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Rhythm and Narrative Method in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

B. EUGENE McCARTHY

Before the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 public awareness in the West of fiction from Africa was confined chiefly to white writers such as Doris Lessing, Alan Paton, or Nadine Gordimer. Thus Achebe's first novel, written in English, though he is himself a Nigerian of the Igbo people, was a notable event. More noteworthy was the fact that it was a very good novel and has become over the years probably the most widely read and talked about African novel, overshadowing the efforts of other West African novelists as well as those of East and South Africa. Its reputation began high and has remained so, stimulating critical analysis in hundreds of articles, many books, and dissertations. Its story describes, whatever one may expect from its Yeatsian title, the life of a traditional Igbo rural village and the rise of one of its gifted leaders, Okonkwo, before colonization, and then observes the consequences for the village and the hero as they confront the beginnings of the colonial process. Achebe's subsequent three novels, more or less related but not sequential, *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *Man of the People* (1966), though all respected, have not matched its success. Achebe's fiction established firmly that there is an African prose literature—poetry had probably been well known since Senghor in the 1940s—even when written in English. Not that there has not been debate over and criticism of *Things Fall Apart*, and from Achebe's standpoint a good deal of misunderstanding through refusal of readers to take its African character seriously; but as a recent study confirms he continues to be "the most widely read of contemporary African writers."¹ His first novel has been "as big a factor in the formation of a young West African's picture of his past, and of his relation to it, as any of the still rather distorted teachings of the pulpit and the primary school,"² and of course he has influenced his fellow writers just as significantly in finding their own subject matter and voice.

When beginning Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, readers are often struck by the simple mode of narration and equally simple prose style, which critics have seen as Achebe's desire to achieve an "English . . . colored to reflect the African verbal style [with] stresses and emphases that would be eccentric and unexpected in British or American speech."³ He reshapes English in order

¹ C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors, eds., *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5, quoting from *TLS* in 1965.

³ John Povey, "The English Language of the Contemporary African Novel," *Critique* XI, 3 (1969), 93.

to imitate the "linguistic patterns of his mother tongue," Igbo.⁴ I would like, as a further means of understanding this special quality of Achebe's prose, to propose a way of reading and of understanding the novel through the concept of rhythm, within the oral tradition.

In the opening passage of the novel, the narrator's repetition of words and phrases, both verbatim and synonymous, and his mode of emphasis and patterning suggest a deliberateness and complexity well beyond the surface simplicity:

^A Okonkwo ^a was well known ^A throughout the nine villages and even beyond. ^A His fame ^a rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen ^A he had brought honour to his village by ^a throwing ^B Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze ^C was the great wrestler who for seven years ^D was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. ^C It was this man ^A that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was ^B one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild ^E for seven days and seven nights. ^D

^C The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. ^E Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as ^A slippery as a fish in ^E water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them ^E stretching to breaking point. In ^A the end Okonkwo threw the Cat. ^B ^C ^E

The narrator's repetitions in this passage are a technique of the traditional oral storyteller, sitting talking to a group of listeners (though he is not a *griot*, or oral historian).⁶ For example, the subject "A" repeats four times, the modifier "a" repeats but varies to add meanings; other words, such as those about the intensity of the fight, likewise are repeated to emphasize their importance and to vary meanings. Walter Ong refines our understanding of oral thought and expression in prose by pointing out that the oral narrator's "thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions and antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions. . . ."

⁴ Ihechukwu Madubuike, "Achebe's Ideas on African Literature," *New Letters* 40, 4 (1974), 87.

⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 3. All subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition. Note: the word "men" above is written "man" in the text, which seems inconsistent with the referent "founder of their town."

⁶ Meki Nzewi, "Ancestral Polyphony," *African Arts* 11, 4 (1978), 94: "But Chinua does not see a link between the modern Igbo novelist and the traditional storyteller." According to Professor Chidi Ikonne of Harvard University the narrator is not a *griot* (from private conversation). Yet Kofi Awoonor, *The Breast of the Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 257, adds, there is a "straight-forward simplicity about the language . . . that recalls the raconteur's voice."

