesian or collective subjectivity" (1056).

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 Ezinma *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 inexperienced teller trying to recall how 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.⁹ Like the dance and masquerade that Achebe discusses in "The Igbo World and Its Art," storytelling occurs in "the public domain" (63) and insists upon the unique situation of its own telling.

This leads to a second point of contact between Achebe and Benjamin: 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 situated within communal life, but Achebe also suggests the ways in which stories take on the accidental marks of each teller who repeats them, how they change as they travel in space and time.¹⁰ In addition to the "resident tiller of the soil," Benjamin's other prototype of the storyteller is "the trading seaman" (85), someone "who has come from afar" (84). When these two "archaic types" are mixed, Benjamin continues, an "artisan

9. Here Scheub's critique of a purely narratological method of treating storytelling is important to recognize: "Those who have studied narrative . . . have too frequently sought mathematical certitude in organization, while missing the real power of the stories" (*Story* 3).

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

class" of storytellers emerges: "In it was combined the lore of far-away 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 on to 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 shareable experience.

Third, and perhaps most significant, stories in *Things Fall Apart* 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. Moreover, the wisdom it offers is instruction 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 shareable; in Benjamin's view of modernity, the individual is so isolated, society so fragmented, that wisdom or counsel is not merely irrelevant but 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.¹¹

• 3 •

"Wisdom" is a term that Achebe himself has used in discussing the public role of the African novelist. When asked whether his novels might offer wisdom—as opposed to mere knowledge or expertise—Achebe answered, "Yes. . . . Wisdom is as good a word to use, I think, in describing the seriousness I was talking about, this *gravitas* . . . which informs our art" ("Interview" 256). Yet here, in his ready assent

11. 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 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 folktales. It is also worth mentioning that part of what gives Benjamin's writing its old-fashioned charm is his 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).

to the interviewer's eagerness to assert the role of the novelist as a kind of communal sage, Achebe is a step behind Benjamin, for whom it is precisely the loss of the wisdom offered by stories that constitutes the most significant casualty of the transition from story to novel.¹² If the story is characterized by counsel or practical wisdom, the novelist, according to Benjamin, "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 profound 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 Georg Lukács's 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, where something as fundamental as "the meaning of life" is

12. Achebe is, however, only momentarily a step behind Benjamin, and (as I will discuss shortly) his later comments in the interview suggest a fully Benjaminian understanding of the novel's position within a modern, fractured society. Indeed the "wisdom" or "gravitas" of which Achebe speaks might better be understood as political force than as the practical wisdom that Benjamin sees as central to the concept of story.

never openly thrown into doubt, the *problem* of meaning never needs to become explicitly thematized.

(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.¹³ Indeed, for this reason, Achebe uses precisely this familiar phrase in framing the value of humanistic study in a world increasingly oriented toward instrumental knowledge alone: "How far can you develop without dealing with certain humanistic problems, such as who am I, why am I here, what is the meaning of life, what is my culture?" ("Interview" 258). For Achebe, just as much as for Benjamin, the novel grapples with this more fundamental question in a way that story does not, because a story is set against the backdrop of a taken-for-granted meaning of life and thus encapsulates a kind of self-evident, communicable wisdom.¹⁴

For this reason, too, story and novel treat death in different ways. "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell" (94), claims Benjamin, and Peter Brooks uses this claim to argue for the preeminence 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" (22). This is likewise a central claim of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*: "All . . . plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning" (46).¹⁵

13. 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 as they occurred in *mere* life" (Wolin 223). 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 its own." Thus Benjamin's emphasis on "the totally different historical co-ordinates" of story and novel.

14. Others have invoked Lukács in reading *Things Fall Apart*. Jeyifo writes that in "[t]he first part of the novel . . . Achebe describes the precolonial, precapitalist African village society in a manner so totalized it would meet Lukács's rigorous standards" ("Problem" 116). JanMohamed reads the novel in relation to Lukács's idea of realism.

