Leon Botstein

The first question to ask about Chinua Achebe is why Africa’s greatest writer is living and working ninety miles north of New York City, on the banks of the Hudson River. As president of Bard College, I must admit it’s a privilege to have Chinua Achebe on the faculty at Annandale-on-Hudson, but his presence here is not quite a happy accident. Achebe has lived in exile for decades, frustrated by the failure of politics in his native Nigeria. Then, in 1990, when a car crash left him paralyzed, it became clear that he required a standard of medical care that would be difficult for him to obtain at home. With all this in mind, it seems almost thoughtless to talk about how much he has meant to Bard College, how much he has enriched the intellectual life of this campus and this country.

When *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958, it transformed its author, a radio broadcaster and former teacher, into the spokesman for a country and a continent. The novel was filled with luminous prose, impelled by searing insight—and met by worldwide acclaim. Achebe was startlingly prolific: he published five books in the 1960s, helping define an era of new countries, new ideas, new art.

From the outset, his undertaking went far beyond literature. Achebe wanted to revitalize the language and culture of his Igbo people, and he has worked tirelessly to strengthen higher education in post-colonial Nigeria. In fact, this civic and political engagement is inseparable from the torrent of great fiction and prose that he has produced. Like Balzac and Tolstoy, Achebe draws his inspiration from the political turmoil of his world. For all these writers, storytelling is more than just a craft, a matter of virtuosity—though it is that, to be sure. For writers such as these, storytelling is a political act and a political risk. Achebe’s willingness to take these risks again and again has inspired a generation of authors, thinkers, and citizens.

Chinua Achebe arrived at Bard College in 1991 as the Charles P. Stevenson
Jr. Professor of Languages and Literature. Over the last decade, he has continued his vital career as an essayist and educator. In an age of blockbuster culture, it’s a pleasure to stop and celebrate a writer for whom high praise is no exaggeration. And so, to commemorate Chinua Achebe’s seventieth birthday, Bard invited well-wishers from around the world.

It was an exciting, inspiring weekend, and the centerpiece was a historic conversation between Achebe and Toni Morrison—who herself spent several years teaching at Bard in the late 1970s. Like Chinua Achebe, Toni Morrison has shown us that a great story can be an act of courage. The authors spoke in Olin Hall, on the Bard campus, before an audience of over four hundred friends, colleagues, and students.

LEON BOTSTEIN: How do you engage someone else’s literary tradition, someone else’s language, and make it your own?

CHINUA ACHEBE: That’s an ongoing question for me. I wrote my first books in English, because that seemed natural. English was the language of education, and I had spent practically all of my life learning the language and working with it. There are at least two hundred different peoples and languages in Nigeria, so accepting the notion of Nigeria meant accepting a lingua franca. And that lingua franca was English. I didn’t have to think about it—it was a given. That’s how I began.

Of course, nothing is ever as simple as that. In learning English for most of my life, I also fell in love with it. You see, language is not an enemy—language is a
tool. And I discovered that what I was doing was bringing the Igbo language into communication with English. And when two languages meet, some very interesting things happen. Sometimes, it's easy to translate an idea from Igbo to English, or vice versa. Other times, the language refuses; it says, “No, this is mine.” For me, that's one of the rewards of this profession—to see languages that developed in two entirely different parts of the world communicating, holding a conversation. You wonder why people can't do the same.

TONI MORRISON: I had no choice about which language I would write in, having no other. I instantly felt the richness of English. And I still say it's one of the best languages in the world to write in, because it is so polyglot—so many languages are already there, so many synonyms, so many antonyms. However, I also understood that as an African American, I would not master American English the way it was supposed to be mastered, because all I saw in films and cartoons and newspapers were suggestions about the inability of black Americans to speak. When you read literature—Edgar Allan Poe, for example—whenever they wrote the dialogue of black people, suddenly they couldn't spell. Every word had dropped g's, everything was grammatically incorrect. There were even essays that explained why it was impossible for us to get a handle on language. Some of it had to do with our limited brains, but most of it had to do with our lips, which were incapable of forming these careful sounds. A German might say “vas” instead of “was” all his life, but if an African said “da” instead of “the,” it was a physiological disability.

I knew that a lot of American writers of yore seemed to be very earnest in their use of English—so formal and so correct that somehow it just didn’t feel right. On the other hand, there were writers such as Langston Hughes, who gloried in the differences in pronunciation, metaphor, symbolism. So within the language I was born into, there were embedded examples of racism and inferiority, and you had to learn how to manipulate that when you became a writer.