Such primary devices for memory ("for rhythm aids recall") and communication simplify the story so that the listeners can grasp characters and events graphically and surely. More specifically, oral expression is "additive rather than subordinative," "aggregative rather than analytical," "redundant or 'copious,'" that is, "backlooping" by means of "redundancy, repetition of the just-said."⁷ The additive and redundant elements are apparent in the above passage, when Achebe's narrator repeats a phrase, for example, "Amalinze the Cat," then carries it forward with new information. Once a name or event is introduced he proceeds by moving forward, then reaching back to repeat and expand, moving onward again, accumulating detail and elaborating: "well known" advances to "fame" and to "honour," just as "It was this man that Okonkwo threw" repeats what has gone before and underlines its importance. Karl H. Bottcher calls the narrator's method "afterthoughts,"⁸ but Ong's "backlooping" conveys better the active methodology of the narrator.

The style is not "aggregative" for key epithets are not attached to characters, no doubt because the novel is written, not spoken. A more important departure from strict oral procedure is the narrator's distance from his characters and his reluctance to intrude his views, for as Ong tells us, empathy and participation are elements of orality, objectivity a consequence of writing.⁹ For the most part the narrator reveals only what was done or said by others: "a fight which the *old men agreed* was one of the fiercest. . .," "it was said that, when he slept. . .," "he seemed to walk on springs, as if. . ." We understand an apparent intrusion such as the following as reflecting not the narrator's bias but the way the people thought: "When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (6).

The patterning and repetition in Achebe's novel are characteristics of the self-conscious artistry of oral narrative performance, where plot moves by repetition and predictability. Harold Scheub argues the "centrality of repetition in oral narratives as a means of establishing rhythm."¹⁰ Such rhythmic textures establish the narrative method as imitative of the African oral rather than the English "literary" tradition. Indeed rhythm is a quality at the heart of African culture. Léopold Sédar Senghor has written: "Rhythm is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of the life force." The

⁷ Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 34, 37–40. Ong says Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* "draws directly on Ibo oral tradition . . . [providing] instances of thought patterns in orally educated characters who move in these oral, mnemonically tooled grooves," p. 35.

⁸ Karl H. Bottcher, "The Narrative Technique in Achebe's Novels," *New African Literature and the Arts* 13/14 (1972), 7.

⁹ Ong, pp. 45–46. See Bottcher on narrator's distance, pp. 1–5.

¹⁰ Unpublished essay as quoted by Ron Scollon, "Rhythmic Integration of Ordinary Talk," in *Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1982), p. 337. See also Emmanuel Obeichina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 174: "The main impulse in [Nigerian novelist Gabriel Okara's] *The Voice* obviously derives from the oral tradition . . . especially his deliberate repetitions, his metaphorical and hyperbolic elaborations and his colloquial rhythm."

dramatic interest of a work is not sustained, he writes, by "avoiding repetition as in European narrative. . . , [but] is born of repetition: repetition of a fact, of a gesture, of words that form a *leitmotiv*. There is always the introduction of a new element, variation of the repetition, unity in diversity."¹¹ In the text where he quotes this statement, Jahnheinz Jahn illustrates prose rhythms with a passage from Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*: "the rhythmical kind of narrative in which the repetition intensifies the dramatic quality of the action, makes Tutuola's story oral literature."¹²

As Robert Kellogg tells us, there are many sorts of rhythm, "phonic, metrical, grammatical, metaphoric, imagistic, thematic";¹³ and modern studies have argued that prose as well as verse has its rhythms, usually found first in syntax.¹⁴ The repetitions of syntactic patterns of word and phrase underscore emphases (sometimes vocal) and stresses of meaning. Thus Roger Fowler describes in passages from David Storey the syntactic repetitions by which "syntax becomes rhythmical" and finds "sentence- and phrase-rhythms" there like "thickening, deepening, then darkening": "When syntax is repetitious, highlighting by reiteration a small number of patterns," he argues, "a palpable rhythm is established through the regularity of voice tunes."¹⁵ Such repetition is the most obvious stylistic feature we notice in the passage from Achebe's novel. Syntactically, these repetitions stress key words, often polysyllables in contrast to the predominating one or two syllable words, chiefly subject nouns, object nouns, pronouns and modifiers of these nouns, and verbs, with occasional stress on time or place. Though emphasis may be difficult to assess uniformly—e.g., "through the NINE villages," or "through the NINE VILLAGES," or even possibly "through the nine VILLAGES"—there are some evident emphases on subjects, objects, or verbs; for example, "In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat" stresses all three. Parallelism enhances the repetitions and strengthens the rhythms: the parallel

