

An Anzalduan Reading of Ben Okri's *In Arcadia* (2002)

Matthew Curr

Summary

Set against Anzaldua's seminal text, *Borderlands*, this study of Okri's *In Arcadia* (2002) concerns itself with the author's psychological, emotional and artistic identity; torn as he is between African and European heritages, obliged to negotiate a middle ground or *mestiza* personality. What appears at first to be unqualified suffering, ignominy and stateless confusion for Lao/Okri, reveals itself in the course of the film crew's revelatory expedition to France, to be the existential groundwork for an identity that possesses insight, compassion and tolerance. More than that, the pain of existing in the shadow lands of English society stimulates Lao to develop the sensitive antennae of a true artist: he gains what Anzaldua defines as *La Facultad*, the ability to see below surface meanings and evince truths about cultures and those that inhabit their bounds. His nuanced *mestiza* character and artistic nature stand in stark contrast to the crass attitudes of entitlement and gauche lack of self-reflection evidenced by members of the film crew who all experience differing forms of grating confrontation and humiliation before they can reach a measure of that inner Arcadian peace, which most of them hardly realised they sought so earnestly.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie van Okri se *In Arcadia* (2002) steun op Anzaldua se seminale *Borderlands*, en handel oor die sielkundige, emosionele en artistieke identiteit van 'n skrywer wat dit moeilik vind om tussen sy Europese en Afrika-herkoms te kies, en as kompromis noodgedwonge 'n *mestiza*-persoonlikheid moet aanneem. Die kamera-span onderneem 'n onthullende tog na Frankryk, en wat aanvanklik vir Lao/Okri matelose smart, oneer en verwarde staatloosheid blyk te wees, lê die eksistensiële grondslag vir 'n identiteit wat insig, medelye en verdraagsaamheid openbaar. Vanweë sy moeisame bestaan aan die steelkant van die Engelse samelewing, ontwikkel Lao die sensitiewe voelspriete van 'n ware kunstenaar. Hy verwerf wat Anzaldua *la facultad* noem, die vermoë om deur die skyn te sien en die waarheid oor kulture en diegene wat daarin woon, vas te stel. Sy genuanseerde *mestiza*-karakter en kunssinnige aard staan in skelle kontras met die ander lede van die kamera-span se ruwe aansprake en onbeheerde, gebrekkige selfondersoek. Hulle moet irriterende konfrontasies en vernedering verduur voordat hulle in 'n mate die Arkadiese innerlike vrede smaak waarna hulle meestal onbewus so naartoe soek.

Introduction

Anzaldua writes in the preface to her major work, *Borderlands*: “The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-US Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between the two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldua 1987: ix). In his somewhat neglected novel *In Arcadia* (2002), Ben Okri demonstrates the truth of Anzaldua’s assertion that borderlands exist in many different places and times: he maps the turmoil and uncertainty of the wanderer from a so-called developing land: “Lao had to make an awkward crossing, a crossing as difficult as fording a deep cold river. For now he had to ford human perception. He had to cross a terrain in the minds of people. He had to submit to one of life’s endless trials – the trial of colour” (*In Arcadia* 2002: 104). Okri’s use of the word “awkward” suggests, at first, a minor difficulty in negotiating a social situation: how to overcome a social indiscretion or lack of finesse in company. As such, however, the word “awkward” is gravely at odds with what follows and what the word belies: the pain of a heart-wrenching existential moment of crisis for a person of colour facing the gatekeepers of whiteness: the border-crossing closely policed by Paris immigration officials. The test that Lao faces is major: the most significant article of his being, his living in white society, who he is. The repetition of “crossing” makes clear what is intimated with some irony in the vestibular word “awkward”. The injustice of existential interrogation, of being asked to explain yourself and your right to exist in “first-world” or “developed” society, in privilege, is brought to light by this deliberate emphasis on “crossing” into the land of the chosen few. Residents and citizens in such a society routinely see him, as a person of colour, to be of suspicious origin and nature. The penalty of otherness is conveyed succinctly in the critical phrase “to ford human perception”. Who he is and how he is seen, are indistinguishable entities in the eyes of smug, unreflective, privileged observers.

