

The Dialogue of the Big and the Small: The Poetry of Ben Okri

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In an interview with Charles Rowell, Ben Okri expressed his views on art and its relation to society in the following terms :

I see art as a bridge between the secular and the spiritual aspects of humanity. In art I'm including everything from song, dance, architecture, painting, music, literature, conversation of a certain kind, even certain silences. Society is held together by laws, but it is animated by art. (214)

Okri's expression of his views on art gives one a glimpse of the challenges facing the reader who wishes to read a specific text in the light of such a broad statement. In the same interview Okri spoke of art and life as being "perpetually in dialogue" (215); the notion of dialogue informs the title poem of his 2012 collection *Wild*, in which the poet evokes "the infinite dialogue/Of the big and the small" as a way of understanding inspiration (54). In the same poem he speaks with a disarming simplicity of the way "Those ancients saw/The world as it is,/A system of co-operation,/Where things are both themselves/And symbols and correspondences" (51). Such statements appear to go against the grain of the modern reader's temptation to see the literary text as the site of a complicated transaction involving a multiplicity of codes used to "read" the world. Robert Fraser has pointed out, in talking about Okri's *Mental Fight* (1999), a poem which owes its title and inspirational thrust to William Blake, that "the poem seems strange, because, as readers of twentieth-century verse, we have grown so used to minimalism, obscurity, or narcissistic self-pity that we take these qualities as the hallmarks of poetry" (*Ben Okri* 93). Existing critical studies devoted to Okri's poetry (of which there are very few) focus on the way in which his poetry, in particular *Mental Fight*, can be interpreted through mythical, philosophical or spiritual frames.¹ Such studies are useful for the way in which they permit the reader to understand forms of expression which may seem either totally personal or hopelessly abstract. However they do not help one to approach Okri's poetry as poetry, characterised by an interdependency of form and meaning which constitutes the very definition of the genre. That Okri himself is aware of the impossibility of separating the formal aspects of poetry, such as sound, from its meaning can be deduced from remarks he makes in the essay "Newton's Child":

It is amazing how much writing is a combination of mathematics and musical composition, of reason and aesthetics. It is also amazing how much of writing is rewriting; how much is instinctive; how much is simple logic, and the operation of so many secret and invisible laws. Take, for example, the law of visuality—the words you actually see on the page. There is, to give another example, the law of subliminal effect—words that you don't notice but which make you see things more acutely. (*WBF* 24)

In commenting on Okri's reference to "the law of subliminal effect," Fraser points out that in Virgil's *Eclogues*, an important text for Okri, "the match between sense and euphony is so smooth that his music seems to be what the poetry is expressing" (*Ben Okri* 99). This remark is curiously similar to Paul Valery's view of poetry as "hesitation between the sound and the sense" (qtd. in Jakobson, *Selected Writings* 38).ⁱⁱ Clearly there is no simple way of entering the world of Ben Okri's poetry. While this statement can be applied to all poets, Okri's multicultural background and his blending of diverse literary, philosophical and spiritual influences requires an approach that takes these factors into account without allowing them to overshadow the personal encounter between poem and reader which is, for Okri, the heart of the reading experience. In his collection of essays *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri defines

poetry as “an inner dialogue. It suggests a private journey to one’s own truth” (*TND* 4). The notion of dialogue can suggest a method for dealing with Okri’s poetry through the examination of the dialogue he establishes between Africa and the world, between the poets, both ancient and modern who have affected his work, and between the different forms or genres which make up his artistic universe. Okri has published three volumes of poetry: *An African Elegy* (1992), *Mental Fight* (1999) and *Wild* (2012). Other uncollected poems have been published separately.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the author’s nonfiction, as found in collections like *A Time for New Dreams* and *A Way of Being Free*, with their use of aphorism and their reliance on themes, symbols and metaphors found in the fiction and poetry, suggest the necessity of seeing Okri’s work as a perpetual dialogue between form and meaning, but also between different forms, an interpretation reinforced by the chapter “Form and Content” in *A Time for New Dreams*, in which the poet meditates on the way in which “true form is both evanescent and eternal, a paradox, a mystery” (*TND* 126). This, as we will see, is not to suggest that the poet’s nonfiction provides an explanation, a gloss, on the poems, but rather that the relation between form and meaning constitutes one facet of “the secret harmony/Of the stars and the sun” to which he refers in “The Ruin and the Forest” (*Wild* 47).

