CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In an almost archetypal scene in Chinua Achebe's 1964 novel *Arrow of God*, a mother and her three children gather in her house in her husband's compound after dinner. The novel is set in Southeastern Nigeria in 1922, when British colonization and Christian evangelization were first penetrating every level of Igbo society. Half in darkness, Ugoye tells two of her children a story. She and her listeners sit in a 'close group near the cooking place', enjoying a communion that complements the completed communal acts of preparing and eating food. Sitting apart from the others, beside the palm-oil taper that is the single source of light, is the eldest brother, Oduche, absorbed in his new school reader, the first book ever to enter the family's compound. He sits near 'the entrance to the one sleeping-room':[1] reading, like sleeping and dreaming, opens a door to a separate, interior world that each person enters alone.

After negotiating with her listeners, Ugoye embarks upon a story about a man with two wives, one 'wicked and envious' and the other good and long-suffering (191).[2] That story arises from and returns to the lived context of the teller and her listeners as Ugoye expresses her own feelings as the younger of two wives in a polygynous household. The children attend eagerly to a story they already know but have not heard 'too often' (190). The tale narrates the differing fates of two sons by two mothers who travel to the land of spirits. By contrast, Ugoye's own son, Oduche, is not reading a story such as his siblings listen to but is performing a school exercise, and his reading appears mechanical and a chore. Oduche's 'lips moved silently as he spelt out and formed the first words of the reader', words entirely stripped of context:

a b a	aba
e g o	ego
i r o	iro

a z u	azu
ọ m u	ọmu (191)

The contrast between speech and writing is a central topos in African literature. Although, as Simon Battestini has shown, there have always been graphic traditions in Africa, the practice of writing and reading words on paper, as opposed to graphic marks on textiles, walls, and bodies, has come relatively recently to many parts of Africa south of the Sahara, brought either by Arabs or by Europeans. The forms of writing used by the European colonizers, including the roman alphabet, but also the printing press, the codex book, the genre of the novel, and the practice of reading for pleasure and self-cultivation, have therefore frequently been regarded in Africa as both new and foreign, and have occupied a central place in the configuration known as modernity. Print literacy's association with the modern and the foreign has, in turn, generated a corresponding association of spoken communication with the traditional and the indigenous.

Africa has been called 'the oral continent par excellence',[3] and many Africans have readily accepted the label. In response to the long tradition in Europe that values written stories over stories that are *merely* told, an important task of modern African writers and thinkers has been to recuperate oral traditions and insist on their dignity and richness. Orality, meaning both oral communication and the memory of that communication, is frequently regarded not just as the repository of African values and traditions but as a medium that is itself essentially African, regardless of content. Even critical discussion of African writing has tended to value orality as the bearer of tradition and of the cultural expression of the unschooled majority, and therefore as the premier sign of Africanness and cultural authenticity.

In the second edition of *Arrow of God*, published ten years after the first, Achebe retained the hearth scene but cut the bulk of Ugoye's story. The elimination of the digression to another narrative sharpens the contrast between hearing a story and reading a page. Olakunle George judges that Achebe's novel 'places orality and literacy in coeval time, and recasts their relationship as a supple dialectic rather than a deterministic teleology'.[4] He follows Eileen Julien in arguing that orality is not the measure of Africanness and authenticity, and literacy not that of modernity or alienation, but rather that the two media coexist and establish distinct but intersecting generic traditions and discursive communities. Achebe, however, weights the scales in favour of orality because readers of

the novel are closer to Ugoye's listeners, who are also enjoying a narrative, than they are to Oduche.

The story Ugoye tells and the words Oduche reads are both in Igbo (not, however, as we shall see, the same Igbo), but the traditional tale has been translated for the English-language reader while the page of writing is left untranslated because reading lessons are language-specific in a way that stories do not have to be. Ugoye's tale, like everything said by the Igbo characters in Achebe's English-language novel, appears transparent and accessible to readers. The words that Oduche contemplates, however, cannot be translated because they are random and without context, intended not to convey meaning but to teach the letters of the alphabet. Although Achebe's readers see the same letters as Oduche, we are not doing what he is doing. He is not reading words but learning to read them. We imagine him sounding out or mouthing the letters in order to hear how the sounds they represent make words. Practised readers do not hear the sounds represented by phonemes but see words as wholes. We do not read letter by letter and often not even word by word but in larger units.