Trial by Colour

To Lao, who he is and what colour his skin betokens to white observers, are two distinctly different subjectivities. How he is seen by prejudiced white eyes melds skin and character; he is objectified as a suspect, a possible criminal, a non-resident, someone unlikely to respect the laws and law-abiding behaviour that create this Eden for the few. Okri skilfully expands his

terse phrasing: "He had to cross a terrain in the minds of people" (*In Arcadia* 2002: 104). When Lao faces the immigration officers in Paris, he confronts the judgement and prejudice of those in power: he is an alien by skin colour; he is assumed to leave a different footprint. Lao has to traverse the dangerous terrain of bigoted, protectionist authority and the even more perilous landscape of people's engrained prejudices about those with a darker skin tone than their own. Lao's moment of trial is far greater than is suggested by the apparently innocent and neutral term "awkward". Its coy usage, when read in context, is scorching and satirical. Okri in fact momentarily adopts and mocks the language of privilege and entitlement. What for those in power, in the carefully fenced-in Edenic fields of Western Europe, is no more than an awkwardness, no more than misplacing a document perhaps, is for Lao (and Okri behind the narrative persona) probably the most agonising ordeal of existence, an interrogation of self. Existentially, Lao (Okri) faces occidental inquisition: sameness confronts otherness at the centre of Okri's precisely staged theatre of justice. The word "trial" resonates throughout the entire narrative structure of *In Arcadia* and through much of the Okri *oeuvre*. Okri's mimicry of the apparently shy vocabulary of privilege and entitlement (in "awkward") typifies a vein of social subversion and disguised outrage running in much of Okri's vocabulary, language and grammar of discontent.

The following sentence lies at the centre of Okri's work and thought hidden at the centre of screening narrative and elaborate entablature: "He had to submit to one of his life's endless trials – the trial of colour" (*In Arcadia* 2002: 104). "Submit" is associated with the fate of those subjugated by Rome: required to pass under (*sub*) the yoke (*iugum*) as a sign of submission and proof of humiliation. Okri has to bend beneath the bar of European rule; he pays for the benefits of living in a formerly imperial power, England, the country that subjugated his own native land Nigeria. The possessive pronoun "his" is darkly attributive in force, marking out the peculiar pain of his life's sentence. He is condemned to live in the shadows, a ghost who materialises and appears in the flesh at such liminal moments as this. The repetition of "trial" emphasises the continuous torment of being suspected, doubted, watched, stared at, for not being the same colour as the majority of European people. The need to prove himself, defend his right to be in England and Europe, renders each day an interrogation of himself by external observers and questioners as much as a painful self-examination as a result of the main onslaught. The condition of being alien, the intricacies and convolutions of living in the margins, is at the centre of Okri's writing. In his nuanced description of the predicament of so many compelled to semi-life, Okri associates the historical and existential elements of life before and after colonial contact. He adumbrates the half-life of crepuscular beings who vanish or re-appear at given times. A new kind of slave-bell calls forth the half-living ghosts of European privilege.

Okri terms this sudden admission “materialisation”, faintly invoking the terminology of space travel while sustaining the menacing suggestions of the middle passage, of bondage and social relegation: “He prepared himself for materialisation” tells of an alien landing, confronting a strange world, being examined and studied as odd, an ethnic peculiarity. Lao (Okri) speaks of living most of the time without ever questioning that he is a human being *In Arcadia* 2002: 104). The corollary to this statement is that at moments of trial by colour he is not viewed as a human being but as a specimen under the critical and unblinking gaze of the European observer/classifier/examiner. In Okri’s *Tales of Freedom* “The Racial Colourist” (2009: 143-145) deals overtly with the white observer: “I noticed a white youth in the place of the man who had gone. He wore little round glasses. He kept looking at me in a peculiar way The youth with the glasses consulted his colour chart and then made an urgent call with a walkie-talkie It was clear he was monitoring the contact I had with people of accepted racial purity (143-145.) Later the youth follows Okri and pursues him: “I crossed a field at a near run. He picked up speed The chap kept on my trail, pursuing me” (143-145). Okri’s inner voice tells him to confront the white persecutor/inquisitor, rather than continue running. Once up against him, Oki discovered the white man “behind his glasses had scared, timid eyes and an ordinary harmless face”. Spectacles betoken here the white man as enfranchised examiner authorised by first world developed nation status to observe and report on the “other”. Lao strikes a bargain with life in a white land: in order to survive “he had learned to live as a hermit, a recluse, and had as little contact as possible with the ugly things that induced suicide upon his soul” (105). These cruelties or “ugly things” comprise the thousand encroachments, snubs, half-insults and slights thrown on persons of colour by the minute each day. Those who cast these aspersions, do so on the grounds of autochthony. Because the spectacled white man with the “ordinary face” was *born* in Great Britain, he assumes he has an innate right to citizenship and the duty to police any alien “materializations”. Against the ethnic citizenship claims of the self-appointed white deputy with spectacles are the ethical claims of Okri: his motherland was conquered by British imperialists such as Lugard, so he feels some measure of compensation or at least reciprocity is owed him. Yet, between the promises and high visions of a commonwealth for all, and domicile in the city which lies at the heart of the family of nations, the shadow of autochthony casts its shadow of smugness, prejudice and bigotry: in the person of such “harmless” Englishmen as the spectacled pursuer/informant. Okri’s own ancestral territories had been pillaged and British culture was imposed unilaterally on his family. Yet, when Okri finds himself writing in the language of the conqueror and wishing to practise his gift in the capital, he is slighted.

