

# Postmodernism's Pit Stops en Route to Utopia: Language, History and Death in Ben Okri's *In Arcadia*

**Leigh van Niekerk**

## Summary

From the outset, this article emphasises the notions of language, history and death as indispensable to any reading of Ben Okri's *In Arcadia* ([2002] 2003). From this, the article explains the relevance of the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger to Okri's writing in particular and to postmodern literature in general. Heidegger's concept of being-towards death as the only way to achieve *Dasein* (authentic human existence), as well as Gadamer's idea of language and history as the necessary precursors to human understanding (the hermeneutic circle), is elucidated. Postmodernism itself is loosely defined before the author hones in on particular items of evidence – motifs, word usage, plot elements, etc. – from the primary text, in support of the argument that language, history and death are relevant in this context inasmuch as they relate to perception (and its relationship with reality). Further explication of postmodernism, *Dasein*, being-towards-death, and the hermeneutic circle is interposed with a series of exhibits including, among others, art (film-making, painting and writing) as a sort of language, the inscriptions received by three of the novel's characters, the historicity of the characters' journey in search of Arcadia, and all measures of attempts (through art, grandiosity or any other means), to avert death. All these strands are finally drawn together with the revelation of the fluidity of postmodernism's view of language and history. The closing argument is that the three concepts – philosophical hermeneutics, postmodernism, and *In Arcadia* as a unified whole – are intertexts, each informing the other in the never ending hermeneutic circle.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel beklemtoon uit die staanspoor die begrippe van taal, geskiedenis en die dood as onontbeerlik vir die lees van Ben Okri se *In Arcadia* ([2002] 2003). Daarmee verduidelik die artikel die toepaslikheid van die filosofiese hermeneutiek van Hans-Georg Gadamer en Martin Heidegger vir, in besonder, Okri se skryfwerk, en postmoderne letterkunde in die algemeen. Heidegger se idee van bestaan-teenoor die dood (*Sein-zum-Tode*) as die enigste manier om *Dasein* (outentieke menslike bestaan) te bereik, sowel as Gadamer se idee van taal en geskiedenis as die nodige voorlopers van menslike verstand (die hermeneutiese sirkel) word toegelig. Postmodernisme is losweg gedefinieer voordat die outeur spesifieke items

van bewyse – motiewe, taalgebruik, intrige-elemente, ens. – van die primêre teks identifiseer ter ondersteuning van die argument dat taal, geskiedenis en die dood in hierdie konteks relevant is vir sover dit betrekking het op persepsie (en persepsie se verhouding met die werklikheid). Verdere uiteensetting van postmodernisme, *Dasein*, “being-towards-death”, en die hermeneutiese sirkel is ingewef tussen ’n reeks uitstallings insluitende, onder andere, kuns (rolprentvervaardiging, skilder en skryf) as ’n soort taal, waarvan die inskripsies wat deur drie van die roman se karakters ontvang word, die historisiteit van die karakters se reis in hulle soektog na Arcadia, en alle mate van pogings (deur middel van kuns, weelderigheid of enige ander wyse) om die dood te voorkom. Al hierdie aspekte word uiteindelik saamgetrek met die openbaring van die vloeibaarheid van postmodernisme se siening van taal en geskiedenis. Die slotargument is dat dié drie beginsels – filosofiese hermeneutiek, postmodernisme en *In Arcadia* as ’n verenigde geheel – intertekste is wat elk die ander beïnvloed in die nimmereindigende hermeneutiese sirkel.

Ben Okri’s postmodern novel, *In Arcadia* (2002), is as replete with references (both subtle and overt) to language, history and death as to its most ostensible concern, the concept of arcadia. Thus, it seems apposite to critically discuss *In Arcadia* with a profound awareness of language, history and death. Furthermore, even for one with as cursory a background in philosophical hermeneutics as myself, these concepts are inextricably linked to two names – Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. In particular, the novel displays a certain commonality with Gadamer’s notion of language and history as the necessary preconditions of understanding and Heidegger’s concept of being-towards-death.

