

## NO LONGER AT EASE AND THE THINKING OF LIMITS

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### Abstract

*Chinua Achebe's works can be deceptive in their classical simplicity. Such is the case with No Longer at Ease (1960). For critics used to referring the work to what is thought to stand behind it (which it represents) or to what stands before it, which it is aiming to correct or give normative direction to, this second novel of Chinua Achebe is particularly disappointing, apparently lacking what Samuel Johnson calls a 'moral purpose'. The power of the text, however, becomes manifest when the action is analysed as a significant pattern; and the pattern in question is literary tragedy. In this particular tragic pattern, the character begins his career, with all certainty about his personal freedom, but goes on to discover from episode to episode that he is locked in a situation of constraint, and ringed round by limits he cannot pass over or sidestep. In this paper we shall examine the narrative in the light of these limits and this constraint.*

**Keywords:** *anguish, anguished freedom, boundary situation, deliberation, lifeworld, tragic constraint, tragic discovery, tragic struggle*

*No Longer at Ease* is undoubtedly 'a story of suffering' (*pathêtikon*), as projected in Aristotle's *Poetics*, chapter 24, complete with anagnorisis and peripeteia. It has particular poignancy or 'human pity' (Murray 107), as a chapter, so to say, in 'the history of the defeated and the lost' (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 75). The protagonists of Achebe's other novels suffer defeat, but none is 'lost' as in the case of Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease*. The effect is that he seems to be the least significant of Achebe's characters. The others are able to attain definition and scale not only by quality of thought (*dianoia*) and action (*praxis*) (Aristotle, *Poetics* chapter 6), but also by reference to the limits (*horos*) against which they struggle. Struggle is the most frequently occurring of the modes of *articulation of praxis* (Barthes 107). So it is in Chinua Achebe's oeuvre. Struggle as *praxis*

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places the protagonist on one side, his opponent on the other and between them an *issue*. The protagonist is *the* character (*ethos*), strictly so called: he is not just one who performs actions and exercises thought relating to an action that is already set in motion; more fundamentally, there is a certain initiative which is his: *proairesis*, as it is called, namely 'rational choice of actions to be undertaken ... the foundation of *praxis*' (99). So the resultant sequence is his in a special way. In *No Longer at Ease*, choice of action to be undertaken, which is apparently preceded by deliberation, and gives rise to the struggle should be Obi's. In this work, however, things are shifting ceaselessly, and various *things*, including Obi himself, are at one point or another being struggled over. This indecision whether Obi is a party in a struggle or the object over which others struggle is a very important reason why he is so *lost* in his own narrative.

The term *limit* is used in two senses in this paper: the first is the temporal scheme envisaged by Aristotle during which the action of the sequence is played out. On this he writes in chapter 24 that 'it must be possible for the beginning and end of the work to be taken in one view', and shows by this means one of the key differences between drama and epic poetry. The second sense is the 'boundary situation', by reference to which the character's quality of soul is determined. Even though these conceptions of *limit* are different things, the first temporal, the second ethical, literally, related to character (*ethos*), Aristotle creates a link between them:

The limit, however, set by the actual nature of the thing is this: the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude. As a rough general formula, 'a length which allows of the hero passing by a series of probable or necessary stages from misfortune to happiness, or from happiness to misfortune', may suffice as a limit for the magnitude of the story. (Chapter 7)

Length is therefore an element of magnitude, but still more important is the experience of the character, if by probability or necessity the chain of events brings about a change of fortune for this personage. The temporal scheme counts if it is determined by this chain of events. The moment is of special significance in a literary sequence because of the status it invests the character with; for 'It is only in the plot that action has a contour, a limit (*horos*) and, as a consequence, a magnitude' (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 39).

By reason of the change of fortune involved, the boundary situation marks the limits of the freedom of the character; hence, it is associated with tragic characters and tragic sequences. It involves a 'pattern of possible alternatives'

(Barthes 82); in tragedy, however, these are not real alternatives, as either course of action is bound to set off the tragic stream and activate the tragic reversal of fortunes for the character. The great example of this process in Chinua Achebe is in *Arrow of God*, where the eating of the sacred yams is for Ezeulu the eating of *death*, and refusing to do so great suffering for all of Umuaro, including members of Ezeulu's own household; and according to the Chief Priest, 'It could not be my wish to ruin all these people' (Chapter 18). Ezeulu is strictly caught up in this boundary situation, unable to choose which way to go. But inaction means that by default he has chosen *not* to eat the sacred yams. He is under the rule of necessity in a similar way as some of the Greek tragic heroes. But the narrative differs from classical tragedy in the way the narrative perspective so distances itself from the character's perspective as to create the impression of almost two distinct stories. In this ironical split perspective, the question of the functional role of the boundary situation becomes undecidable. By that token, the 'magnitude' of the sequence and the scale of the character both become undecidable.