¹¹ Quoted in Jahnheinz Jahn, *Muntu* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 164–66. See original, Senghor, "L'Esthétique Nègro-Africaine," *Liberté I, Négritude et Humanisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), pp. 211–12; and his premise: "Image et rythme, ce sont les deux traits fondamentaux du style négro-africain," p. 209. See also Obeichina: "The most striking feature of Okara's art is the repetition of single words, phrases, sentences, images or symbols, a feature highly developed in traditional narrative," p. 173; and Daniel P. Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief, Epic Literature from the Banyanga (Zaire Republic)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 79: "Somewhat related to the formulaic system are the innumerable repetitions that add emphasis, effect, clarity and thus give fullness to the description [and] lend sonority, additional rhythm, and emphasis to the statements."

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹³ Robert Kellogg, "Literature, Nonliterature, and Oral Tradition," *New Literary History* 8 (Spring, 1977), 532. This issue of *NLH* has a valuable collection of essays on "Oral Cultures and Oral Performances."

¹⁴ Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 28: "the surface structure of a text (which is a sequence of sentences) has, like the surface structure of a sentence, qualities such as sequence, rhythm, spatial and temporal expressiveness." Raymond Chapman, *The Language of English Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), pp. 84–85: "We have seen that the traditional metres of English poetry have some connection with the rhythms of ordinary speech. . . . Rhythm of course is not confined to poetry . . . prose can have its distinctive cadences." Richard Ohmann, "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," in *Linguistics and Literary Style*, ed. Donald Freeman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970; previously published 1964), p. 260: "let me state this dogmatically—in prose, at least, rhythm as perceived is largely dependent upon syntax, and even upon content, not upon stress, intonation, and juncture alone."

¹⁵ Fowler, pp. 60, 63. See also Michael Riffaterre, "Criteria for Style Analysis," in *Essays on the Language of Literature*, eds. Seymour Chapman and Samuel Levin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 428–29.

subject-verb sentence opening: "Okonkwo was" with "fame rested," or "Amalinze was" with "he was" with "It was." In the third (unquoted) paragraph, the parallel repetitions become insistent, as the verbs become increasingly active: "he was tall," "he breathed," "he slept," "he walked," "he seemed to walk," "He was going," "he did pounce," "he had," and finally, "He had no patience. . . ." Alliteration too accents these repetitions: "called" and "Cat"; "fight," "fiercest," and "founder"; "Spirit," "seven," and "seven." One may even discern a distinct metrical rhythm in some lines, such as, "The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath," which could be marked, short, long, long; short, short, long, long, and so on. The third paragraph summarizes with a strongly trochaic, blues-like line: "That was many years ago, twenty years or more," but the near domination of metric regularity changes to "and during this time, Okonkwo's fame . . ." If there is such a thing as a dominant meter in prose (English is considered to be naturally iambic),¹⁶ Achebe's prose would seem to be largely anapestic: "It was this/ man that Okon/kwo threw/ in a fight/ which the old/ men agreed/ was one/ of the fierc/est since the found/er of their town/ engaged a spir/it of the wild/ for sev/en days/ and sev/en nights," ending with a series of four iambs. Note another anapestic line: "Every nerve/ and every mus/cle stood out/ on their arms/ on their backs/ and their thighs." The point here is not to scan the lines but to show the rhythmical quality of the prose, more markedly rhythmical than traditional English prose, closer to an oral African quality.

I will explore now further levels of rhythm in the novel, moving from the stylistic to the structural, and then to the thematic, for not only the style but the entire narrative method can be considered rhythmical. Critics have mentioned the structuring of events in the novel in terms of rhythm. According to David Carroll, "the narrator then moves from this larger rhythm of the generations to the rhythm of the seasons, to Okonkwo and his sons repairing the walls; . . . yet the compassionate narrative voice seems to establish another rhythm, contrapuntal to Okonkwo's success."¹⁷ S. O. Iyasere says, "Against the joyfully harmonic rhythm of this event [the locusts], the withdrawn, controlled formalism of the judgment of the *egwugu* stands in sharp relief. By juxtaposing these events, Achebe orchestrates the modulating rhythms of Umoufia."¹⁸ The structural tightness of the novel has been demonstrated by critics such as Robert Wren on the novel as a whole,¹⁹ and Karl Bottcher on the narrator's voice and other stylistic techniques.²⁰ The narrative procedure that we see in the opening passages, involving a regular introduction of new materials, a little at a time,

¹⁶ Raymond Chapman, p. 43: "One of the most common metrical lines in English poetry is the iambic pentameter. . . . It follows very closely the pattern of everyday speech. . . . The iambic pentameter can be given many variations, but it remains close to what sounds 'natural' in English."