Because his novel is a narrative like Ugoye's, Achebe insists on the continuity between his own writing and oral story-telling. The writer's claim to a relation to oral tradition is a familiar move in African literature: the first two generations of African novelists and poets regularly sought to establish such continuities by writing down oral traditions or by creating styles that reflected qualities of the oral tradition. The rubrics of Léopold Sédar Senghor's poems indicate that they are to be accompanied by the kora or the balafong, that is, by music. Achebe's historical novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* feature a proverb-laden style that echoes Igbo oratory and traditional narrative.

The logo of the Clairafrique chain of bookstores in Senegal (Figure 1) graphically expresses this notion that books perform the functions associated with oral culture and that African writers and literary critics are the equivalent of town criers, griots or praise singers, and traditional singers of tales. The logo features a drummer singing towards the sky against the background of a book as tall as himself. The upright book and its rounded spine echo the cylindrical and tapered shape of his drum. The drummer, wearing no visible clothes, is clearly a figure of tradition rather than, say, of contemporary mbalax music.

Even as African writers insist on their continuity with indigenous oral traditions, however, they implicate themselves in an activity (writing) defined as non-African. Mamoussé Diagne's magisterial *Critique*

Figure 1 The logo of the Clairafrique chain of bookstores in Senegal. Clairafrique is dedicated to the diffusion of African literature through its stores, its programmes, and its publishing arm.

de la raison orale, a scrupulous and authoritative investigation into traditional oral genres, has a subtitle, *Les Pratiques discursives en Afrique noire*, which presumes that black African discursive practices are essentially oral. African culture, Diagne writes, owes its distinctiveness to the conditions of its manufacture, just as European philosophical and scientific culture derives from the nature of writing. Yet the author photograph on the covers of his books shows Diagne's head against a wall of bookshelves stocked with books of uniform height and varied colours. This is a fitting self-representation for the Senegalese scholar whose weighty tome is a model of literary erudition with footnotes on every page and a comprehensive bibliography.

Every instance of oral discourse that Diagne analyses is quoted from a book. The irony is readily explained: the task of recuperating the oral falls to writers who attended school and were inspired by the literature they encountered there to forge literary and scholarly traditions of their own. In this sense then, there is no contradiction when Diagne *writes* about oral reason, for orality was created as a subject matter worthy of academic study by a literate tradition of scholarship. The question of orality arises because of literacy; better said, the nature of orality is only a question for literacy. That, at least, is the argument of Paulin Hountondji in *Sur la philosophie africaine*.

A similar irony exists in *Arrow of God*. Achebe has proclaimed that he 'would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my 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'.[5] There is an implied gulf between the Igbo characters in *Arrow of God*, who have no need to learn that lesson, and Nigerian readers of the novel, who, precisely because they can read English and have been exposed to a painful decentring of the world, need to be healed of the wound their reading has caused. Put another way: Achebe's writing is intended to remind Africans of what their training in reading has made them forget. The novel marks its great distance from Umuaro even as it seeks to recuperate precolonial Igboland for Nigerian readers.

Although Achebe's readers can understand Ugoye's story as they cannot understand the words in Oduche's primer, we are nonetheless aligned with Oduche's point of view by virtue of the fact that we have before us the very letters that he reads and, when reading, our upper bodies are likely to be in the same physical disposition as his: heads down, eyes moving across the marks on a white surface held to the light. Furthermore,

although none of the people of Umuaro can read the English-language novel in which they appear, Oduche, we assume, will one day be able to join us, the circle of readers, and read as he is now being read. Achebe's Nigerian readers, even today, are likely to have read books in circumstances similar to Oduche's. While he is seated on the floor, contemporary Nigerian readers are more likely sitting in chairs or perhaps on steps, but they, too, will have had to find a private retreat in the midst of family and, even where there is electricity, will know what it is to read by the flicker of candlelight. They will know books intimately, as tactile objects whose covers fade in sunlight, whose pages yellow and curl with humidity and can be tunnelled into by insects, and whose corners become soft like cloth. They may also know them as treasures that fit easily in the hand and whose machine-produced lines of type, numbered pages, and conventions of illustration bear testimony to the often distant city where they were produced.

Although it has not received as much critical attention as orality, literacy is as prominent a theme in African literature and for good reason: postcolonial novels are all written texts. African authors share with all writers a deep personal experience of the materials and conditions of writing. Scholars, novelists, poets, and journalists all know writing as an activity involving the body, requiring light and silence, and, in the case of typewriters, making noise. They also know reading and writing as mental activities, promoting forms of concentration that can be described as either alertness or distraction and reverie. African writers have seen their names and photos on books that travel the world independent of their creators. These experiences cannot but leave a mark on the texts that they write.