The example that is most attractive to me comes from a poem by Robert Penn Warren, in which he's describing a day. And he says, “Shadows bigger than people and blacker than niggers.” The “nigger” part is not the part that is alarming, really. What's alarming is the division: he could have said “bigger than trees and blacker than niggers”; he could have said “bigger than people and blacker than panthers.” Instead, he separated human beings into people and niggers. It has nothing to do with what was in his mind.
He chose a powerful set of metaphors, that’s all. And it works. But it works in a way that makes me say, “I can’t use that. I can’t make that division. I can’t cut it that fine. I have to do something else.” That kind of thing is there in the best language, the most beautiful language. And that’s chilling.

So whatever I do, I have to write in a way that will embrace all the levels of English that I grew up with. When any of us were misbehaving badly, my mother would say, “Go somewhere and sit down.” Or she might say, “I’m going to knock you into the middle of next week.” Or she might say, “Honor thy mother and thy father, that thy days may be long upon the land.” Or she might say, “More poisonous than a serpent’s tooth is an ungrateful child.” And I thought that all of this language was the same, and it was all mine. So I never felt estranged by standard English, and I never felt uncomfortable with so-called colloquial or vernacular language. All of it was home for me, and that is what I want to render in the novels I write.

**LB:** You’ve both been writing for decades. How do you deal with the way vernacular language changes over time?

**TM:** I’m sure it’s much more complicated and profound for Chinua. My writing is usually set in the past, so my job is to catch the language of 1926, to know exactly how people talked in 1875. I go back and I read all those newspapers for weeks and weeks, until I can hear it, until I feel as though I’m at home in the language of New York City, uptown, 1926, and I don’t have to grab for it. I have only written one book that was sort of contemporary, and that was *Tar Baby*, which I wrote in 1981. If I were
writing a book that took place in the year 2000, I would have to work very hard to re-hear the language, because it changes rapidly. And I'm not always au courant, you know, particularly with young people. So it's something I would have to find out about before I would feel comfortable enough to write dialogue between two young people who were fifteen in the year 2000. I would have to do some serious research.

**LB:** And yet your own voice doesn't change, even as your fictional world does.

**TM:** No, it's . . . it's . . . I don't know. It's like skin—I live in that voice. I don't know if it's modern, I don't know what it is, all I know is that it's mine, and I hear it as well as read it. That doesn't change. The dialogue of contemporary people changes, but the narrator's voice is not subject to all these things. And what makes it my own is how I manipulate it. But if I'm going to represent dialogue, that's when I have to make sure that I'm not using a language this person would never speak.

**CA:** I think it's probably a bigger issue with language in America, for instance, or in Europe. In a multilingual place like Nigeria, the language we speak doesn't seem to be subject to this same rapid pace of change. If it's happening, I haven't noticed—and that's quite possible, too. But for me, what I hear are the different registers of language. I'm constantly hearing it in my inner ear: "No, that's not it; this person would not speak like that." That's not something you can explain to anybody; it just happens. And I think that's really the fundamental qualification of a writer of fiction—you have to be able to hear that voice that says, "No, I haven't got it right."
LB: Is it a question of balancing sound and meaning?

CA: Well, there is a very close relationship between sound and meaning in the Igbo language. It’s no exaggeration to say that the language itself is singing. And many people who attempt to learn Igbo—European missionaries, for example—have a hard time seeing the language as music. So you might have a modern-day preacher in church saying, “Chukwu we ike.” What he wants to say is “God has great power,” but what he ends up saying is “God has great buttocks.” Because he has said “EE-kay” instead of “ee-KAY.”

So you can’t speak Igbo unless you can hear it as music. And I think that’s part of my responsibility as a writer, whether I’m writing in English or in Igbo. The tone links prose to poetry, and poetry to music—it’s not on the surface, but it’s there, embedded in the language itself.

TM: That’s something I recognized very early on, even without knowing any African languages: the tonal quality of so-called black speech. The difference between uh-huh and uh-uh. You know, I can say “uh-huh,” and mean no.

CA: Yeah—that’s Igbo!

TM: So when I began to write, I consciously chose not to use adverbs; I chose not to write “…she said so-and-so-ingly.” It has to be there already, in the words. A woman burns up her son because she can’t bear his life of destruction, and then she hobbles back upstairs and sits down. Her daughter says, “You know Plum’s on fire.” And the woman says, “Is?” Well, you have to hear that woman saying “Is?” and know immediately that she already knows that Plum is on fire. I try
very hard to pull that tonal quality into something that has to work quietly, on the page.