15. Clement Okafor makes a similar point in explaining Igbo cosmology: "It is only after someone's death that the living can then assess his destiny fully" (71).

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 point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five," an apothegm upon which Benjamin enlarges:

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 their 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.

(100–101)

Because the novel gives us a finished life, a closed book, a completed narrative, it allows the satisfaction of meaning. Yet if narrative implicitly purports to tell us why things happen, we also 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 signifies only 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. (In contrast, story embeds death into its narrative with a rhythmic regularity.)

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 the reader is how to interpret Okonkwo's death, what meaning to assign to it. Begam usefully submits 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” ending (401), from the point of view of the British District Commissioner, who sees in the death a valuable example of how to pacify resistant natives; and 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 W. H. Auden, Graham Greene, and Evelyn 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 endings is hardly complete. First, the District Commissioner’s perspective is clearly *deprivileged*—it is implicitly mocked—and cannot stand as an equal to the other two interpretive possibilities. Second, and more importantly, even within the “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 . . . an offense against the Earth” and cannot “be buried by his clansmen” (*Things* 207).¹⁶ 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

16. Achebe, in an essay, elaborates on the suicide as 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). Emeka Nwabueze reads the suicide “dualistically,” suggesting that it can be regarded as either catastrophic or heroic, but concludes his essay with a strong endorsement of the “heroic” reading (172). Harold Scheub, on the other hand, argues

impose, retrospectively, a narrative form. Obierika's final indignant words to the District Commissioner thus 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 men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself, and now he will be buried like a dog" (208).

• 4 •

There is, however, an even more profound ambiguity in the meaning of Okonkwo's death: 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 it in a similar disgrace. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, Okonkwo's effort to avoid a particular fate leads him into—indeed constitutes the fulfillment of—that very fate. That his death should so resemble that which he ardently seeks to avoid can itself be looked at in two incompatible ways. It can be seen *as* fate, as something predetermined (by gods, by his unconscious, by the dialectical progression of History), or as mere accident; it may be inescapable, and hence meaningful, or simply 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," specifically the concept of the *chi*, or personal god. Early on, the novel raises the issue of whether Okonkwo is lucky. At one point he fails to demonstrate humility, and the elders react angrily:

that Okonkwo's death is not heroic, and he contests readings that see Obierika's view as authoritative. Scheub maintains that Okonkwo is in no way representative of his people and falls because he so deliberately severs connection with the norms of his culture. Yet this line of reasoning has its own shortcoming: by arguing that only Okonkwo, and not the Igbo culture in general, "falls," Scheub has to deny the relevance of the broader history of colonialism in which the novel's production and reception have been situated. Because he maintains that Igbo society did not "fall apart" but merely "adapt[ed]" to the Christian invasion ("When a Man Fails" 98), Scheub must relegate "the ultimate destiny of Umuofian society" to a footnote in which he claims that the extranovelistic historical context "lies outside the purview of this novel" (122).

The oldest man present said sternly that those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. . . .

But it was really not 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.

(26–27)

The concept of *chi* appears to be invoked here to eliminate the possibility of accident (or luck or chance). 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 person for which he is not somehow responsible" ("Chi" 165), thus reinforcing the notion that character, morality, and fortune neatly align. Yet in the same essay he also writes, "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, or at least a strongly different emphasis, linking the actions of one's *chi* not to any cosmic justice but instead to accident or whim. Thus Achebe in this essay offers the same proverb that appears in the novel, but with a twist worthy of Franz 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.¹⁷ Hence different critics can invoke the idea of *chi*

17. See Richardson: "[A]mbiguities surround Okonkwo's *chi*, or personal daimon that directs one's destiny. The protagonist attributes the disappointments in his life to the workings of his *chi* . . . [but] when events seem to be progressing more to his liking, Okonkwo believes that his *chi* is making amends for past disasters. The fluidity of this concept is such that any possible event can be attributed to its influence; it is equally plausible to interpret it as mysteriously inscrutable or simply nonexistent" (146).