Although much of what Gadamer and Heidegger discuss is considered by Jacques Derrida (whose deconstruction is more deeply immersed in postmodernism than either Gadamer or Heidegger’s philosophies are), this essay chooses to focus on Gadamer and Heidegger for two reasons. First, since Derrida developed his philosophy out of theirs, it is with Gadamer and Heidegger (philosophical hermeneutics) that his ideas originate (Feldman 2000: 51-53). Secondly, as will be shown, the specific ideas of language and history as the transitory a priori of thought, and being-towards-death with which this essay is concerned, are specifically relevant to the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer. To focus on Gadamer and Heidegger when discussing postmodernism is not to negate Derrida since “philosophical hermeneutics and deconstruction should be understood as complementary postmodern philosophies” (Feldman 2000: 51)

This article attempts to show how these theorists have had an irrevocable, if indirect, impact on the mindset of postmodern writers in general and on Ben Okri’s approach to humanity’s concept of Eden, Arcadia or Utopia in *In Arcadia* specifically.

This is achieved by considering these and related concerns with regard to various relevant extracts from and observations regarding the novel itself. Relevant terminology is discussed and the significance of relating post-

modernism (specifically, *In Arcadia*) to terms from philosophical hermeneutics is illuminated.

Postmodernism is, by its very nature, extremely difficult to define since this would require the demarcation of certain limits or boundaries and it is precisely limits and boundaries which postmodernism seeks to defy. A rough definition, however, lies in comparing postmodernism to its predecessor, modernism. Postmodernism is “a reaction against ... return to the state that preceded ... continuation and completion of various neglected strains within modernism ... you cannot have postmodernism without modernism” (Heartney 2001: 6).

An extract from a table of comparison, designed by Ihab Hassan, outlines the differences between postmodernism and modernism succinctly:

<b>Modernism</b>	<b>Postmodernism</b>
form (conjunctive/closed)	antiform (disjunctive/open)
purpose	play
design	chance
art object/finished work	process/performance/happening
distance	participation
creation/totalization/synthesis	decreation/deconstruction/antithesis
presence	absence
centring	dispersal
genre/boundary	text/intertext
root/depth	rhizome/surface
narrative/ <i>grande histoire</i>	antinarrative/ <i>petite histoire</i>
master code	idiolect
origin/cause	difference- <i>différance</i> /trace
determinacy	indeterminacy
transcendence	immanence

(Quayson 2005: 89-90)

The interplay between perception (or perspective) and reality is a central concern of postmodernism (the difference between modernism and postmodernism lies in how each *perceives* things – they are differing world-views). It also plays a pivotal role in Gadamer and Heidegger’s theories. The unfolding of *In Arcadia*’s plot is dependent on the perceptions (and changes therein) of the characters, and the text is rife with self-conscious reflections on dreams, reality, illusion and other concepts related to perception – many of the chapters’ titles are related to intuitions (Okri [2002]2003: 41-45, 67-71, 178-180, 187-189, 227-228) and dreaming (Okri [2002]2003: 187-193). The plot traces the experiences of a film crew in the process of making a documentary. This involves looking at real events through a lens or, in other words, from a certain perspective.

The film crew are essentially making a documentary about an idea – arcadia – and, for lack of information, are largely feeling their way as they do so. As a result, the idea of arcadia is constantly on everyone’s minds and

is regularly discussed – at one point, each crew member is even asked to reveal what their own personal idea of arcadia is (Okri [2002]2003: 133). In this way the reader is able to track the evolution of the concept of arcadia as the novel progresses. The postmodernist ideals of process, participation, surface, idiolect and interpretation are at play here.

It is clear that language, history and death are only significant in this context inasmuch as they relate to perception (and its relationship with reality). Our perceptions are shaped by and, in turn, shape our histories. Language is the medium through which this shaping of perception is possible, because it is through language that we materialise our ideas for ourselves and others. The perception in question is the perception of death and its relation to arcadia. This train of thought can be further explicated by delving, simultaneously, into the philosophies of Gadamer and Heidegger – particularly since these specific philosophies are seen as important precursors to postmodernism (West 1996: 96-97) – and to the novel *In Arcadia*.

