

Introduction: The Works of Ben Okri

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This issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap*, guest-edited by Rosemary Gray, is dedicated to the works of a Booker Prize-winning author, Ben Okri. Linear threads of utopianism, history and civilisation, language and writing, notions of reality, politics, literary aesthetics and intertextuality, postmodernism and the postcolony form an interlacertine pattern that draws the six articles together into a coherent whole.

It is, at once, easy and extremely difficult to critique the Okri oeuvre. The paradox inheres in the fact that, on the one hand, Okri's writings provide a richness and complexity that is both challenging and exhilarating for the critic. On the other hand, this Nigerian-born author's facility with words and his inimitable ability to capture in simple yet profound phrases "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed" (to quote a favourite Enlightenment author, Alexander Pope) tempt one to sidestep critique and invoke and facilitate Okri's own voice as self-evident.

Consider, for example, two of Okri's comments in his recent Steve Biko Memorial Lecture in Cape Town (12 September 2012), which embrace concerns that are explored in some depth in the articles in this issue. Having pointed to the African world's empathy with and support for the struggle against apartheid, Okri first posed the loaded question "After the nightmare is over, what are you doing with the day?" Then, reminding the audience of the last eighteen years of so-called liberation and the propensity of neo-colonialists to blame the past, while enjoying the fruits of the present, he transposed the adage "They came; they saw; they conquered" into an equally telling and all-embracing indictment of "We came; we saw; we squandered!"

It is this same plain-speaking and cogent thinking that informs my conversation with Okri in London (16 February 2011), with which this issue begins. In this interview, Okri was quick to rebuff the charge of optimism as evinced in the aphorism "light comes out of the darkness" in his *Songs of Enchantment* – part of his famed *Famished Road* trilogy – with a cultural relativist redefinition of the real, perceiving of reality as "a keyboard of life". Responding to my comment that his novels depict an unusually robust relationship between the child and either of its parents, Okri was quick to

point out that “the family is the intimate theatre of life”. The conversation ranges widely from the philosophical, the political and the esoteric to debating the nature of literature and the civilising role of the writer. Unlike so many black African writers, Okri tends to evince a postmodernist rather than a postcolonial consciousness because, as he says, “We are not defined by history. The human spirit is limitless and our job as writers is to unveil”.

Leigh van Niekerk’s article picks up on both the optimistic and postmodernist strands. In her article “Postmodernism’s Pit Stops en Route to Utopia”, she explores the notions of language, history and death in *In Arcadia*. In a close critical analysis of motifs, word usage and plot elements, and drawing on Gadamer and Heidegger, van Niekerk shows how philosophical hermeneutics, postmodernism and this novel are intertexts, “each informing the other in the never-ending hermeneutic circle”.

The first of two comparative articles – one on Okri and Soyinka by Rosemary Gray and the other on Okri and Blake by Pam van Schaik – follows. Drawing on Ben Okri’s non-fictional *A Time for New Dreams* and Wole Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the initial comparative article explores mythic conjunctions in Okri and Soyinka’s poetry, showing how these are inherent in onto-poiesis or the self-induced development of consciousness. The article concludes that in Okri’s poetry (*African Elegy*, and *Mental Fight*), a higher state of consciousness or “illumination” is the basis for life’s transitions wrought largely through spirit awakenings via a retrieval of traditional geo-cosmic horizons, while in Soyinka’s *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, such transitions accrue from a conscious reconstruction of the human self, affected by the trauma of solitary confinement.

Focusing on the Journey Archetype and so providing a different viewpoint on *In Arcadia*, Sola Ogunbayo’s article compares the quest or journey motif in this novel with that in the earlier *Astonishing the Gods*. Situating her argument within a contemporary socio-political frame of reference, Ogunbayo concludes that Okri’s use of myth as prophecy in these two novels reveals symbolic plots that offer imaginative insights into “things to come”.

Maurice Vambe’s article, entitled “Fantastic Subversion of the African Postcolony”, explores the elements of the fantastic in Okri’s *Songs of Enchantment*. Recalling Okri’s rejection of the notion of being defined by one’s history and his revisioning of reality raised in our conversation, Vambe argues that through the spirit-child, Azaro, *Songs of Enchantment* not only renounces the notion of African history as repetitive but it is itself also made up of fragments of stories in which the apprehension of reality is equally fragmented “in order to partialise literary/narrative accounts and critical interpretations of politics in the African postcolony”. Evoking the narrative strategy of the fantastic in classical realism, folk tale, dreamlore and the cautionary tale, he shows how Okri is able to fracture “the unbearable tyranny of the *abiku* cycle and replace it with the dialogical notion

of history that anticipates an open-ended reinterpretation of African liberation”.

This collection of articles on Ben Okri’s writings concludes with Pam van Schaik’s study of the significance of the term “Mental Fight”, the title of Ben Okri’s second collection of poetry, within its Blakean intertexts, *Jerusalem* and *Milton*. The article explores the ways in which both Ben Okri and William Blake prophesy the redemption of humanity through “the power of words and the participation of all people in a new ‘dream’ by means of which a more humane civilisation may be attained”.

This collection of articles serves to demonstrate the rich complexity of a fraction of the Okri oeuvre. In spite of his obvious talent, this is an author whose humility is disarming: “[I]f you close the image,” he cautions in his novel *In Arcadia*, “if you have all the answers to your questions about the picture [symbolic of being-towards-death or authentic human existence] ... it dies”.

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