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).¹⁸ In contrast, Emeka Nwabueze sees the workings of Okonkwo's *chi* as arbitrary and therefore exculpatory; he attributes Okonkwo's fall not to moral shortcomings but to "Okonkwo's paternal imago and the machinations of capricious fate" (168).¹⁹ Similarly, Damian U. Opata maintains that "Okonkwo's type of accident [here he refers specifically to the killing of Ezeudu's son] is usually, at least in traditional belief, attributed to *ajo chi* ('capricious fates')" (92). Invoking the notion of *capricious* fate, Nwabueze and Opata reinstate the possibility of accident in the world of the Igbo and argue against moral readings of Okonkwo's fall.²⁰

If analyzing the concept of *chi* cannot resolve interpretive ambiguity, neither can locating the novel within the generic tradition of tragedy, as many readers have attempted to do. For while the novel can, as mentioned, be read as a kind of Sophoclean tragedy, even this generic category can be ambivalent.²¹ As Naomi Conn Liebler

18. Scheub holds a similar view: "[Okonkwo's] selfishness and his perverted ideals, his own fuming drive toward fulfillment destroy him. . . . [H]e will fall not because of forces external to him, but rather because of flaws that are integral parts of his character" ("When a Man Fails" 98–99).

19. Nwabueze's invocation of Freud here is interesting but problematic; psychoanalysis, too, as its reliance on the Oedipus 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 that 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 often seem to 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, but these statements need not be taken to indicate an authorial view.

20. Okafor likewise wrestles with the ambivalence of this concept and stresses that the Igbo notion of "*chi*" does not imply a narrow determinism: "The Igbo belief that a person cannot achieve anything without the consent of his *chi* must not mislead one to conclude that Okonkwo is merely a pawn in the hands of his guiding spirit. On the contrary, Okonkwo's personality flaws precipitate his catastrophic demise and nullify his individual accomplishments" (80–81).

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

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 the workings of Athenian drama. Liebler comments that Aristotle's idea of *hamartia*, often translated as "flaw," is better translated as "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 (Christian) 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 and, implicitly, whether a hero's error should be regarded as a failing of character or an accident of chance.

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 Igbo culture, a question of how the Igbo interpret their world, including their own fortune or misfortune. Increasingly, as the novel progresses, their world seems governed at least in part by chance. On the other hand, this is also a problem in the reader's interpretation of Achebe's novel. As I suggested at the 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. An accident always *wants* its status as accident to be revoked; it always demands assimilation into the structure of a narrative. In other words, it wants interpretation.²² And when an accident already exists within a narrative, the demand is redoubled: both its existence in the fictional world and its existence in the novel's narrative demand interpretations that will produce meaning.

Within the world of the Igbo, then, one sort of ambiguity exists, that of whether the characters of the novel should see the incidents

22. Richardson claims that "causal connection, however intermittent, deferred, or oblique, is a necessary condition of narrativity" (37) and asserts: "In many respects, interpretation and causality are two sides of the same coin. . . . The more ambiguous, unlikely, or contradictory the causal agency appears to be, the greater the demand for interpretive accuracy becomes" (43).

of the narrative as meaningful events or mere accidents; in the wider fictional world of the novel as a whole, additional interpretive ambiguities—those that Begam discerns among the points of view of precolonial Igbo, British, and (future) colonial Igbo—come into play; and finally, in the process of reading the novel, still further ambiguities arise, because, approaching Okonkwo's story as a novel, readers are heavily biased toward making meaning of every detail for themselves, or assuming that Achebe has attempted to do so. These levels of ambiguity, moreover, tend to reinforce each other: the thematization of the tension between accident and narrative, between contingency and necessity for the Igbo provides a kind of illustration of the problem that the reader of *Things Fall Apart* experiences. At the same time, the reader's position of being caught between meaning and nonmeaning helps her to experience the crisis of narrativity that arises when things fall apart within the fictional world. In other words, the reader's struggles in interpreting the events of the novel mirror the characters' struggles to interpret the events of their own lives.²³