The importance of literacy in Africa as a subject of study has recently been recognized by historians and cultural anthropologists. Stephanie Newell has studied the place of English-language literacy in Ghanaian popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century, and Derek Peterson the genres of Gikuyu literacy in Kenya during the same period. Both Newell and Peterson figure among the scholars that Karin Barber brought together in a collection of research on ordinary literacy among Africans under colonial rule. Wendy Griswold has studied the reading habits of contemporary Nigerians, and Robert Fraser has written a postcolonial book history, tracing the development of the market for books and other printed material in Africa and India.[6] Literacy as a theme in African literature, however, in contrast to orality as a theme, has not yet received critical attention.

Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy traces the history of the spread of literacy in Africa and the West Indies in the twentieth century by using historical novels as case studies. I examine first *Arrow of God*, set in 1922, and Wole Soyinka's novel *Ìsarà*, set in the late thirties and early forties, which recreates the experience of the author's father's generation, that of the first West African readers sufficiently numerous to constitute a class of their own.

The same tension between orality and literacy exists in the literature of the Caribbean, where the bulk of the population is descended from African slaves. Slaves were prohibited from learning to read, and mission schools were set up in the English-speaking West Indies in the nineteenth century, not much earlier than in West Africa. Throughout most of West Indian history, only a small elite was ever literate, and the vast bulk of the verbal culture of the Afro-Caribbean was and is oral in expression. Because oral memory preserved tales, proverbs, and figures of speech from Africa, and because the tongues of the colonized preserved the sounds of the languages of Africa even as they spoke English, French, or Spanish words, oral culture has commonly been regarded as the repository of Afro-Caribbean cultural authenticity. Certainly, the scene of the elder telling stories to children is as regular a feature of West Indian literature as it is of African literature.

Indeed, in Caribbean literature, the divide between literacy and orality can seem even wider than it does in African literature. Because, in the West Indies, the oral and the written involve the same language, their mutual imbrication is more obvious, as are their divergent implications for class and relations to the imperial metropole. The Indo-Trinidadian novelist V. S. Naipaul, uncomfortable with orality's association with Afro-Caribbean culture, attributes an absolute value to the act of writing and to the historicizing consciousness that he believes it promotes. His novel *A House for Mr Biswas*, the earliest of the novels studied here, like Soyinka's *Ìsarà*, is a novel about the author's father and his growing consciousness of being surrounded by words printed on paper. Alone among his generation, Mr Biswas measures himself by what he learns of other worlds from books and newspapers. The result is both a painful, even debilitating, existential despair *and* a deeper awareness of the capacity of writing to record and so to counter that despair. That awareness constitutes Mr Biswas's legacy to his son.

No African (and perhaps no European) writer would go as far as Naipaul in finding redemption in writing, but neither would any be prepared to follow the Jamaican novelist Erna Brodber in attributing

heightened powers to orality. Her novel *Myal*, set in Jamaica in the second decade of the twentieth century, tells the story of the coming of print literacy as a potential spiritual disaster averted by the spirit guardians of the community's oral memory. In *Myal* orality does more than survive the transformation of the world by print literacy: as a medium orality sees around and contains literacy, in the way that elsewhere literacy has always claimed to identify and know orality.

The four novels by Achebe, Soyinka, Naipaul, and Brodber, recreating the coming of literacy before the births of the authors themselves, together constitute a synoptic history of literacy in Africa and the West Indies in the first half of the twentieth century, the same period covered by the cultural historians Barber, Peterson, and Newell.

Canonical fiction in English (and French) from Africa and the Caribbean, my object of study, is, however, largely a product of the second half of the twentieth century, of the decade before and the decades since the wave of national independences that began with Ghana in 1957. Literacy was already well established in Africa and the West Indies when the writers I examine were born. Conscious of their status as literary pioneers, Achebe, Soyinka, and Naipaul have all felt compelled to seek the origins of their own practice of writing and to revisit the moment when history, in the specific sense of a written record of the past, became conceivable.

Because literacy created a new category of disadvantage called illiteracy, the critical distance from the immediate world that the written text affords also gave rise to an alienation from the community. And when writing objectifies language, the colonized have often found themselves fixed on paper in powerful, pernicious ways. While Soyinka and Naipaul celebrate the capacity of their writing to restore the past, Brodber regards literacy as a kind of demonic spirit possession that alienates people from their true selves and creates haunting shadow selves on paper.

