

Idealism in no longer
at ease



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Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* includes a variety of idealistic characters, from Obi Okonkwo, the typical educated young reformer, to Mr. Green, his curmudgeonly, racist boss. Despite these characters' differing views, they share the characteristic of being trapped in their world views, unable to effect change because of an inability to see the world beyond their preconceptions. Because he lies between two worlds, Obi would seem the most likely to accomplish something, yet he is least able to. Raised in a Nigerian village and educated in England, he has experience of both European and African cultures but understands neither. He believes strongly enough in European progressiveness to marry a woman from a forbidden caste, despite the fact that she does not share his beliefs. "I can't marry you" (80), says his fiancée Clara, to which his reply is "nonsense!" (81). Even after Clara attempts to return her engagement ring, explaining "your family will be against [our marriage]. I don't want to come between you and your family" (141), Obi counters, "bunk!" (141) and proceeds to drive home, where his mother tells him that if he gets married while she is alive, she "shall kill [her]self" (154). Obi does not understand the fact that he cannot marry Clara. While his own views are enlightened, nobody else in his life shares them. Clara is not interested in the gift of equality brought by missionaries who teach that "in Christ there are no bond or free" (151). The Umuofia Progressive Union, who sent Obi to England to become "a great light" (9), have no desire to see what he illuminates, condemning Obi's marriage to "a girl of doubtful ancestry" (94). Similarly, nobody appreciates Obi's attempt to reform Nigeria's corrupt bureaucracy. When Obi refuses a bribe from a man trying to secure a scholarship for his sister, the sister comes in person to offer Obi another bribe. She gets the scholarship without

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any help from Obi, but when his friend Christopher asks, “ how do you know she did not go to bed with the board members?” (138), Obi acknowledges that “ she probably did” (138). Likewise, when Obi’s wagon is stopped by armed men demanding money, Obi conspicuously spies on the extortionists, making them fear that Obi will turn them in. The driver reacts by complaining that “ now that [’]policeman[’] [is] go[ing to] charge...ten shillings” (50) instead of two. Mr. Green, the only person in the book who agrees with Obi’s goals, never knows about his attempts to stop corruption, only his eventual bribe-taking, which supports his own opinion that “ the African is corrupt through and through” (3). Mr. Green’s form of idealism is less orthodox than Obi’s. Mr. Green dreams of a government without corruption: a Nigerian government without any Nigerians. According to Obi, he is “ a man who [does] not believe in a country and yet work[s]...hard for it” (120), which makes him sound like a pragmatist. It is true that Mr. Green tries to stem corruption; we hear him dictate a letter informing the recipient that “ the Government pays a dependant’s allowance to bona fide wives of Government scholars and not to their girl friends” (132). Yet he “ had put in his resignation when it was thought that Nigeria might become independent” (121), which could be the act of only an idealist. Mr. Green “ must have originally come with an ideal-to bring light to the heart of darkness...in 1900 Mr. Green might have ranked among the great missionaries...in 1957 he could only curse” (121); in other words, Mr. Green has brought the full force of his idealism to bear on the educated Africans who constitute the corrupt civil servants. Most characters in the book agree with Mr. Green’s assessment of the civil service: “ to [an old official] the bribe is natural...[the Ibo] say that if you pay homage to the man on top, others will pay homage

to you” (23); “[bribes] would not be necessary, since [the officials in question] would be mostly white men” (38). This does not mean that Mr. Green is correct, but it does indicate that his views are the products of idealism, not merely paranoid racism. His view of educated Africans fits within a paradigm familiar to the African characters, but it is simplistic and false: “white men...eat bribe” (38). We have little indication of how successful Mr. Green’s one-man campaign is; it certainly has few wide-ranging consequences. Mr. Green’s effectiveness is limited by his belief in the utter irredeemability of “the so-called educated Nigerian” (132). “I don’t expect you to agree with me, of course” (133), he tells Obi; his dedication keeps him from realizing that Obi does agree with his anti-corruption stance, though not with his disgust for Obi’s class. Mr. Green “loved Africa, but only Africa of a kind...the Africa of his gardenboy” (121), and so “had succumbed...to the incipient dawn” (121). His obsession with his ideal Africa has kept him from seeing a more complex reality that includes people like Obi, who does not fit into the categories of the poor who “die every day from hunger and disease” (132) or the corrupt Europeanized civil servant. Both Obi and Mr. Green fail to understand the societies they try to serve. This is both the cause and the failure of their idealism. Obi is only determined to change Nigerian society, both traditional and official, because he does not realize that society does not want to change. His ignorance, not his education, drives him. Mr. Green’s desire for change comes from believing that Africans are thoroughly corrupt; if this is true, he can never curb corruption. Where Mr. Green remains ignorant, Obi learns that he can neither marry Clara nor afford to refuse bribes. He falls into realism, takes bribes, is arrested, and at the end of the story he understands more than any

other character: “ the learned judge...could not comprehend how an educated young man [could take bribes]...the British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know...Mr. Green did not know” (194). This is why “ treacherous tears” (3) fill Obi’s eyes at the mention of his unfulfilled “ promise” (2); he realizes that the desire to effect change and the power to do so cannot be held at once.