On further inspection, the novel proves rife with this tension between accident and meaning. We find it, for example, 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 stories and create expectations, and their meaning becomes clear only when the story is complete. Indeed, in narrative, an oracle or prophesy functions something like the gun in Chekhov's 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, as *Oedipus Rex* and *Macbeth* are, it still offers multiple examples of omens and warnings that create narrative expectation—for both characters and readers. When Okonkwo beats his youngest wife during the

23. Richardson again is relevant. He invokes Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory "to suggest the ways in which the same interpretive dilemmas that perplex characters can also confront the reader" (15). Later he elaborates, "Certain narratives . . . are so constructed that the ambiguity of the causal relations within the fiction are reproduced for the audience to experience, as the reader's interpretation of the text becomes an analogue of the protagonists' understanding of the world they inhabit" (37).

Week of Peace, he is upbraided by the priest of the earth goddess: "The evil you have done can ruin the 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—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 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, Wood notes, 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.²⁴ I would argue, however, that the text licenses both readings, and that the discussion between Okonkwo and Obierika offers a parallel to the reader's inner debate on the meanings of the oracle and of the killing within the larger narrative.

24. 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). Rhonda Cobham asserts a sequence of causation from the killing of the boy to the suicide of Okonkwo, claiming that Okonkwo's slaying of Ikemefuna "set[s] in motion a chain of events which ultimately leads to his downfall" (170). 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. Opata similarly maintains that "there is no logical implication between Okonkwo's reversal of fortunes and his killing of Ikemefuna. . . . no causal link can be established between them" (91).

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 Okonkwo is therefore 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 adequately to 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 a direct causal connection is never articulated, it remains a possibility—not only for the novel's characters, who might see divine will in Okonkwo's bad luck, but also for its readers, 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 personal transgressions against the earth goddess.

• 5 •

I am arguing 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

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 they provide. Now, it is tempting to suggest that a "traditional" culture, which we might call a "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;²⁵ 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 Achebe's satiric representation of Christianity reminds us that contemporary Western culture retains its own superstitions and beliefs in higher powers.²⁶ Moreover, even a modern reader who rejects supernatural causation in the real world can still, without contradiction, believe in the "supernatural" nature of the fictional events depicted in the novel. Still further, as Neil ten Kortenaar has argued, Achebe's Igbo possess what ten Kortenaar calls, following Abdul JanMohamed, a "double-consciousness" regarding their own religious system; he cites the narrative disclosure of possible doubt among the women who

25. Richardson, for example, writes that in the novel, "Igbo supernaturalism" gives way to "an ironic naturalism" (145), that "Once they are seriously contested, the tribal beliefs turn out to be hollow. The sympathetic portrayal of the indigenous cultural economy of the Igbo concludes with a disclosure of the fictionality and inadequacy of those beliefs" (146). Elsewhere he makes the point more generally about many postcolonial works which "end up rejecting traditional supernatural metaphysics even as they critique Western political and cultural imperialism. . . . causal investigation leads to ontological skepticism, although the rejected supernatural beliefs are often recalled nostalgically as part of a lost totality, or reinscribed as metaphorically true if literally false, or transmuted into effective postmodern allegories" (17).

26. It is possible of course to ascribe to an ideal reader a naturalistic position distinct from (and superior to) both Igbo and Christian supernaturalism, but Achebe seems keen to remind Westerners to be wary of their contempt for "primitive" belief systems. In "An Image of Africa," he 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" (2). For an excellent discussion of Achebe's analysis of the ideological advantages that Christianity allows the British missionaries, see Moses.

witness the ritual of the *egwugwu* as evidence that the Umuofians can at once know and not know the naturalistic explanation for the supernatural visit from their dead ancestors.²⁷