Thus Okri (Lao) has to strike a bargain with the history that first stimulated him to write in English, his natural desire to follow that artistic trail back to

its roots and his own loss of a homeland. He becomes an exile, not by invitation but by force of circumstance: "He had found this truce effective, this de-materialisation useful, this exile within England practical, this exile from colour-grading a liberation ..." (*In Arcadia* 2002: 105). Anzaldua explains the double life of mestiza being as: "Not only was the brain split into two functions but so was reality. Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes" (Anzaldua 1987: 37). The neutral territory of the cosmopolitan capital granted him anonymity and a certain penumbral half-life: his truce with history. Only when he had to leave this half-life and face the test of border-guards, was this treaty with life ruptured: his time of de-materialization and invisibility ended. Becoming visible invokes the bureaucratic machinery of white empire: persons of colour are to be examined, ethnographically and linguistically classified, numbered and entered into the ledgers of European personhood. Lao, who had compromised enough to lead a quiet half-life in the shadows and architectural interstices of the capital structure, now has to emerge from the wings of life's stage and face the glare of the stage lights. He has to explain himself, answer for his living and rights to be amongst the privileged of Europe. This interrogation of citizenship, selfhood and probity recoils upon his own sense of self and being. The intrusive authorial voice intones:

But seldom, seldom, indeed, did he think himself a being, a man, a figure, reducible to colour, to a place in the spectrum, a light impression negative on eyes that in the hearts register such negation. He seldom allowed it, and when it happened, when he felt himself being painted into being, becoming only a colour, not a simple complex human being, like everyone else, when he felt this reduction, he experienced the strangest sensation of being snatched, for a mortal moment, away from Eden, into unreality, from childhood games and freedoms into adult imprisonments, from the hidden bliss of all creation into the eye's historical grading of pigmentation. (106)

La Facultad

Okri sees himself (or his narrative second self Lao) as quietly in command even if seething with resentment and genuine grievances: he chooses "not [to] burn with rage and self-doubt externally induced, but strong with the spirit soaring, free and powerful, like the mind of a child, or the casual notions of an Alexander on a quiet day between momentous battles, serene master of the battles of daily life" (105). Okri presents quotidian life, the struggle for existence or sheer survival, as a battleground for the many: a playground for the few. When crew members bemoan the agony of their lives, they assume so much that persons of colour only dream about.