The Ezeulu who lives on beyond the pair of alternatives comprising his boundary situation is really an effigy of himself. The catastrophe that befalls him in the death of his son Obika is probable in its own terms, and has no direct link to the boundary situation. It is his enemies that draw the link. Ezidemili, for instance, is the first to comment: 'This should teach him how far he could dare next time'. The implicit judgement that he has been punished for refusing to eat the sacred yams will feed into the popular discourse, where, as we know, in a confrontation between 'the laws of the signs of the gods and of the voice of the people' (Heidegger 312), the people are prejudicially *for* their welfare, not for the law: To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors—that no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against his clan.

The effect of this calumny would be that from the confrontation with the boundary situation to the catastrophe of Obika, we are dealing with one event, whereas the narrative process had produced two. There is also powerful irony in the gloating of Ezeulu's enemies, since they do not realize what has happened to *them*. What ought to be done and what ought not to be done in this narrative are not a dilemma private to Ezeulu. The question is rooted in the cultural lifeworld; and since 'moral discourse is tied back into the lifeworld of socialized subjects both at the outset and in its issue' (Cronin xxxvii), an unsatisfactory

resolution of such a question leaves a fissure in that lifeworld. This is the fatal internal weakness whereby Umuaro comes out of the crisis utterly changed.

In other works like *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*, the boundary situation does not call attention to itself as in *Arrow of God*, but the crossing of it always goes with a change in fortune, as in the decision to expel the missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* strongly urged by Okonkwo, Nanga's decision to use violence and thuggery in running his electoral campaign, and the killing of Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah*. *No Longer at Ease* shares a lot more in common with *Arrow of God*.

The boundary situation in *No Longer at Ease* is connected to the crisis of the narrative, where the major threads in the story come together: Obi Okonkwo's proposed marriage to Clara, who calls herself an *osu*. Obi is brought up short at the moment of this announcement:

'What's the matter, Clara? Tell me.' He was no longer unruffled. There was a hint of tears in his voice.

'I am an *osu*,' she wept. Silence. She stopped weeping and quietly disengaged herself from him. Still he said nothing.

'So you see we cannot get married,' she said, quite firmly, almost gaily—a terrible kind of gaiety. Only the tears showed she had wept.

'Nonsense!' said Obi. He shouted it almost, as if by shouting it now he could wipe away those seconds of silence, when everything had seemed to stop, waiting in vain for him to speak. (71)

Obi's 'silence, when everything had seemed to stop, waiting in vain for him to speak' is the psychologically important moment in the narrative. He is apparently faced with a decision to be put into words. At the emotional level, however, he has already crossed the boundary situation and the point of decision without knowing it. He has made commitments to Clara deeper than words – which means that accepting that 'we cannot get married' is not a question of stopping short at the threshold of commitment, but withdrawing from a commitment already made:

Until Obi met Clara on board the cargo boat *Sasa* he had thought of love as another grossly over-rated European invention. It was not that he was indifferent to women. On the contrary, he had been quite intimate with a few in England—a Nigerian, a West Indian, English girls, and so on. But these intimacies which Obi regarded as love were neither deep nor sincere. There was always a part of him, the thinking part, which seemed to stand outside it all watching the passionate embrace with cynical disdain. The

result was that one half of Obi might kiss a girl and murmur: 'I love you,' but the other half would say: 'Don't be silly.' And it was always this second half that triumphed in the end when the glamour had evaporated with the heat, leaving a ridiculous anti-climax.

With Clara it was different. It had been from the very first. There was never a superior half at Obi's elbow wearing a patronising smile. (63)

Obi can either continue along the path in which fate or the Power of Events, as Achebe has spoken of this force playing a controlling role in human affairs (*Hopes and Impediments*), has thrust him – and take the consequences, as his mother makes clear to him, or abandon his own self-commitment and face another kind of situation that of *anguished freedom*, as Sartre calls it.