For all these reasons, we should be wary of overstabilizing the beliefs of the precolonial Igbo as represented in Achebe's novel. Nonetheless, for a traditional culture, as we see it in both Benjamin's discussion and Achebe's reconstruction, the bigger questions, the questions about the meaning of life, do 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 warning, a lesson. A culture of story already possesses a narrative to which new details merely need to be assimilated. In a culture of the novel, by contrast, it is the narrative itself that has to be made and remade. It is thus worth repeating the 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. Although the premodern 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 narrative is the narrative 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 rather that it narrates the emergence of a need for an explanation of the meaning of life.²⁸ 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 Igbo culture by showing the deterioration of the

27. Ten Kortenaar refines JanMohamed's argument by claiming this double consciousness for the narrator as well as for the Igbo characters: "It is in the reader, rather than in the characters, that a double consciousness is created" (130). Achebe speaks of this same double consciousness in regard to the *egwugwu*: "In the past, knowing who walked within the mask did not detract from the numinous, dramatic presence of a representative of the ancestors on a brief mission to the living. Disbelief was easily suspended! The decline today is merely a symptom of the collapse of a whole eschatology" ("Igbo World" 67).

28. In reaching this conclusion, then, I would endorse ten Kortenaar's claim that "Achebe is writing of a moment of epistemic rupture, when one mode of knowledge gives way before another" (127).

Igbo narrative system and the ways in which Igbo beliefs in the meanings of events are tested and changed. To be sure, Achebe presents moments before the arrival of the British in which misfortune causes characters to question their belief system. But this doubt reaches a crisis (less for Okonkwo than for his clansmen) only when white men set up a church. In fact, part 3 of the novel offers a series of tests as to whether the Igbo gods will protect their people, whether they will punish the misdeeds of the converts, who commit unthinkable acts—Okoli's killing of a sacred python, Enoch's unmasking of an *egwugwu*—so transgressive that no code of punishment even exists for them. At times, such as in 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, as when they fail to kill the African Christian Mr. Kiaga when he takes in twin children who had been left to die. (Kiaga tells the new converts: "The heathen say you will die if you do this or that, and you are afraid. They also said I would die if I built my church on this ground. Am I dead? They said I would die if I took care of twins. I am still alive" [157].)²⁹ Less and less frequently do beginnings (warnings, omens, prohibitions) lead to the expected endings (revenge, punishment, justice). What results is a glimpse of a world in which an overall narrative coherence is obliterated.³⁰

I will conclude with one brief point. If *Things Fall Apart* shows us the transition from story to novel, it goes even 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 already

29. Okpala takes Okoli's killing of the python and subsequent death as evidence that within the fictional world of *Things Fall Apart*, a kind of "spiritual justice" does hold. Again, this interpretation too easily confuses narrative point of view, in this case that of the Igbo community, with authorial statements.

30. Thus on every level, from the smallest incident in Okonkwo's life to the fate of Igbo society and of Africa itself in the era of European conquest, *Things Fall Apart* invites the reader to consider the relationships among accident, narrative, and meaning; it ultimately asks whether historical patterns of colonial conquest were themselves necessary or accidental.

being shot through with explanation" (89). 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 well-known 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 the Commissioner's thoughts rendered in free indirect discourse:³¹

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, and 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*.

(208-9)

The novel the reader has just completed, the story of Okonkwo's life, will be reduced to a lone paragraph in a book that perpetuates the imperialist-missionary work whose horrific effects the reader has just witnessed. This promised reinscription will erase not only Okonkwo's life but his entire culture; and the Commissioner's stringency as an editor, we gather, reflects his general principles of governance. That such words as "pacification" and "primitive" should be in the title of the book 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 in fact recovers Okonkwo's story and Umuofia's. But the ending does suggest that Achebe's novel, in representing Benjamin's concept of story and its erosion, recognizes

31. 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 254-55).

the fragility of narrative meaning: it recognizes how quickly the meaning of a life, however enigmatic, can be reduced to a piece of information.

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