Okri achieves this exposure of white entitlement and unreflective pride by revealing Lao's agony to a completely indifferent and self-absorbed Jim, the director of the film who more than any other of the pampered members of the "developed" world crew bemoans what he regards as the injustice, ill-fortune and downright injustice of his lot in life. The confrontation between Jim and Lao, the first and third world representatives of the narrative, forms the didactic core of the novel. Lao/Okri has developed *la facultad* as a result of his suffering. Anzaldua explains the psychic growth of the genuine artist through the challenges of living/surviving in the Borderlands: "Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it. When it begins to fester I have to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it" (Anzaldua 1987: 73). Jim has never known such agony and lacks any insight as a result of his privilege and isolation from pain. He cannot understand why he has never become a recognised and praised artistic film director; he has never suffered or gained compassion or insight into the hearts of others because his own is so cold. Anzaldua defines *la facultad* as: "... the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant 'sensing', a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and the faces of feelings" (Anzaldua 1987: 38). To the spoilt first-world crew members, Lao's difference, otherness and social privations pass unseen and disregarded. This complete blindness to "otherness" means that any disruption or jolt in Lao's performance as narrator is startling. Sam the cameraman "wanted Lao in a shot with passengers streaming through immigration control" (106). But Lao seems unable to perform. Instead he draws Jim aside and speaks in what seem to Jim to be philosophical riddles. He is trying to open Jim's eyes and heart to the inner world of the artist: "There are invisible lines that society sets up", Lao says to the self-pitying Jim, "which make some people more visible" (107).

Given the white man's utter inattention to the predicament of a black man such as Lao, it is not surprising that Jim cannot make sense of Lao's panic, anxiety and distress at the Paris border trial. Jim is not required by officials of the white fortress to explain or defend himself. But Lao is stringently required to account for his domicile and employment: "Lao approached his materialisation from pure selfhood to defensiveness with annoyance, with irritation. He called Jim aside and said: "This journey is a quest, and in all great quests there are always trials" (106). Jim has never considered what life is like for a black man in England, so Lao's faint intimations are entirely lost on him. An African aphorism encapsulates the essential blindness: "You cannot fight an evil disease with sweet medicine" (Mutwa [1966]1970: xi). Jim is becoming increasingly frustrated at Lao's tardiness: the film crew want the shot and

cannot take it without Lao. They look to Jim, as director of the project, to coax or bully Lao into snapping out of what they perceive as a difficult, or awkward, moment. The fact that that is all they can see is because of their utter lack of empathy for an-other. Lao still resists “snapping out” of his dark moment and tries again, more explicitly this time, to explain his predicament in a shadow life, an invisible nobody in a land of visible whites. Reiterating the line symbol that signifies the precarity of the racial divide, Lao adds in a cascade of philosophical barriers to cover his anger: “You cross the line without noticing it For you there is no line, no chemical reaction, no danger of being humiliated, insulted, bundled up and thrown out, shouted at, animalised, locked up in a back room with a gag that eventually kills” (107). Jim is no closer to understanding Lao’s torment at the border crossing: the trial by colour. Jim can think only of the possible success of a last film, the money and prestige it would grant to an otherwise failed career, and life. All he considers is Lao’s incomprehensible intransigence and the threat it poses to his project: a final chance of redemption. He bursts out with impatience: “Stop being so damned philosophical. Get to the point” (107). Eventually Lao has to try a third time to explain himself:

You wander through it all so unknowing. But if I go past the line a chain reaction is set off. The line is meant to weed out people like me, different people. The line trips me up. I get detained. I get questioned. It is a question of pigment. It makes pigs of people. My innocence is my crime. I am condemned at birth, because of a different sun. (107)

Okri ingeniously simulates the conditions of unknowing that typify white insularity and arrogance. It is exactly this state of not knowing, of not being aware of difference that is the most culpable aspect of enclosed, fiercely protectionist white society. Yet even after this third attempt to explain what he goes through, Lao has failed to communicate his pain to Jim who is so wrapped up in his own drive to excel, to achieve, to be that he still cannot imagine or feel his way into the situation of another. This inability to see feelingly is what keeps Jim from entering a private paradise of the self, an Arcadia. His very impatience, his headlong fixation with achievement and recognition is what has blinded him to the artistic emergence he has sought so long and so hard. Incredibly, despite the insistent calls for the shoot to go on, Lao perseveres with Jim and makes one last effort to explain in distinct and plain speech why he is frozen in existential immobility at the platform; the crossing policed by border guards, the defenders of the white realm:

Society always has invisible lines and nets, points of interrogation. Not so long ago, being of a different blood, and belonging to the main trunk whence sprang the dreams of Jesus Christ, set off fatal chain reactions at those invisible lines. And the lines determined those who could live normally, as though life were a fairground for the favoured, and those who were bundled off to death camps

to be tortured, gassed, exterminated, made into soap, for the cleansing of society. I am one of those now who get in the way of such homogenising. You can't see it. You are not meant to see this process happen You will not care. Besides, you will be too busy, you will be in something of a hurry. But, as you cross the line, you will go on, undisturbed into normal life. And I will be dragged off to society's hidden inferno. (108)