¹⁷ David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe* (New York: Twayne, 1970), pp. 37, 47.

¹⁸ Solomon O. Iyasere. "Narrative Techniques in 'Things Fall Apart,'" *New Letters* 40, 3 (1974), 76. See also Iyasere, "Oral Tradition in the Criticism of African Literature," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, 1 (1975), 111-14.

¹⁹ Robert Wren, *Achebe's World* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), pp. 23 ff.

²⁰ Bottcher, pp. 1-12.

awaiting further amplification, is similar to African polymetric rhythms in which various meters are heard simultaneously, though not introduced at one time.²¹ This is not a rhythm of percussive stress or beat, but an accentuation by word, phrase or theme. As our awareness is sharpened to the introduction of new materials—the “additive” element of orality—we become aware of the multiple rhythms at work: words that emulate the “redundant” aspect of orality by early or late repetition (e.g. “breathe,” “seven”), themes that are briefly expanded or developed later (e.g. fierceness, wrestling), and those such as *masculine* and *feminine* that evolve slowly but consistently. We thus become more conscious of the process of development of words, phrases, and themes, and are less likely to overemphasize one and miss another. We will also see that the narrative makes increasingly evident a connection between these rhythmic elements of style and form and the basic rhythm of clan life, with the result that rhythm becomes significant thematically to Okonkwo’s response to clan life and to the ultimate breaking of that life. I will sketch the pattern of the thirteen chapters of Part One to show how the narrative is laid before us, like pieces of a complex puzzle that slowly reveal coherence.

In Chapter One we meet Okonkwo as a man of great achievement and greater potential, and we see the heritage of his father the failure, a heritage Okonkwo wishes to flee. But as Okonkwo hastens to achieve his goals he inadvertently becomes involved with the hostage, the boy Ikemefuna whom the narrator refers to as “doomed” and “ill-fated,” though we are unsure why at this point. The pacing of Chapter Two is particularly suggestive of the narrative method used thereafter in the novel. Set in three parts the chapter begins with Okonkwo, about to go to bed, hearing “a clear overtone of tragedy in the crier’s voice.” We drift briefly from that motif to hear lore of the night before we continue the episode of Ikemefuna’s arrival in Umuofia into the care of Okonkwo. The second part turns abruptly to the character of Okonkwo, “dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness,” specifically of being thought an “agbala,” a woman, or a man with no titles, like his father. “And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness” (10). When in the third part the chapter returns to details of Ikemefuna’s arrival—as Bottcher says, “the point of departure is resumed almost word by word”²²—we have in a nutshell the whole novel: Okonkwo’s passions, hatred of weakness or womanliness, his success and strengths, his connection with the hostage, and the overtones of tragedy.

The three parts of Chapter Two offer an episodic advancement of the plot,

²¹ Cf. Jahn, p. 165; and J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 136: “the crucial point in polyrhythmic procedures . . . is the spacing or the placement of rhythmic patterns that are related to one another at different points in time so as to produce the anticipated integrated structure.” All of Chapter 12 is relevant here. Isadore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetic of Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 61–2, asks, “What is the nature of this musical element in African heroic song?” and responds, “one fundamental aspect, its polyrhythmic nature, is relevant here. . . . Polyrythms . . . vary as one moves from east to west, with West Africa as the region of greatest complexity.”

²² Bottcher, p. 7.

both adding to what has been mentioned and reflecting on the parts to which they are juxtaposed for commentary and contrast, as well as introducing new materials, all in the oral-rhythmic process of addition of new and amplification of old themes. Chapter Three, also of three parts (though the chapters vary generally from one to four parts), begins with Agbala, not the scornful title of "woman" but the Oracle whose priestess people visit "to discover what the future held . . . or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers" (12). Agbala had once told Unoka why he was a failure. Now, to overcome the disadvantages of a useless father, Okonkwo visits not Agbala but, more practically, a wealthy man for a loan of yams to start his own farm. Part Three then reverses the trend of the story thus far, for Okonkwo fails, and establishes the possibility of things going badly to the point of suicide. "The year had gone mad," and all his seed yams have been destroyed. One man hangs himself, but Okonkwo survives because of "his inflexible will."