Gadamer's project lies in exposing the “fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding [,] an event over which the interpreting subject does not ultimately preside” (Linge 1977: xi-xii). For Gadamer, two concepts are particularly significant with regard to any attempt at understanding (and, thus, at the creation of meaning and a meaningful existence) – language and history. Gadamer considers any person's horizon (his historically and linguistically constituted context) to be “*the productive ground of all understanding rather than a negative factor or impediment to be overcome*” (Linge 1977: xiv; my emphasis). The focus of this article is more on language (than on history) in that it depends on the idea that the whole of *In Arcadia* is a verbal working-out of the meaning of the word (and concept) “arcadia”.

Furthermore, Gadamer argues, it is only through language (here considered in its loosest sense as an organised system of signs) that one is able to interpret phenomena to which one is exposed so as to convert abstract notions into concrete understanding (Linge 1977: xxviii). Derrida continues with this understanding by positing that “there is nothing outside-the-text (*‘il n'y a rien hors du texte’*)” (Abrams 2005: 56). The reality of our experience is shaped by this understanding. In other words, since we do not have access to any absolute underlying reality – reality (for all intents and purposes) is merely that which one projects, linguistically, onto the world.

It must be noted that Gadamer does not envisage the determinist master code of modernism. In every event of understanding, a fusion of horizons takes place between the text and the interpreter and both are altered to some extent – history is moved along. One may be able to choose *which* language one uses and it may be altered over time, but one can never escape the fundamental linguisticity of being human. History and language are seen as fluid – they are (in the words of another philosopher, Jürgen Habermas) “the transitory aprioris of thought” (Wachterhauser 1986: 6) – transitory

because they are always in flux, and a priori because they necessarily precede understanding.

Gadamer uses the analogies of play (a game which ultimately takes on a life of its own, not within the control of the players but still affected by them) and conversation (which often yields conclusions and opens up new channels of discussion which none of the participants had intended or foreseen) in order to describe this process (Linge 1977: xxii-xxiii). Derrida carries this over by writing of perpetual play of meaning in language (Abrams 2005: 57). Gadamer's approach clearly anticipates postmodern notions of play, happening, participation, deconstruction, intertext and idiolect.

References to language are everywhere in *In Arcadia*. The camera and its filmic techniques form a kind of language. Sam, the cameraman, is described as having "spent most of his professional life displacing speech into what can be caught in camera angles and oblique shots" (Okri [2002]2003: 143). The director, Jim, periodically receives written instructions (on how to proceed with the film) in envelopes that appear mysteriously (Okri [2002]2003: 74). Cryptic messages, all of which have an unsettling effect, are in-explicably slipped to Lao, Jute and Riley (Okri [2002]2003: 24, 37).

Jute's message seems to be a map – which is surely nothing other than a syntagmatic construction from within a certain organised system of signs. Lao's message, "beware the inscription" (Okri [2002]2003: 24), immediately suggests to the reader that language is going to have a powerful effect on Lao and the other crew members – an awareness which his receiving of the message seems to indicate he lacks at this stage. It also places a certain combination of words at the centre of the intrigue surrounding the journey. The fact that the red ink in which Riley's message is written runs like blood down her palm may suggest that human beings are fundamentally lin-guistically constituted – in other words, that language runs in our veins.

It is significant that Lao's name is not revealed until page 38 and his race only disclosed 104 pages into the novel (Okri [2002]2003). This seems to intimate the narrator's (or Okri's) acute awareness that name and race are historically codified in our society with very specific connotations that have the power to severely distort the meaning of the text for the reader. Similarly, the tomb in Poussin's painting, "Les Bergers d'Arcadie" (at the centre of the plot), bears no name. This is generally considered to add greatly to the painting's mystery since the tomb's namelessness makes the meaning of the painting and its inscription even harder to decipher (Okri [2002]2003: 204-205).