The irony in the word "Besides" is particularly trenchant and germane to Jim's unsighted disregard for "otherdom". "You will be too busy" describes exactly Jim's artistic and social isolation, his total lack of *la facultad* caused by his frenetic "busyness": he is too busy to "see" or "feel" the very predicaments and inner meanings of life which a film director is meant to detect and reflect. He is shown to be the inartistic art director, the unobservant observer of life, and Okri tells us why. Jim's main concern is not the human condition but the financial condition. Jim's humanity is truncated by the priorities of his social context of capitalism and egocentric achievement.

Mestiza Identity

Okri identifies with the victims of the holocaust: "those who were bundled off to death camps". He feels the penalties of otherness, being scrutinised and examined as physiologically other than the Anglo-Saxon desiderata. He writhes in pain at the indignity of becoming an object of curiosity and the injustice of being classified not as an individual human being or subject but as a person of colour or object first: one who will behave in a particular way typical of skin colour, not private character. According to such racial stereotyping of all black human beings, Okri/Lao realises that he will be suspected and apprehended on the basis of "vague criminality and social aberrations" (108). The sinister machinations of white conformist society render the outsider's life precarious. "They" exist in England or Germany rather than "live"; are tolerated as conditional guests, not welcomed as permanent members or citizens. In *The Age of Magic* (2014), "evil" is, for Okri and tellingly so, an inversion or a modified palindrome of "live".

Okri feels this abrogation of dignity, justice and selfhood intensely as definitively evil. Jim, representing the stolid indifference of the establishment, does not feel anything outside his own concerns, lacks insight and *la facultad* and cannot be the film director he dreams of being. For this reason, to break the armour of unconcern, Lao/Okri persists until they bring Jim to a moment of realisation, of feeling, an epiphany of sight for the unseeing egotist:

"Jim looked at Lao intensely, as if seeing him with new eyes. "Are you telling me that ...?"

"Absolutely! Suddenly I spring to your eyes differently, don't I? ..."

"So what do you want us to ...?"

“Nothing. Do nothing. I just wanted to say this. To risk being awkward. To crack the complacency with which you regard this world. There are torments that we go through, because of a different sun, that you will never suspect. Society has an invisible hell which people like me are made to reside in, and it is normality.” (109)

There is a great mass of machinery needed to sustain this imposing facade of “normality”: countless administrative, legalistic, parliamentary and military cogs and wheels have to be put in place and synchronised. When in motion, this machine cuts and tags and labels any “untoward” or “odd” elements in the state; coding and tracking “them”. Jim’s people operate this machine of state and enjoy all the privileges of full membership which it grants without a thought of feeling for those who are placed on the watch list, “being excluded, judged, misperceived, colour-coded in all things, denied intelligence, suspected of crimes, burglaries, drug peddling, muggings, murders, robbing old ladies How often do women on seeing me clutch their handbags, as if in my colour they read an inscription which says ‘Ecce mugger’?” (110).

Finally, Jim has no choice but to face, understand and feel the pain of Lao’s predicament. In a rare moment of empathetic insight, he does not verbalise the awakening within him but simply embraces Lao. This action is a breakthrough for Jim, and his countrymen. His accumulated failures and failure to feel all combine to crack and remove the edifice of cultural distrust and isolation behind which he has unknowingly hidden all his life.

The Train Driver

By complete contrast to the self-indulgent and morbidly corrosive complaints of the pampered film director and his crew is the life and work of the train driver en route to Paris. Okri sets this section (Book IV, one to nine) as narrative antimony to expose the destructive nature of self-concern. The modest life of the train driver immediately undercuts the pretensions and glamour of making a film, aspiring to art and moving from one spectacular location to the next, yet never achieving real artistic life. The train driver has made the happiness he did not find ready-made in life. The barren plot which he purchased from his honest wages as a train driver, he has turned into a small Eden or Arcadia of his own. His small happy family is of his making too. The didactic force of Okri’s lesson here is created not by verbal exposition but by ingenious juxtaposition of clamorous, nugatory wannabe artists with the security and modesty of real happiness made by a useful life and humble, responsible work. Okri’s unspoken lesson in this central section invokes a potent element of the eighteenth-century. Voltaire’s mockery of happy-go-lucky characters in *Candide* is reminiscent in this passage as is Voltaire’s injunction to “tend your garden”; as both means of subsistence and metaphysical contentment. Johnson’s eponymous Rasselas, the young spoilt