At the same time, I grew up in a house where people sang all the time—particularly my mother. Up and down that street, people played instruments and sang; for years, you could hear people bursting into song on the corner, or on the street, or while they washed. But now I am so afraid of being seduced by music that I never play it when I’m writing, because I don’t want be influenced by it. I’m like, “Who knows what direction I might go in?” It’s too powerful. In any case, I believe that language should be its own music.

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LB: How does being a teacher affect this process of writing?
CA: Fundamentally, literature is storytelling. And for some reason, every society on earth considers storytelling to be vital. Whatever we do, we create a story to support it. So I believe that we’re doing something that is mandated by our very humanity. Whenever people get together, they account. There is this need: I want to tell you.

Now teaching—that’s another matter. In theory, I would say that writers should avoid teaching. Because teaching and writing fiction or poetry draw from the same reserve of energy, and therefore one will take from the other. But there are also many good things about teaching. You communicate with young people, and that’s very enriching. So in the end, you say, “I’ll do a bit of teaching, and I hope I’ll have the energy to write after that.”

TM: I have mixed feelings about teaching, too. I was a teacher before I was a writer: I didn’t publish until I was in my late thirties, but I started teaching in universities when I was twenty-three. When I started writing, I quickly learned that I couldn’t teach and write at the same time, although many of my colleagues manage it rather well. For me, it’s not easy—not even possible, perhaps—because I like teaching a lot. I like the education it provides me with. Every four years, there’s a whole new generation of people, with entirely different attitudes and notions. For me, teaching is analytical: you take something apart, see of what it is made, and then you make judgments. But when I’m writing, I don’t do that. I’m waiting for surprise. I’m waiting for something else. So I try to separate those two activities completely.

I have had some satisfaction in teaching creative writing, but only because I’m a really first-rate editor. I don’t pretend to teach beauty, truth, or vision. But when my students turn in an assignment, I subject it to the toughest, most-sophisticated-possible editing process. I treat every assignment as if it’s going straight to the New Yorker, or straight to Simon & Schuster. It’s deadly serious: word for word, line by line by line by line.
LB: Do your students relate to literature differently than you do? In an age of instantaneous communication and virtual reality, what is happening to writing?

TM: I think literature is more valuable than ever, because we live in the age of the image: film, TV, photographs. Which is not to say that the image isn’t a valuable mode of communication. But it can be so dominating that we lose that moment of lost time, that moment when the language is so deft, so flawless, that you don’t know you’re sitting in a chair, holding a book. That’s a valuable experience that only literature provides, although I could be persuaded that music provides it, too. But more and more, everything is being truncated; in an electronic age, the big asset is speed. There’s a promise of eternity, if you can just keep on getting faster and faster: this program, that modem, their nanoseconds will build, and there will be all this extra time—which is another way of saying you will have extra life. This promise is sinister and devious: you won’t have any extra life.

Over the long haul, this can be a bad thing for the development of the mind. I was talking to a young girl who was in gymnastics at the age of ten or eleven. I bought her a book by Nadia Comaneci or somebody, where she says that her parents put her on a clothesline before she could walk, to start her training early. So we were talking about it, and I asked this girl, “Can you see that? Can you imagine hanging on a rope, as a baby?” And this little girl said, “No, I can’t see it.” And I said, “Just imagine it.” She said, “No, I can’t.” “You can’t see that picture?” She said, “No, but I understand it.” If she took a test on it, her comprehen-
sion of what she had read would be good, but she still couldn’t see it.

I was so depressed! She is a top-of-the-line student, and she cannot visualize. So then I started to do a little exploration, and I found that there are many young children who are watching Teletubbies, and having a good time, and learning to read fast, and building a good vocabulary, and making good grades—but they can’t participate in the imaginative process of reading a book. I’m sure they’re all going to be mighty successful, but this seems to me a serious flaw. I tend to have these big solutions. So I think that literature—teaching it, writing it, reading it—is more critical now than it was in the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

LB: Does being famous make your job harder?

TM: Well, there’s a very serious struggle on my part to eliminate the pressures, the expectations, the admiration, the dismissal. When I’m working, none of that is useful—in fact, it’s disruptive. The work doesn’t respond to the persona at all, and I’ve never had trouble putting aside the persona and moving into the study, where the work is done. It has never been a problem—until very recently. And I don’t know why it’s a problem now, at this advanced age. [They laugh.] But suddenly, the struggle is greater. I’m not sure if it’s because I feel more vulnerable, or if it’s because the media makes one’s persona exponentially larger and larger. Certainly I’ve noticed that people behave differently around me. It may be flattering, and it may not be, and either way, I resent it a little bit. If you’re an adult—or you try to be—you just deal with that aspect as best you can. But I really think it is dangerous, and it is diminishing, and it hurts if your persona seeps into the creative strategies that you’re employing on the work. I only mention this at such length because it is beginning to be something I have to do—I have to consciously eliminate this stuff from my work.