When Lao and his fellow crew members encounter the concept of arcadia, it is already steeped in several centuries' worth of meaning – it emerges from a horizon of its own even as the crew members confront it with each of theirs. This existing horizon has been created by earlier individuals

projecting their own interpretations onto the concept – its meaning is constantly in flux. The power of perception to shape reality is especially evident here. Virgil, the poet who “put [Arcadia] on the literary map” (Wills 2004: 15) had never even been there. The real Arcadia was thought of by the ancient Greeks as “a region to be avoided, a spooky, even repulsive, place with mentally retarded inhabitants” (p. 16).

This is a far cry from the pastoral paradise immortalised by Virgil in his poetry. It is, however, the perception of Arcadia that predominates to this day – to the extent that pastoral plays are now sometimes performed in that hilly region in Greece in order to entertain tourists who have come in search of a glimpse of paradise (Wills 1998: 27) – and with which Ben Okri confronts the characters in *In Arcadia*. This is the horizon from which the concept is presented to them. The link between poetry and language is obvious. Thus, the impact of Virgil’s poetry is testament to the power of language to shape perceptions and, therefore, one’s experience of reality. This may also be one of the reasons why Okri chooses to end the novel before the characters actually get to Arcadia itself. Okri chooses to keep the emphasis on Virgil’s imagined Arcadia so that that he can play with its connotations of paradise.

*In Arcadia* contains a great deal of speculation on the nature and significance of art. Art tends to employ certain sets of codes. Thus, although these codes may be cryptic and lack absolute universality, language can also be thought of as a type of language. At the risk of oversimplification, one might consider (for example) how the colour pink traditionally evokes emotions and thoughts relating to femininity and romance. Painting is a powerful language that can stir intense emotions in those who use and interpret it. For Mistletoe, the novel’s artist, “you see what you are in art” (Okri [2002]2003: 155). Lao comes to the realisation that paintings are actually living things (Okri [2002]2003: 200).

The connection between Mistletoe’s role in the novel and the fact that she is a painter is by no means arbitrary. Mistletoe is the only person on the journey who is not involved in the documentary, but is merely there to keep Lao company (Okri [2002]2003: 35). To a certain extent, she stands at a more objective distance from events than the other characters do. Moreover, if the characters had been thrown together on this journey in order to learn some sort of life lesson, the fact that Mistletoe is only there because Lao is there might suggest that she never needed to learn this lesson in the first place. When Lao asks everyone to define their personal ideas of arcadia, “Mistletoe [goes] on drawing. She [is] becoming her own ideal” (Okri [2002]2003: 134). This seems to suggest that she has no need to hypothesise about arcadia when she is already living hers, to a certain extent, in her art. This may be why Lao repeatedly refers to her as the daughter of Pan, the god associated with Arcadia in ancient Greek mythology (Okri [2002]2003:

172, 191, 230). Art is here depicted as an ideal medium through which to project one's arcadia onto reality.

At the centre of *In Arcadia* is Poussin's painting, "Les Bergers d'Arcadie" and the inscription it bears which has become so famous, "Et in Arcadia Ego". Like Virgil's arcadia, "Les Bergers d'Arcadie" has accrued a vast heritage of interpretation and its meaning is constantly undergoing transformation, as is its inscription. This links to the postmodern perception of meaning as being a process, performance, happening which involves participation rather than interpretation. Furthermore, the painting leads the characters to the Louvre, the famous museum in Paris. The connection between museums and man's fundamental historicity goes without saying.

The words in the inscription are described as the four most debated in the history of art (Okri [2002]2003: 204) and, as will be shown in the conclusion of this article, they are what ultimately lead Lao to his final revelation regarding what arcadia actually is and where it is to be found. A large part of the problem of interpreting the inscription is that it is in the ancient language of Latin – some meaning must inevitably be lost over time and in translation. For this reason, many different translations have been suggested (Okri [2002]2003: 204). Okri's postmodernist conviction to indeterminacy causes him to emphasise this fact. The shadow in the picture, cast by the pointing figure, depicting a man holding a scythe is symbolic of death (Okri [2002]2003: 206) – the picture clearly speaks a kind of language to all who look upon it. The fact that this figure is pointing at the words as the other three contemplate them (Okri [2002]2003: 206) draws further attention to the centrality of language to arcadia and death. Nowhere do the concepts of history, language, arcadia and death converge more obviously than in this painting with its mysterious inscription.