The remark in the scene of Clara's disclosure, 'when everything had seemed to stop' is undoubtedly the narrator's. But it is remarked not from an even distance from the consciousnesses of the two characters. It is Clara who has a keen interest in Obi's reaction to her announcement who notes that his speech action is delayed. Clara is in fact the 'everything' that 'had seemed to stop, waiting in vain for him to speak'. By disguising Clara's reading of the situation as narration, the narrator has forsaken Obi. Obi is more isolated than he has inkling of. Clara at any rate has *heard* Obi's silence, and what she has heard is not cancelled by the subsequent shouted speech event. As a result of what she has heard, she has taken a position, and seems now to be standing back somewhat from her own commitment to Obi. Hence:

At half-past two on the following day he called for Clara and told her they were going to Kingsway to buy an engagement ring.

'When?' was all she could ask. (65)

Seen from the point of view of the boundary situation, *No Longer at Ease* is a tragedy, the grimmest of Chinua Achebe's tragedies, because in such a situation, 'with all the protective covering stripped off, the hero faces as if no man ever faced it before the existential question' (Sewall 5). This existential question is formulated by Heidegger as 'who man is and where he is settling his existence' (312). Is man, for instance, a creature of convention, faced on all sides by 'oughts' or 'systematic imperatives'? (Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* 5). This question is fleshed out somewhat where we first catch a glimpse of Obi's consciousness after the passage with Clara:

Obi felt better and more confident in his decision now that there was an opponent, the first of hundreds to come no doubt. Perhaps it was not a

decision really; for him there could be only one choice. It was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god, thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of Time. Quite unbelievable. (65)

We may extrapolate from here that Obi's silence at Clara's announcement is a moment of reflection, leading to a decision not to flee. The silence, however, would have been meaningless if at the moment of the announcement Obi had thought it 'scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god'. This is a new insight which had taken shape from the fact that 'there was now an opponent'. The opponent is his friend Joseph.

But an opponent is precisely what Obi does not have. The meaning of the struggle from his kinsmen's point of view – beginning with Joseph – is to save Obi from himself, as they think he is about to throw himself away together with his future offspring. His father explains:

*Osu* is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that, my son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters. (121)

This comes as part of the struggle for Obi which is conducted by his relatives seriatim with unyielding tenacity, from point to point increasing the psychological pressure to the point that something has to give.

More likely, Obi's silence had given him a chance to consider whether to stay in the relationship or to flee, undoubtedly, an anguished reflection. The working of this anguish is seen in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*:

it must be understood not only that I must of necessity perpetually carry within me what I wish to flee but also that I must aim at the object of my flight in order to flee it. This means that anguish, the intentional aim of anguish, and a flight from anguish toward reassuring myths must all be

given in the unity of the same consciousness. In a word, I flee in order not to know, but I cannot avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish. Thus anguish, properly speaking, can be neither hidden nor avoided. (43)

In deciding not to flee, Obi is sticking to his commitment to Clara. That is, to turn his back on Umuofia and its taboos; to be his own man and not need validation or identity by reference to the ancient community, with its irrational norms; to live the life of pure reason: Obi has dramatically awakened to the realization that this is what being in the twentieth century promises.

To think of himself as a mid-twentieth century man is a way of denying to himself his anguished situation; the reassuring myth in Obi's case is being a mid-twentieth century man. But he cannot avoid knowing that he is fleeing; and since 'the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish', he is caught up in an inescapable tension. The boundary situation has launched Obi into an anguished flight. Before now being a man of Umuofia can be for him a source of genuine pleasure. At his reception in Umuofia, he has this (reported) monologue which he himself hears on behalf of the white man he mentally confronts:

It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. He wished they were here to-day to see. Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live. (45)

In his boundary situation, he can no longer be at ease with this same Umuofia with its 'men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed'. No more is he at ease with himself. He *is* anguished. As Sartre observes, 'It is certain that we can not overcome anguish, for we are anguish' (43). Sticking to his commitment to Clara means that he must prepare to do battle with Umuofia over its taboos, but it is flight from the anguish of breaking his commitment that drives him to the anguish of the struggle with Umuofia. The boundary situation is crisis – from every point of view.