CA: It hasn’t been a problem for me. I think part of the reason must be that in Nigeria, there is no celebrity business, really. It would be more difficult here, but I grew up in Nigeria. I was once introduced to a mechanic by a friend of mine, and the mechanic looked at me and said, “Is that all?” [They laugh.]

In Nigeria, there is no celebrity business, really. I was once introduced to a mechanic by a friend of mine, and the mechanic looked at me and said, “Is that all?”

But the celebrity thing can be dangerous, I can see that. So even now, living in America, I do not hanker after it. In the end, I think it depends on the person. Toni and I are people of humility, and if you are a person of humility, then it is not a problem.

TM: You know, Chinua, the way you describe your home, and the absence of celebrity there—that’s the way I always thought of my home. It’s a little town in Ohio. When I was a young girl, I was walking down the street, and a man said to me, “Are you a Willis?” I said, “Yes, it’s my mother’s maiden name.” And he said, “Oh, I know. I recognized your walk.” When I went to New York, of course, no one asked me that. They asked, “What do you do? What job do you have?” But I will always remember that moment.

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when a stranger said, “Are you a Willis?” He knew something about me—something very personal, and very important, even though I’m not sure exactly what it was.


**LB:** Of course, fame has also brought you both an enormous readership. Do you think about that readership when you write?

**CA:** I would say it depends on what I’m writing. When I’m writing an essay, for instance, I am arguing a point with an audience. That’s different from when I’m writing a novel, and I withdraw into myself. In that situation, thinking of an audience is a hindrance. In fact, it would make it impossible to proceed. I say this to my students: You have to be your own editor. Don’t turn in half-finished work and expect me to be the editor. That’s something I’ve already taught myself: I’m my own reader, my own editor, my own critic. And when I have done all that, then I can turn it loose on the world. At that point, I don’t mind what happens or where it goes.

**TM:** I agree totally. If I’m doing an article for a magazine, or if I’m giving a speech, I’m really trying to persuade people to agree with me, and I exert all my energy toward advancing an argument. When I write novels, I am questioning a lot. There are many arguments in the book, and I am not trying to conclude with a moral, or an agreement. Just the opposite: it’s complicated, it’s layered, and it’s open. As Chinua said, it’s very much a private enterprise, and the reader is a big hindrance to that process.

**LB:** If you don’t mind, I’d like to end with the ultimate parlor game question: What book would you take to a deserted island?

**CA:** You probably won’t believe me, but one book I would like to read again and again is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. That sounds a little precious, so let me explain.

You see, it’s no accident that we are having this conversation. And the reason I would take Toni’s book is that I think she’s the only one who is probing what James Baldwin called the “conundrum of color”—the question of what happened to us on the continent, and in the diaspora. We have not dealt with that question on the continent, and I think Toni Morrison has the courage to begin to deal with it.

The question is, “What happens when a mother kills her child to save her from slavery?” The mother loves the child and wants to save her from the abomination of slavery, but in so doing she commits another abomination. This is my reading, and it may not be yours, but what the story says to me is that that’s no solution. This daughter you killed will come back, and when she comes it is not going to be pleasant.

A similar question will be asked on the continent: “Is it true that you sold your own brothers?” Of course, it is not true that we sold our own brothers—something made us do it. There is some explanation, but still, it is never enough.

Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, was once dethroned by his generals while he was abroad. He immediately terminated his visit and flew back—not to Addis Ababa, the capital, but to Asmara, in what’s now Eritrea. And he began to march with his supporters, all the way to Addis Ababa, and the countryside.
rose in support of him. By the time he arrived in Addis Ababa, the coup had fizzled out. So he captured the generals, and he had them strung up in Menelik Square, and then he called for his son. The son had been used by the generals during the coup attempt, so he sent for him. Selassie said, “Why did you do it?” And his son said, “They made me do it. They put a gun to my head.” And Haile Selassie said, “I forgive you. And I forget you.”

You do not excuse one abomination with another.

It’s that kind of probing that I find in Beloved, and it’s a frightening book, because it’s a frightening conundrum that we black people have to deal with. So I would take that book.

**TM:** Well . . .

**CA:** Don’t take mine! [They laugh.]