The fact that Poussin does not provide answers but rather poses questions (Okri [2002]2003: 215) links with postmodernism's high valuing of process, participation, deconstruction and indeterminacy. What the painting gives is "the code for continual development in living, and in thinking" (Okri [2002]2003: 203). The director tells Lao that "if you close the image, if you have all the answers to your questions about the picture ... it dies" (Okri [2002]2003: 212).

Gadamer derives a great deal of his philosophy, particularly the idea that history is a precondition of understanding, from the work of Heidegger. As will become evident shortly, Heidegger's notion of the necessity of being-towards-death is essentially a product of man's historicity. Being-towards-death has a special resonance with *In Arcadia* in that the characters invented by Okri find themselves on the quest for arcadia and to find out what it actually means. The argument of this article is based largely on the idea that arcadia is essentially synonymous with happiness and that what Okri is suggesting in *In Arcadia* is that happiness (that is, arcadia) lies in identifying (or rather, coming to *understand*) some sort of meaning in one's life.

Heidegger coins the term being-towards-death when discussing understanding and meaning. Being-towards-death, according to Heidegger, is absolutely pivotal to achieving *Dasein* (authentic human existence). That is, in order to lead a truly meaningful (and thus, happy) life, one must be acutely aware and accepting of the inescapable fact that, eventually, one *is* going to die. This is to be aware of the finitude of one's own existence, to be aware of one's historicity. In this way, meaning is not sought in terms of the modernist concept of some grander scheme of things but rather simply in *living* one's life – living while one is alive (West 1996: 101-103). In postmodernist terms, this links meaning to *participation* in life.

It also calls to mind the postmodern values of play, chance, antinarrative and immanence. This is why, in *In Arcadia*, Lao says:

I think it is a good thing for people to live posthumously ... and to hear what other people think of them while they're alive. It's good for all concerned. Frees people into the truth and all that.

(Okri [2002]2003: 99)

At the outset, death has a stifling, terrifying quality for the characters – “death, decay and destruction have taken over the air [they] breathe” (Okri [2002]2003: 47). Riley, in particular, suffers from a paralyzing fear of death (Okri [2002]2003: 82). However, with typically postmodernist emphasis on indeterminacy, the characters are also pulled in the opposite direction by the realisation that “[they] must find a way to make death not a threat, an enemy, a terror, an excuse, but a friend, an aid, a liberator” (Okri [2002]2003: 32). After experiencing the opulence of the palace of Versailles, Lao begins to understand that, by trying to avoid death, the French king had actually cast its shadow over his whole life, chasing life away.

Maybe, he thought, the grandiose designs of kings are meant to avert death .... But in the strangest way he felt how much death spoke [there] through the beauty of the place. Death spoke not through decay but through the absence of freedom.

(Okri [2002]2003: 169)

Lao also later observes that, while Marie Antoinette was escaping to her artificial rural village, the real villagers of France were starving. This is why she failed to anticipate the French Revolution or her own execution (Okri [2002]2003: 177). He comes to realise that arcadia cannot be achieved by avoidance of reality but, rather, is entirely impossible without absolute immersion and participation in reality. Truth cannot be gained by somehow rising out of one's socio-historical horizon (which, according to Gadamer and Heidegger, is impossible anyway) but by using this horizon as the lens through which to observe the world – Versailles is the dream and arcadia is

the reality (Okri [2002]2003: 166). He now understands that “the crew’s sadness [is] that ache for the real, for the authentic enchantment” (Okri 2002: 181).