Having established Okonkwo's direction, the narrator wishes to expand the context of the novel and offer several correctives, for the implications of the incident of Okonkwo's "survival" are not resolved until Chapter Four. "'Looking at a king's mouth,' said an old man, 'one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast.' He was talking about Okonkwo" (19), who had indeed forgotten his maternal life, and preferred "to kill a man's spirit" by calling him "woman." Okonkwo's fear of weakness is here qualified as specifically anti-feminine: "To show affection was a sign of weakness," so he beats his hostage, and in the next part beats one of his wives in violation of the Week of Peace dedicated to the Goddess Ani, an evil act that "'can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish'" (22).

The importance of the feminine element in the culture could be overlooked because of the emphasis Okonkwo places on masculine virtues and achievements for which he is justly celebrated. But the novel steadfastly points to the centrality of the feminine.²³ Okonkwo's masculine sensibility terrorizes his son Nwoye whom he wishes to be "a great farmer and a great man" (23), and enhances his affection for the already manly Ikemefuna, who significantly entertains such "womanly" traits as telling (24) and hearing (42) folk tales. Okonkwo's emphasis on "his inflexible will" as the cause of his survival is corrected here when the narrator explicitly states, "the personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame" (24).

One new element is introduced in this chapter, the concern with customs. Since Okonkwo had violated the custom of the Week of Peace, the discussion is appropriate, but its importance here is in revealing that the clan's customs are

²³ For discussions of the feminine, see Ernest Champion, "The Story of a Man and his People," *NALF* 6 (1972), 274; G. D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (New York: Africana, 1969), pp. 20 ff.; Iyasere, "Narrative. . . ." pp. 79 ff.; Wilfred Cartey, *Whispers from a Continent* (New York: Random House, 1969), Chapter 1, "Mother and Child." Awareness of the masculine/feminine element is now widely manifested by critics.

not absolute: "the punishment for breaking the Peace of Ani had become very mild in their clan." The men mock those clans who do not alter customs as they see fit: "they lack understanding." If we think too much on change as things-falling-apart, we are apt to miss the ameliorative process of change which is inherent in the clan. Throughout the story several old men and some young men ponder the sanity of customs, such as the particularly agonizing one of killing twins, and we are conscious that eventually it too would be changed. Desire for change, founded in emotional distress, is what brings Nwoye to Christianity for solace.

Chapter Five returns to another feast of the Earth Goddess to elaborate her position. The "source of all fertility[,] Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (26). During her feast, for which the local women inscribe themselves and their huts with detailed patterns, and to which visitors come from the motherland (and reportedly spoil the children!), the violence of Okonkwo once more erupts. He rages that a tree has been killed—"As a matter of fact the tree was very much alive"—and then shoots at his wife, the one who (as we later learn) had left her husband out of admiration for Okonkwo's excellence as a wrestler. The implications of this wild act of shooting eventually become clear for though there was no formal violation of the harvest festival, Okonkwo here mishandles a gun as he will later do in fatefully killing a boy.

The remainder of Chapter Five is filled with the wonderful power of the drums, like the rhythmic pulse of the heart of the clan, sounding insistently behind the action—"Just then the distant beating of drums began to reach them" (30), "The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging" (31), "In the distance the drums continued to beat" (32). They are a pulse countered only by Okonkwo's roaring at his daughter Ezinma whom he wished were a boy. At this point rhythm takes on thematic dimensions as the narrator contrasts Okonkwo's eccentric or asymmetrical behavior with the rhythmic spirit of the clan. The significance of the drum beat is amplified in the following chapter (Six) where the chief entertainment of the clan, wrestling, takes place on the *ilo*, the village circle, a dramatic space where the central physical and cultural acts of the people occur (recall the spiritual "dark, endless *space* in the presence of Agbala," 12). Later (Chapter Ten) judgments are passed there on major legal cases, and finally (Chapter Twenty-three) when the clan is disrupted and the imagery is of coldness and ashes, no acts take place: "the village *ilo* where they had always gathered for a moon-play was empty" (139). Our attention is drawn inexorably to the *ilo* by the drums so that by the time the celebration begins, we watch the people drawn in every sense together by the drums, for the drummers are literally "possessed by the spirit of the drums" (33) and their "frantic rhythm was . . . the very heart-beat of the people" (35-36). Rhythm is central. We are to see this celebration as the focal dramatic act of the dramatic space which is the center of the people—harmonic life—as if we as visitors to the clan must see at least once what rhythm means in its fullest articulation, must be reminded what

it was like when, as the novel opened, Okonkwo threw the Cat, and when now, in almost exact repetition for Okonkwo, for his wife, for the clan, "The muscles on their arms and their thighs and on their backs stood out and twitched, . . .