prince who dithers and vacillates away his days deciding what course to choose, has a voice in Okri's strident denouncement of similar vacant self-searching. The overtones of the eighteenth century in the core argument of Okri's revelation of European self-indulgence cohere with the landscapes and follies of Versailles portrayed by Okri in Book V. Okri denounces Louis XIV's overwhelming distortion of the Arcadian idyll by placing this section exactly alongside the parable of the modest train driver in Book IV. Okri aligns himself with the social/ist commentary and critique embedded in Pope, Voltaire and Johnson when he discloses the vanity and criminality of living in a dream world funded by the poor: effectively stealing the happiness not made or worked for. Okri as African apologist broadens and re-contextualises this critique of sloth, self-delusion and pretence by examining the lives and central concerns of typical spoilt Europeans in the twentieth century: the heirs of those white adventurers who enslaved his ancestors in their desire to enrich themselves and lead lives of purposelessness and social futility. Okri anatomises the driving passions of 21st century Europeans to show what makes them tick. Their motives are as unattractive as those caricatured by Pope, Voltaire, Johnson. Okri identifies those few living in the European hall of mirrors; he knows how compulsive the European passion for luxury is, and the lengths Europeans will go to in order to secure wealth and prestige. He articulates the pain of those millions robbed to satisfy the wants of the few: in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, the tortoise-shell or ivory on Belinda's dressing-table tell of the slaughter of innocent animals to add sparkle to the playgrounds of the privileged.

Okri's close and adept invocation of the European tradition of humanist satirists renders his own predicament, uncertainty and fear all the more a part of the agony of world-wide exploitation of his kinsfolk who suffered the middle passage for centuries. The modest garden of an honest labourer is a sober antidote to the intoxicating vanities of the gardens, fountains and marbles of Versailles. The false values of this artificial landscape did not die, however, with the king who created them. His legacy is sustained in the modern-day religion of materialism: the pursuit and veneration of opulent living. The self is constructed and advertised on social media in terms of possessions: everything that Jim thought mattered and that he thought he really wanted from life. Jim learns how empty his pursuit of prestige, fame and wealth has been. He looks back on his life and sees the folly of so much of it clear and whole. Metonymically, using Jim to represent the vacuity of contemporary European values, Okri opens our eyes to a broad, terrifying postcolonial vista: of the leaching few and the oppressed many across the world who are duped, cajoled or coerced into mercantilist paradigms that favour developed lands and impoverish developing ones. The self-indulgent complaints of the un-artistic filmmaker are exposed and condemned largely by juxtaposing the selfless service, labour and resourcefulness of a train-

driver. The train driver's happiness was made; not found, stumbled across or granted as a birth right:

You die, and find yourself, like Daphnis, at Heaven's Gate. A mysterious person meets you at the entrance. You ask to be admitted. The mysterious person insists first on a conversation about the life you have lived. You complain that you had no breaks, that things didn't work out for you, that you weren't helped, that people brought you down, blocked your way, that your father didn't love you, that your mother didn't care, that economic times were bad, that you didn't have the right qualifications, that you didn't belong to the right circle, that you weren't lucky, in short you pour out a venerable torrent of excuses. But for every excuse you bring forth the infinitely patient mysterious person points to little things here and there that you could have done, little mental adjustments you could have made. He gently offers you examples of where, instead of giving up, you could have been more patient. Tenderly, he shows you all the things you could have done, within the range of your ability, your will, that would have made the difference. And as he offers these alternatives you see how perfectly they make sense, how perfectly possible the solutions were, how manageable. You see how, by being more alive to your life, and not panicky and afraid, things could have been more liv[e]able, indeed, quite wonderful. (229)

The good manners of the irony belie the didactic solemnity of the passage, subtly couched as a memorable "favourite story of Lao's" (128), recalled by his companion, the evergreen artist, Mistletoe. Okri shows how simple and rewarding life can be for those who are more like the train-driver and less like the failure, Jim, the aspirant film director.