As with the boundary situation itself, the battle begins before Obi has even made the decision to fight. It also takes a course he could not anticipate. A

critical stage is reached at the meeting of Umuofia Progressive Union shortly after the encounter with his friend Joseph, and it has been provoked by the Chairman of the Union who has intelligence of Obi's plans:

'We are pioneers building up our families and our town. And those who build must deny ourselves many pleasures. We must not drink because we see our neighbours drink or run after women because our thing stands up. You may ask why I am saying all this. I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her....'

Obi leapt to his feet trembling with rage. At such times words always deserted him.

'Please sit down, Mr Okonkwo,' said the President calmly.

'Sit down, my foot!' Obi shouted in English. 'This is preposterous! I could take you to court for that ... for that ... for that. ...'

'You may take me to court when I have finished.'

'I am not going to listen to you anymore'. (75)

As part of his entitlements, a mid-twentieth century man has the option of legal action to enforce his rights and privacy, but Obi does not go beyond the threat. To fight Umuofia, he needs to distance himself from the opponent. His unwillingness to take this necessary action amounts to *bad faith*: he is one and the same with the enemy he is going to fight, but he hides from himself this truth.

That the enemy is within – is himself – is already indicated in the critical silence in his passage with Clara, 'when everything had seemed to stop, waiting in vain for him to speak'. Obi is a man of Umuofia not merely because of his parents and ancestry. Although he has been brought up as an educated Christian, the traditional lifeworld with its value systems and taboos seem to have sustained their roles in his mental habits unchallenged. His parents have never given these up either: apparently nothing in their experience has happened to force these ruling ideas into the open to be confronted with their Christian faith. This is why their reaction to Obi's news that he is going to marry the daughter of Josiah Okeke of Mbaino is exactly in the same spirit as that of the members of Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos, only more dramatic. They show no sign of *deliberating* this matter, but display a gut reaction which makes sense only by reference to the lifeworld. For, according to Rehg:

The implicit agreement represented by such a lifeworld background stabilizes a communicatively integrated group insofar as it removes a large



body of assumptions from challenge – as it were, fusing validity with the facticity of a given cultural background. This is because the background not only provides its members with shared resources for managing conflict; as a source of shared identities, it also lessens the number of issues that are likely to be contested at any given time, so that large areas of social interaction rest on a stable basis of unquestioned consensus. (xvii)

Who Obi may marry, particularly whether he may marry someone like Clara stigmatized as she is by the cultural tradition is a matter on which the whole Umuofia claims competence to decide, and the verdict by one and all, whether traditionalist or Christian is the same. Simply, the matter is part of the body of assumptions stabilized under the rule of the cultural lifeworld and therefore removed from challenge. Disclosing the engagement to his father and confirming the identity of the young woman in question:

[the old man] laughed. It was the kind of laughter one sometimes heard from a masked ancestral spirit. He would salute you by name and ask you if you knew who he was. You would reply with one hand humbly touching the ground that you did not, that he was beyond human knowledge. Then he might laugh as if through a throat of metal. And the meaning of that laughter was clear: 'I did not really think you would know, you miserable human worm!'

Obi's father's laughter vanished as it had come—without warning, leaving no footprints.

'You cannot marry the girl,' he said quite simply. (120)

There is a slight ambiguity in the simile of the ancestral mask as to its source, whether it is purely narrative commentary or whether Obi's perception is at the core of it, and the narrator had only given flesh to the perception. The following report, the 'father's laughter vanished as it had come—without warning, leaving no footprints' does not fully clarify the ambiguity, but it highlights that Obi is observing his father and being struck by the way he is reacting to the disclosure he has made.

But he seems to have clearly made out that the laughter is not intentional. It is abrupt in its coming and vanishing, like the act of an *Other*, exercising the faculties of the old man without taking his leave. The laughter is an act of self-disclosure by this *Other* who would not let itself be seen in the ordinary course of things. There is more to Obi's father than meets the eye; certainly there is a ghost. The very next day, Obi is given a glimpse of it by his father himself:

He began slowly and quietly, so quietly that his words were barely audible. It seemed as if he was not really speaking to Obi. His face was turned sideways so that Obi saw it in vague profile.

'I was no more than a boy when I left my father's house and went with the missionaries. He placed a curse on me. I was not there but my brothers told me it was true. When a man curses his own child it is a terrible thing. And I was his first son.'