At the centre of this connection between death and arcadia (and, really, of *In Arcadia* itself) is [predictably] Poussin’s painting “Les Bergers d’Arcadie”. The central object in the painting is a tomb, bearing the inscription which Lao seems to have been warned to beware of: “Et in Arcadia Ego” (Okri [2002]2003: 204-205). As already noted, the shadow of the shepherd who is pointing at the tomb forms the shape of a man with a scythe – the symbol of death – “Arcadia and death are inextricably intertwined ... happiness and death are coupled” (Okri [2002]2003: 206). The director of the Louvre tells Lao that the painting fascinates him because “it brings together the complementary relationship between death and happiness. The inevitability of death and also the possibility of happiness” (Okri [2002]2003: 211). This is perhaps what the different shepherds in the painting are “in various stages of understanding” (Okri [2002]2003: 210), according to the director.

It is through this that Lao ultimately comes to understand what arcadia means to him. He begins to see that the disappointed misery that seems to have settled over mankind is that “the world we have made doesn’t quite correspond to the dreams and hopes that somewhere dwell in us” (Okri [2002]2003: 219). At first he is disheartened by this realisation but then he comes to see that it is human beings themselves who are responsible for this situation – the fault lies with us for “project[ing] wrongly” (Okri [2002]2003: 222).

Ultimately it is we who have alienated *ourselves* from arcadia – by forgetting that its existence or disappearance is entirely within our control – we have a *choice* in how we perceive reality. Lao is overwhelmed with a sudden sense of empowerment as it dawns on him that “the world is more or less neutral, but the disease within makes it seem an enemy” (Okri [2002]2003: 223-224). Together, Lao and Mistletoe realise that the key to arcadia is to “live while you are alive” (Okri [2002]2003: 227). The inscription in the painting seems to be saying more than just “Death too has been in Arcadia” (Okri [2002]2003: 205) but, taking it one step further, “even in Arcadia, I [death] am present ... *especially* in Arcadia” (Wills 1998: 27). In other words, to “live” in arcadia requires an exceptional being-towards-death.

There are so many more connections that can be drawn, but, even within the limited scope of this paper, it is clear that the ideas of history, language and death intonated by Heidegger and Gadamer have had a profound influence on postmodernist literature. At the very least, there can be no arguing that Gadamer and Heidegger helped to steer literature away from the modernist obsession with absolute truth and overarching narratives which cast an entirely objective subject as their chief protagonist.

Perhaps Gadamer and Heidegger's philosophies and postmodernism only really differ in terms of degree. Derrida clearly adapts and moves along these ideas significantly before they are able to have a notable direct influence on postmodern literature. The influence, as this article has attempted to show, is there nonetheless. It is not certain whether or not Gadamer would have considered the sign systems of film and art as organised enough to fall under his category of language. The characters in *In Arcadia* may, to some, appear far less conditioned by their socio-historical context than Gadamer's theory suggests that actual human beings are. Postmodernists may be inclined to see human beings as less conditioned by their contexts than Gadamer and Heidegger do. Moreover, Okri may not even have been explicitly aware of Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death or Gadamer's ideas on language and history when he wrote this novel on the centrality of death to arcadia.

However, in the context of postmodernism's view of history and language as fluid – no idea can really ever be separated from another. Okri must inevitably have been affected by Gadamer and Heidegger, whether he was aware of it or not. It seems impossible to think otherwise when, as the novel closes out, Mistletoe and Lao (both having taken a step closer to arcadia through their newfound awareness of death) are described as inscriptions seen from afar as the train speeds through space and time (Okri [2002]2003: 131).

The reader of *In Arcadia* who does so with the Gadamer and Heidegger's theories in the back of his or her mind will inevitably go away with a unique interpretation of the novel. The student of Heidegger and Gadamer who has read *In Arcadia* will undoubtedly be reminded of Lao and his fellow crew members as he studies. Thus, reader, philosophy and work of art are irrevocably and continuously reshaped by each successive reading – each successive fusing of horizons.

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**Leigh van Niekerk**  
University of Pretoria  
leighvn@gmail.com