Born a decade after the fathers of African and West Indian literature and started upon a writing career significantly later, Brodber manifests an ironic ambivalence to writing on paper. That ambivalence is shared by postcolonial writers of the subsequent generations, as the values of modernity and nationhood that the first colonial readers associated with literacy come to seem like ironic mockery. The ambivalence has been strongest where the possession of literacy skills was linked to racial divisions, as in the West Indies or the white-supremacist settler colonies of Southern Africa. In Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe), for instance, where writing on paper was not just a metonym of modernity but also a direct tool of the

totalitarian racist state, the connotations of reading and writing are more bitter than anything encountered in West Africa. In Zimbabwean literature there is less optimism about literacy than in Soyinka but also less emphasis on continuity with oral tradition, because of the peculiar dangers that the affirmation of tradition posed in a racist state that enforced fixed notions of cultural essence. The fiction of Dambudzo Marechera, set in the 1960s and 1970s in Rhodesia, depicts print literacy's great capacity for violence without upholding orality as an alternative value. Marechera's is the first narrative considered here written in the first person, and as I will show, the division that writing fosters between the self of the writer/reader and the autonomous first-person pronoun written on paper became charged in Southern Africa with the painful alienation suffered by black Africans subject to state racism. As far as Marechera is concerned, the only new consciousness fostered by literacy and literary ambitions is a bitter awareness that the world has been written by others. He experiences writing on paper as a House of Hunger or a prison-house to which there is no outside.

My study concludes by briefly looking at the Senegalese novelist Boubacar Boris Diop's *Le Cavalier et son ombre*, a pessimistic allegory of the condition of the African writer in contemporary Africa, and at *The Farming of Bones* by Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, a novel that directly addresses a question presumed by the historical novels of Achebe, Soyinka, Naipaul, and Brodber: how does writing on paper provide access to the past and to the dead? Danticat's novel resurrects the 1930s and the victims of the great massacre of Haitian cane workers in the neighbouring Dominican Republic.

Because I discuss the seven novels roughly in order of publication, as well as in chronological order of when they are set, they allow me to tell two parallel stories: alongside the history of the spread of writing on paper and its changing significance I tell a literary history of Africa and the West Indies. The first colonial literates, like Mr Biswas or Akinyode Soditan, Soyinka's protagonist, were readers rather than writers. Their sons, among whom were the founders of African and West Indian literature, came of age and began their writing careers just as their countries became independent. In a later time of disillusionment, not just with decolonization but also with the power of literature, the next generation's relationship to writing is more fraught with irony and even despair than their predecessors'. The publishing careers of Brodber, Marechera, and Diop have been more irregular than Achebe, Soyinka, or Naipaul's – Brodber and Diop were late starting to write fiction and Marechera died of AIDS at the age

of 35 – and their novels conform less to the expectations of genre. My study concludes with Danticat, who represents at once a hope for and the limits of postcolonial writing. Danticat was not even born when Achebe published *Arrow of God*. Her migration to the USA as a child has meant that her relation to the world of publishing and to the market of readers of fiction is a happier one than Marechera or Diop enjoy, but, writing in English about Haiti, she also lives farther from the people she writes about than do any of the other writers in my study.

The story I tell here of the coming of literacy, a narrative of early excitement, later compromise, and final ambivalence, is a corrective to the narrative that has dominated previous scholarship, a story that too absolutely identifies Europe with the book, and Africa and Africans with orality. The story of literacy in Africa and the West Indies is not simply a story of a foreign cultural medium deforming the oral essence of the people's spirit. But neither is it the story of how the coming of print brought with it democracy and modernity, a triumphant story frequently (and often misleadingly) told about Europe and America. While many writers have insisted on the continuities their writing maintains with oral tradition, just as many (and sometimes the same writers) have insisted that the cultural dynamics now associated with literacy have always been present in some form. As represented in literary fiction at least, the experience of Africans and the African diaspora with writing on paper does not constitute a single narrative, whether of progress or of cultural loss. The experience of literacy differed widely from place to place and from one generation to the next, and its depiction in literature involves a host of perhaps surprising elements such as spirit possession, houses and prisons of printed paper, and the resurrection of the dead. Although one can beat out a rhythm on a book, books do not make the best drums, and African and West Indian novelists are more likely to compare books to masks, boxes, roads, trains, and watery surfaces.

THE LITERACY THESIS (AND THE ORALITY THESIS)

The beginner's vocabulary that Oduche mouths draws attention to phonemes and words. In the next chapter I shall say more about phonemes and words themselves as inventions of writing. For now, suffice it to say that, in the page Oduche is reading, there is no referent beyond literacy itself to comprehend. Of course, literacy is a large referent. With his characteristic hyperbole, the theoretician of communication Marshall McLuhan wrote, 'By the meaningless sign linked to the meaningless