*Has he thrown a hundred Cats?
He has thrown four hundred Cats."* (36)

This is the cultural center of the novel—the *ilo* becomes a metaphor for the dramatic space of the novel, the cultural locus upon which Okonkwo performs, first as wrestler, then as tragic actor. In *Achebe's World* Robert Wren also emphasizes this chapter: the novel's twenty-five chapters "are upon closer analysis divided into four groups of six chapters each, with one pivotal chapter, XIII, where Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudo's son and must flee."²⁴ Wren goes on to note that Part One actually "has two six-chapter units plus the pivotal chapter." The stress then is on Chapter Six, the drum chapter, as a center of this Part (for with Seven we move to the killing of Ikemefuna), so there is an imbalance with Chapter Thirteen: the "alternating chapters show Okonkwo in crisis": VII, IX, XI and XIII.²⁵

Hereafter in Chapter Seven as things begin to break down, we can view Okonkwo's eventual tragedy as a violation of this harmony. We notice how he stands obnoxious and restless against the festival of drums: "never . . . enthusiastic over feasts," he picks a quarrel over the "dead" tree, shoots at his wife, jealously sees Obierika's son become wrestling hero instead of his son (34). Playwright and critic Wole Soyinka tells us that a person must constantly attempt to bridge the gulf between the area of earthly existence and the existence of deities, ancestors and the unborn by "sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf. . . . Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self."²⁶ Achebe's narrator underscores the same sense of cosmic responsibility in Chapter Thirteen: "A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (85). Achebe's is not Yoruba fiction, but Soyinka's description gives, I think, an important clue to Okonkwo's tragedy: separation from what the clan adheres to as value, specifically here the rhythmic center of life.

In Chapter Seven the actions run together without division and there is a symbolic heightening of word and action as if we are continuing from the previous chapter with specially meaningful narrative. As Okonkwo told Nwoye and Ikemefuna "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed . . . they sat in darkness," a terrible symbolic image, especially in contrast to Nwoye's love of "stories his mother used to tell," folk tales of mercy and pity at which "he warmed himself" as Vulture did in the tale (38). (Note that Okonkwo almost

²⁴ Wren, p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 144–45.

inadvertently remembers in detail his mother's folk tale, 53.) Then the locusts came, destroyers later identified with "the white man" (97). Okonkwo is warned "to have nothing to do with" killing Ikemefuna, for "He calls you his father." But then—in the suddenly symbolic phrasing of the narrator, "in the narrow line in the heart of the forest," the narrow line between obedience to the Oracle or obedience to humanity and the advice of Obierika, a line which crossed either way would be destructive—"Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (43). And Nwoye, knowing what his father had done, felt "something . . . give way inside him," just as he did before when he "heard the voice of an infant crying in the thick forest," thrown there to die in a pot. "It descended on him again, this feeling, when his father walked in, that night after killing Ikemefuna" (43).

The rhythm of the narrative does not end here with the broken rhythm of Okonkwo's life. The style continues much as before; Wilfred Cartey observes Achebe's repetition of images in Part Two: "When the rain finally came, it was in large, solid drops of frozen water which the people called 'the nuts of the water of heaven'" (92); similarly, Nwoye feels Christianity "like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth" (104).²⁷ In the first chapter of Part Two, Okonkwo is instructed through a kind of repetition or review of his life from childhood to manhood, for the purpose of renewing his way of seeing. The first truth he is taught is the role of the female; not only has Okonkwo committed a female crime of inadvertently killing a boy when his gun exploded, but his penalty is seven (the number we saw in the opening passage) years exile in his motherland:

Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or 'Mother is Supreme'? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka. . . .

You do not know the answer? So you see that you are a child. . . . Listen to me. . . . It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme (94).