Obi had never heard about the curse. In broad daylight and in happier circumstances he would not have attached any importance to it. But that night he felt strangely moved with pity for his father. (125)

There is a curse. The old man believes in it. He is telling Obi about it now because he sees in Obi's plans towards Clara the fulfilment of the curse – just as the mother sees in it 'the meaning of [her] death in the dream' she had had the night before the arrival of Joseph's letter from Lagos about Clara and Obi (122-123). Even if the family no longer believes in the traditional fetishes and had given up the symbols of the old belief systems, their instinctive reactions continue to be governed by the lifeworld of traditional society and its meaning systems – for the lifeworld, according to Habermas,

forms both the horizon for speech situations and the source of interpretations, while it in turn reproduces itself only through ongoing communicative actions. (*Between Facts and Norms* 22)

The curse in the father's communicative action above re-presents the lifeworld 'deliberatively filtered' (*Between Facts and Norms* 302). By it, he makes his final appeal to Obi to respect the ancient taboo, which Obi receives with sympathy. This narrative, *No Longer at Ease* has profound echoes, not only because of the depth from which the communicative actions of the characters spring in moments of crisis, but also because of the narrative voice, especially where it is interpreting; for example, in the mask simile. There is deliberative filtering in the narrator's 'I did not really think you would know, you miserable human worm', for it has a view to a knowledge about which the ancestral mask is absolutely certain, the confident lack of access to which keeps the human 'worms' human, within their limits. The taboos are in fact in the region outside these limits. Obi's father, like his mother, and all Umuofia will not exercise thought beyond these limits. Obi has at last recognized these limits and will go back to Lagos subdued and resentful, in short, anguished.

In *No Longer at Ease*, the characters whose decisions influence the action are associated with anguish precisely because there are limits to their freedom – whether the limits be inward or outward. Consciously or not, they act with restraint. A few in this narrative are free of restraint: like Christopher:

Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, to whom and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in thus coming to terms with a double heritage. (100)

Each heritage imposes a horizon, obviously; and Christopher is 'rather outstanding in thus coming to terms' with both heritages marking his universe. He is one who has seized his own freedom, and his actions henceforth are marked by indeliberation and spontaneity.

The seizure of freedom has been associated by the narrator with 'second generation educated Nigerians'. Unlike the first generation, they are unafraid of being called 'uncivilized'. One trivial incident is shown where they drop the use of fork and knife for their *gari* and pounded yam. Obi is with Christopher and the second generation educated Nigerians on this (18). Similarly, in Obi's and Christopher's heated arguments 'about Nigeria's future', the point appears to be the argument, not a position one might be committed to on principle; for 'whichever line Obi took, Christopher had to take the opposite'. Obi's spontaneity crumbles to pieces with his suddenly being confronted with a limit he can neither surpass nor turn away from. His former freedom is now succeeded by an anguished existence. Is the early spontaneity of 'coming to terms with a double heritage' therefore founded on an illusion?

In Obi's case, however, if it is not a case of coming to terms with the double heritage, is it a case of his Christian upbringing or his Western education settling at the periphery of his consciousness, while the *old order* has kept out of sight at the centre where it is entrenched and has exclusive control? Although Obi's Western education has nurtured in him a critical attitude towards religious behaviour in general and issues of traditional decorum which are really underlain by superstition (56), he has had to fight with himself over the taboo of marrying an *osu*. But the reality is that he does not win this fight: he never really has fought. Only defiance he could muster, enabling him simultaneously to flee from his anguish and towards it:

Obi lay perfectly still on his back, looking up at the bamboo ceiling, the way he had been told as a child not to sleep. For it was said if he slept on his back and a spider crossed the ceiling above him he would have bad dreams.