Conclusion

In Arcadia ([2002]2003) has suffered surprising critical neglect. The paucity in critical judgement is typified by remarks such as "A considerable challenge is involved in taking on such an idiosyncratic, complicated and intellectually obscure work of fiction" (2008) and "Okri has chosen a big and bold subject and a highly original approach to it" (King 2003). Is this perhaps indicative of a failure to read Ben Okri on his own terms?

Okri's first new millennium novel takes its impetus from both "A Moment in Timelessness" – his inaugural millennium lecture at the 1997 Edinburgh Book Festival – and *Mental Fight* (1999) – his Blakean intertext, subtitled "An anti-spell for the twenty-first century". Like Melville or Schreiner or Woolf or Joyce, Okri reincarnates his own genre of fiction as a reflection, in words, of his own belief system and right to invent:

A great challenge for our age, and future ages: to do for story-telling what Joyce did for language – to take it to the highest levels of enchantment and

magic; to impact into story infinite richness and convergences; to make story flow with serenity, with eternity. (*Birds of Heaven* 1996: 20)

Art, initiation and a dynamic stillness inform Okri's conscious artistry. "We have entered a new age. We must be prepared People who use only their eyes do not SEE. People who use only their ears do not HEAR," writes Okri towards the end of *The Famished Road* (1991: 498; original emphasis). As if in elucidation, he concludes *Starbook* with "The ways of time are indeed strange; and events are not what we think they are. Time and oblivion alchemise all things, even the great suffering" (2007: 421). The reciprocity of time is a primary narrative device in *In Arcadia*.

Although living or existing in a middle ground or shadow land involves pain and degrees of insecurity, angst and insignificance, Lao, and Okri, argue for the enhanced humanity and probity won the hard way. Albeit specific to the African continent, Credo Mutwa's synopsis on the problem of the racial divide captures the essence thereof:

Kenya's Mau Mau uprising, Angola's rebellion, the massacres in the Congo, riots and killings in South Africa – all soon to be written in blood permanently on the highway of human history, all soon to be written in bleached bones on *the desert of time* – all were started by one thing – the total *lack of understanding* between Black and White; the utter failure of one race of human beings to understand what goes on in the minds of the other race. (1970: ix; emphases added)

The mestiza state of living among others and feeling the insecurities and fears of others allows the subject to grow into a useful and valued member of a community, able to intuit the hurt of indignities and affronts served up to so many by the unseeing few, so often. The artistic faculty is nurtured in both Okri and Anzaldua by means of this reaching out to others, living in the margins, knowing anonymity and ignominy. At a time in our history when white supremacy is growing in a way that would not surprise Anzaldua, the plea that Lao makes to Jim, to feel the suffering of others that can alone open the eyes and heart of the smug white, is particularly loud in its call: "The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance" (Anzaldua 1987: 86). Anzaldua's mythopoetic masterpiece resonates strongly with the structures and literary habits of much of Okri's work: both emphasise the need to see feelingly, to suffer the pain of others, identify the ignorance of the privileged and endeavour to enlighten the bigoted and prejudiced.

References

- Anzaldua, G
1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. New York: Aunt Lute.
- King, Bruce
2003 Review of *In Arcadia* by Ben Okri. *World Literature Today* 77(1): 86-87.
- Johnson, Samuel
[1759]2007 *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*. London: Penguin.
- Mutwa, Vusamazulu Credo
[1966]1970 *Indaba My Children*. London: Kahn & Averill.
- Okri, Ben
1991 *The Famished Road*. London: Random House.
1996 *Birds of Heaven*. London: Phoenix.
1998 *A Way of Being Free*. London: Phoenix.
1999 *Mental Fight*. London: Phoenix.
2002 *In Arcadia*. London: Phoenix.
2007 *Starbook*. Chapham: Rider.
2009 *Tales of Freedom*. London: Rider.
2014 *The Age of Magic*. London: Head of Zeus.
- Pope, Alexander
[1766]1954 *The Rape of the Lock*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Voltaire, Arouet de
[1759]1991 *Candide*. Trans. S.G. Corcos. London: Dover.

Matthew Curr

Cape University of Technology
curr@cput.ac.za