In spite of the additive qualities of the motherland (D) as sympathy, refuge and

²⁷ Cartey, p. 100.

protection, Okonkwo's course is clear cut: he will eschew the feminine and, unchanged, act towards others as he acted before. Though the rhythms of the clan are by no mean perfect, he refuses to respond to their fulfillment and direction, and refers later to these years as "wasted." "He cannot see the wise balance," Ravenscroft writes, "in the tribal arrangement by which the female principle is felt to be simultaneously weak and sustaining."²⁸ But the newly introduced element of the white men will alter his course much further. As subtle as the colonists' entrance is the narrator's addition of a feature at a time: at first an unknown, the white men become a joke, then formidable missionaries, then government, then place of judgment, then "religion and trade and government" and prison (123).

For all the disruption wrought by the whites, Christianity is not itself necessarily bad. The customs of the clan, which had been considered by some to be foolish or baneful and would in time be altered as others had, are accelerated to change by Christianity. Nwoye accepts the religion primarily because it answers a felt need. "It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow," like the folk tales he loved earlier. "The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul [just as he and Ikemefuna had sat in darkness listening to Okonkwo's tales of the past]—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed" (104). Christianity speaks directly to Nwoye's needs, not in rational or doctrinal terms but in mercy and comfort of spirit. Nor does it seem that his reaction is destructive of any of the prior values of the clan; certainly Ikemefuna was a richly responsive human, lacking neither masculine strength nor feminine mercy, and the only counter to Nwoye's inclinations was Okonkwo's insistence on masculinity. Christianity itself is greatly varied by its practitioners, the missionaries, for whereas Brown (midway between black and white) actually tried to understand African belief and respond with some sensitivity to the people (he is still obtuse: "a frontal attack . . . would not succeed," 128), another, with the nondescript name of Smith, "saw things as black and white. And black was evil" (130). Such dogmatic cruelty had not appeared in the novel until this missionary; and of course he succeeds because he is inflexible and tyrannical, while complex persons of compassion are overcome or bypassed.

Seven years was a long time to be away from one's clan. A man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.

Okonkwo knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the clan. But some of these losses were not irreparable. He was deter-

²⁸ Arthur Ravenscroft, *Chinua Achebe* (London: Longmans, Green, 1969), p. 13.

mined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years.

Even in his first year of exile he had begun to plan for his return. The first thing he would do would be to rebuild his compound on a more magnificent scale. He would build a bigger barn than he had before and he would build huts for two new wives. Then he would show his wealth by initiating his sons in the 'ozo' society. Only the really great men in the clan were able to do this. Okonkwo saw clearly the high esteem in which he would be held, and he saw himself taking the highest title in the land. (121)

The rhythms are clearly evident with the beat of key words and tenses and voices: "he knew" (twice), "he had lost" (three times), and so on to "he would return," "he would build," "he would show," "he would be held," and "he saw." One of the peculiar effects of this repetition is that "he" is doing all the acting and thinking so that the repetitions advance with very little return to the beginning for elaboration. The "redundancy" lacks the element of "addition." Okonkwo marches forward, dreaming, not reflecting, not in fact building upon the prior words and thoughts. His mind works from knowing in truth to seeing in fantasy, from knowledge of loss to determination to overcome and excel. The repetitions mirror the stress between Okonkwo's linear mentality and the clan's circular, rhythmic mode of repetition. For Okonkwo personally nothing has changed at home: he curses his son Nwoye from the family and wishes Ezinma were a boy, "She understood things so perfectly" (122). Socially, however, outside Okonkwo's mind, there is now the new religion, trade, government; and everyone knew the white man " 'has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart' " (124-25).

The rhythmic coherence of the novel is sustained through to the end, at least when the narrator is describing the actions of the clan. The words of the District Commissioner, however, or words describing his actions, appear to be syntactically and philosophically different. For instance, in the final chapter we read the complex sentence:

When the District Commissioner arrived at Okonkwo's compound at the head of an armed band of soldiers and court messengers he found a small crowd of men sitting wearily in the obi. He commanded them to come outside, and they obeyed without a murmur. (146)

The sentences are "subordinative" and sequential in narration of facts—this happened and then that—not at all in the "additive" rhythmic manner of accumulation of detail by repetition.²⁹ We are confronted by the difference between his speech and the clan's speech when the Commissioner complains to himself, "One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous

²⁹ Cf. Senghor, p. 214: "Il y a plus, la structure de la phrase négro-africaine est naturellement rythmée. Car, tandis que les langues indo-européennes usent d'une syntaxe logique de subordination, les langues négro-africaines recourent, plus volontiers, à une syntaxe intuitive de coordination et de juxtaposition." See also Robert Kauffman, "African Rhythm: A Reassessment," *Ethnomusicology* 24, 3 (1980), 402, 406.

words," for redundancy or copiousness is indeed one of the marks of oral speech. Rhythmic language follows as Obierika and his fellows approach Okonkwo's body hanging from a tree:

There was a small bush behind Okonkwo's compound. The only opening into this bush from the compound was a little round hole in the red-earth wall through which fowls went in and out in their endless search for food. The hole would not let a man through. It was to this bush that Obierika led the Commissioner and his men. They skirted round the compound, keeping close to the wall. The only sound they made was with their feet as they crushed dry leaves.

The passage features assonance of the "o" to depict the "round hole," the now-familiar parallelism, repetition, specificity of detail and images, and continual expansion of the scene by repetition and addition. The verb "to be" dominates the sentences—"There was," "the opening . . . was," "it was"—and the weight of meaning is carried by objects, "bush," "compound," "hole," as if one's actions are relatable chiefly to stable poles of identification in the village rather than to one's personal activities.³⁰ The monosyllabic detail of the words quoted above gives them a symbolic tone, as if that little hole were the impossible fissure through which Okonkwo had passed by suicide into non-existence. The rhythmic phrasing stands sharply against the closing words of the Commissioner which are again logical and process-oriented, analytical, unsuperfluous, and non-African, with weight on verbs: he "arrived," "found," "commanded . . . and they obeyed." His arrogant dismissal of Okonkwo's story as deserving a bare paragraph in his book is mirrored in the straightforward, one-dimensional prose.

The style of the novel and its structure thus draw attention to the exquisite tension between traditional English prose and the unique African and/or Igbo quality Achebe has created; it is, as Lloyd Brown says, "a total cultural experience, . . . the embodiment of its civilization."³¹ Achebe himself is keenly aware of this quality of African style, as he points out in a passage from a Fulani creation myth: "You notice . . . how in the second section . . . we have that phrase *became too proud* coming back again and again like the recurrence of a dominant beat in rhythmic music?"³² In a discussion of his own prose, he illustrates "how I approach the use of English":

³⁰ In the quotation from p. 123 the repetition of "he" and active verbs—"He knew," "he would do," "he would rebuild."—confirms our sense that Okonkwo is operating outside the cultural rhythms of the clan. Marjorie Winters in "An Objective Approach to Achebe's Style," *Research in African Literatures* 12, 1 (1981), 55–68, describes the length of the narrator's sentences, his spare use of adjectives and adverbs, the "unusual" number of "introductory demonstratives," the clarity achieved by his "redundancy of connective signposts" ('and so'), "as well as other repetitious elements." Her approach differs from mine but her results do not oppose conclusions drawn here.

³¹ Lloyd Brown, "Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe's Fiction," *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1976), p. 133.

³² Chinua Achebe, "Language and the Destiny of Man," *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 56–7.

'I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow.'

Now supposing I had put it another way. Like this for instance:

*'I am sending you as my representative among these people—just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight.'*³³

Though Achebe does not spell out the differences between these passages, he seems fully conscious that the repetition of the "if" clauses creates that quality of rhythm which is missing in the "English" version, the metaphorical phrasing which, we should observe, is used in a colloquial rather than philosophical or proverbial sense. Rhythm, as Achebe seems well aware, thus can range from a stress within a phrase or sentence, to the structuring principle of a paragraph, to the form of an entire work. Through such a reading we may learn about the nature of rhythm and orality, and about the form of the novel, but especially we may better see the unique English Achebe has created and realize its African tone in order "to understand another whose language" one, as a non-African, "does not speak."³⁴

³³ Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, pp. 101-02.

³⁴ Achebe, "Where Angels Fear to Tread," *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 79.

Eleventh annual Florida State University Conference on Comparative Literature and Film: "Gender: Literary and Cinematic Representation." Major speaker: Teresa de Lauretis, author of *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*; also a panel discussion on a film, introduced and chaired by Peter Lehman, founding editor of *Wide Angle*. January 30 and 31, February 1, 1986. For further information, write to Jeanne Ruppert, University Press, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306.