He was amazed at the irrelevant thoughts that passed through his mind at this the greatest crisis in his life. He waited for his father to speak that he might put up another fight to justify himself. His mind was troubled not only by what had happened but also by the discovery that there was nothing in him with which to challenge it honestly. All day he had striven to rouse his anger and his conviction, but he was honest enough with himself to realise that the response he got, no matter how violent it sometimes appeared, was not genuine. It came from the periphery, and not the centre, like the jerk in the leg of a dead frog when a current is applied to it. (124)

Here then is revealed which system has command of Obi's consciousness at the depths where his thoughts have their wellsprings. There is a 'periphery' to this consciousness; and there is a 'centre'. Between these two levels there is a disconnect, the law of the 'periphery' deriving from elsewhere than the 'centre', as might be expected in an individual *at ease* within himself, free of anguish, integrated. Perhaps the law of this 'periphery' is from the 'mid-twentieth century', from Western education, or from the spirit of rebellion – seen in his attitude towards religion, towards the colonist and his institutions, towards *official* positions in general, as in an intercepted letter he had written to Hitler at eleven years of age; or from sympathy towards the underdog. Something of his habits of thought may be glimpsed in the following reflection on that letter to Hitler:

'What was Hitler to me or I to Hitler? I suppose I felt sorry for him. And I didn't like going into the bush every day to pick palm-kernels as our "Win the War Effort".' He suddenly became serious. 'And when you come to think of it, it was quite immoral of the headmaster to tell little children every morning that for every palm-kernel they picked they were buying a nail for Hitler's coffin'. (33)

Obi has never been at ease with official dogmas and positions. So for him, living, being a member of organized society has always been *anguished*. In the above passage he *suddenly gets serious* and produces a critique of public rationality. His boundary situation entails a deeper and more tragic questioning concerning the law of the 'centre' with its 'intersubjectively shared know-how

that has gained acceptance in the lifeworld' (Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other* 26).

The lifeworld is not directly experienced. It would appear in this narrative that the traditional lifeworld has continued unobtrusively to govern the lives of the individuals despite that they have become officially Christian. The crisis of *No Longer at Ease* is not simply about Obi. There is a confrontation between the lifeworld of Christianity and traditionalism. This confrontation reminds us of *Antigone*, where two laws, both backed by divinity are in conflict: the law about piety towards the dead and the law about loyalty towards the city. Such is the tragic confrontation which brings back the question 'who man is'. For literature, the goal is not to solve this problem: it can *solve* no problem – and certainly not the questions of existence which are enigmas by constitution. There is only a symbolic act of (re)discovery of a problem and thereby not letting it slide into forgetfulness. There is also a symbolic act of following the unfolding of the problem to the limits without blinking. What literature achieves is particularly, as Paul Ricoeur says, to signify the necessity 'ever to begin again and rebegin everything in the dimension of thought' (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 288). But this has consequences: subversion is at play in thinking the enigmas of existence and uncovering in the process fissures in the founding structures of human society, and in the solid rationality of a cultural lifeworld. Under what Frank Kermode calls a 'lust for commitment' (104), it is taken to be subversive – or sometimes reconstructive – by intention.

### Conclusion

Obi Okonkwo's education had left him with a sense of being in charge of his own destiny. As very often in this book, there are trivial incidents, which end up saying a great deal more than at first. For example, his turning up at his own reception organized for him by the Umuofia Union in 'shirtsleeves because of the heat' is called by the narrator 'Obi's mistake Number One' (28). His decision is based on circumstances of weather, leaving out the question of *propriety*. In other words, he is making decisions where no room is allowed for one, independent action being foreclosed by the demands of convention. Independence of action, which means that one sets up one's own rules in a social world, is rare in literature. The *Odyssey* is one of the greatest examples of success in this regard. In tragedy, however, it is a point on which many a character meets his defeat. As Northrop Frye has written, 'We are born ... within a pre-existing social contract out of which we develop what individuality we have, and the interests of that society take priority over the interests of the

individual' (101). Obi is somewhat uncertain in the company of Christopher who is said to be 'rather outstanding in ... coming to terms with a double heritage', but his assumption is that he is entitled to his freedom and tacitly assigns priority to his individual values. His self-assurance that he can make his own rules is underscored in this dialogue with Joseph:

'Are you going to marry the English way or are you going to ask your people to approach her people according to custom?'

'I don't know yet. It depends on what my father says.'

'Did you tell him about it during your visit?'

'No, because I hadn't decided then.'

'He will not agree to it,' said Joseph. 'Tell anyone that I said so.'

'I can handle them,' said Obi, 'especially my mother'. (67)

It is one of his big discoveries in this crisis that he cannot handle his parents, especially *his* mother, a discovery that brings home to him all at once that his existence is under constraint. His Christian parents turn out to be the means through which the old folk tradition reasserts its unchallenged dominance and standing as a lifeworld prior to and excluded from all deliberation – except perhaps as part of the crisis of a boundary situation.

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