The Dialogue between Africa and the World

The title poem of Okri’s collection *An African Elegy* suggests the difficulty of looking for clues to the meaning of the poems in this collection in the political context of Nigeria in the turmoil of the post-independence period. While the speaker’s reference to “the mystery of our pain” in the title poem creates a clear link between his voice and those of others who share a common “destiny,” there are no specific references to a time or place. The reference to God in the first line suggests a Christian vision in which man must “taste the bitter fruit of Time” (*An African Elegy* 41). However, the speaker’s affirmation that he has “heard the dead singing” suggests a spirituality closer to the Yoruba culture which often informs Okri’s presentation of Africa, in which the spheres of the living and the dead are not separated by the Christian distinction between what could be termed “this world” and the “hereafter.”^{iv} Although the elegy is a meditation inspired by death, either literal or metaphorical, the poem concludes with the affirmation that “The sky is not an enemy./Destiny is our friend.”^v Unlike the poems of one of Okri’s fellow Nigerians, Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967),^{vi} which represent a challenge to the non-African reader because of their use of images which are difficult to grasp without an understanding of their African origins as well as their intertextual echoes, Okri’s poem uses a vocabulary that can easily be understood in a Christian context – he speaks of “miracles,” “suffering,” “mystery,” and “bless[ing].” However, the speaker suggests alternative ways of using these terms, ways that cannot be aligned with the Christian distinction between life and death, the here and the hereafter. In contrast to “the bitter fruit of Time,” in the third stanza the speaker affirms that “we never curse [...] the fruit when it tastes so good.” Rather than adhering to a single view of the way in which “the unseen moves” in everything, the poem seems to go beyond the Christian dichotomy, thus illustrating one of the differences between Yoruba religion and Christianity described by Roland Hallgren:

It is a correct relationship to god and the divine sphere which guarantees the good life here on earth. At a basic level however we cannot deny that there is a difference between African religions in general and Yoruba religion in particular compared to Christianity. Specific ideas of celestial reward, personal salvation, judgement, the grace of the Lord, confessions of sins, forgiveness etc. are patterns of thought that are strange to Yoruba traditional religion. (9)^{vii}

Although Okri is quoted in an article by Ben Naparstek as saying that he is “interested in what

is universal in the African,” (qtd. in Guignery 25), his exploration of form and its relation to both belief and imagination reveals the impossibility of separating works of art from the contexts which give them meaning. This is made particularly clear in the first poem of the collection, “Lament of the Images,” in which the stealing of the masks makes them incomprehensible outside of the belief system that animates them. The masks could be seen as representing by metonymy any African “images,” which cannot simply be “taken” (“They took some images”) and treated as “‘primitive objects’” (*An African Elegy* 10). The poem clearly places the cultural misunderstanding created by the colonial period at its centre, reproducing though its repetitions the brutal pillaging of the continent:

They took the masks
 The sacrificial faces
 ...
 They took the painted bones
 The stools of molten kings
 The sacred bronze leopards
 The images charged with blood
 And they burned what
 They could not
 Understand. (9)

The hinge on which the misunderstanding pivots is evoked further on in the poem when the speaker explains:

The artists of the alien
 Land
 Twisted the pain
 Of their speech
 And created a new
 Chemistry
 Which, purified of ritual
 Dread,
 They called
 Art. (11)

Only “ritual dread” can animate the masks and make them meaningful.^{viii} The form of the poem, by creating a chain of nouns and verbs that occasionally stand alone, dramatizes the process of selection in the speaker’s choice of words and the difficulty of aligning them in a meaningful, horizontal sequence. It also emphasises the visual arrangement in a way that mirrors the iconicity of the masks and their resistance to integration into a foreign discourse.

The political turbulence that has characterised post-independence Africa is not absent

from the poems, but as in *The Famished Road*, the violence is often represented as an assault on the senses and on meaning rather than as the pretext for the construction of ideologies. Two poems are dedicated to Nigerian writers who addressed political corruption and violence directly in their works. “Darkening City: Lagos, 83” is dedicated to Ochia Ofeimun (1950 -) and “Memories Break” to Kole Omotoso (1943 -).^{ix} “Darkening City: Lagos, 83” uses the ambiguous relation of electrical power to other forms of power (“Our lanterns flicker/In darkening city/Of murderous powers without light.”[*An African Elegy* 38]) in order to generate nightmarish images of the mental and cultural darkness that gripped the city at a time when political corruption was rampant in Nigeria.^x Both the form and the thematic concerns of the poem echo the work of Ofeimun, whose collection *The Poet Lied* (1980) is described by Fraser as concerned “with the sheer pomposity of power” (*West African Poetry* 307). Another poem dated the same year, “On Edge of Time Future,” relies on the ironic repetition of the line “I remember the history well,” (*An African Elegy* 48) to play on the relation between story and history often evoked in postcolonial representations while suggesting the repetitive nature of political upheaval in Nigeria. While images like “hungry roads” and “fevered winds” suggest an African context, it is the chaotic nature of all attempts to construct a nation that is the central concern of the poem:

The nation was a map stitched
 From the grabbing of future flesh
 And became a rush through
 Historical slime. (49)

By their general refusal of poetic imagery and the reassuring regularity of rhyme and metrical patterns, the poems collected in *An African Elegy* reflect the difficulty of finding an appropriate frame for the emotions inspired by Africa’s political turmoil. Yet the poem “We Sing Absurdities,” dedicated to Robert Fraser, reveals, by its play on the etymology of “absurd,” the degree of Okri’s sensitivity to the paradoxical relation between sound and sense and between the poet’s sensitivity and the “ordinary chaos” that defines African life. In the same way, the phonetic similarity of the words “sing” and “sink” in the two final lines underlines their contrast in meaning:

We sing absurdities
 When all else sinks in shallows. (21)

The poems found in Okri’s most recent collection *Wild*, are, for the most part very different from those found in *An African Elegy*. Specific references to Africa are less frequent, except in poems like “The Blue Cloth (Mozambique).” However, an understanding of these poems requires an attention to the way in which his African background and culture nourish and animate his particular view of poetry. As the short poem “The Rhino” suggests, appearances are deceptive and all acts of interpretation require a capacity to see beyond the “thick crust” to which he refers.

My horn stands me apart
 And I have a passionate heart.
 My skin is a thick crust.
 I walk in the wonder of dust. (*Wild* 50)

In the chapter of *A Time for New Dreams* entitled “Healing the Africa Within,” Okri affirms, “There is a realm in everyone that is Africa. We all have an Africa within.” (*TND* 134). It is this internalization of Africa as both an aesthetic and an emotional experience that can be seen as one of the forces shaping the writer’s later poetry.

The Dialogue between Past and Present, Theory and Practice

It is impossible to separate Ben Okri’s relation to tradition and to other poets from the way in which form informs the meaning, or the interpretation of his poems. Like the work of most poets, his is in some ways a working through, a coming to terms with his need to both listen to others and speak for himself. This can be seen in a poem like “The World is Rich,” in which the use of a simple and traditional form stands in contrast to the complexity of the thought in a way that is reminiscent of Robert Frost’s “Fire and Ice.”

They tell me that the world
Is rich with terror.
I say the world is rich
With love unfound.
It’s inside us and all around. (*Wild* 35)

This first stanza, unlike the poems in *An African Elegy*, rather than deploying violent imagery in an attempt to evoke terror, uses the incongruity produced by the juxtaposition of “rich” and “terror” to produce a verbal conundrum that will be partially solved by the final affirmation:

Even in the terror
There is love, twisted round
And round. Set it free
River, flow to the sea.

The heavy reliance on end rhyme in the poem reinforces the effect by posing, in terms that reflect Ramon Jakobson’s work on the relation between sound and meaning, the way in which the proximity of sounds draws attention to the semantic relation between the words evoked in the poem.^{xi} The poem itself moves in a circular pattern of repetition that mirrors the use of the word “around” itself in rhyming patterns, suggesting also the way in which nursery rhymes and folk poetry pose complex questions in simple forms.

Any attempt to account for the form of Okri’s poetry raises, as it does for any poet, the complex question of poetry itself, of what it is, how it functions, and what referential status it possesses. Roman Jakobson took an important step in freeing poetry from the assumptions based on its relation to meaning and emotion by pointing out the parallel between language as the autonomous material shaped by poetry and the use of sound in music, gesture in dance and physical matter in sculpture and painting (*Huit questions* 16). In so doing, he made it possible to identify and observe the “poeticity” of poetry, using the patterns of resemblance and difference underlying the functioning of phonology, syntax and grammar as the basis for the study of the structuring of language in poetry. He summarised the functioning of his model in the well-known assertion that “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (*Selected Writings* 27). According to Jakobson, any thorough examination of the

selection, distribution and inter-relation of the different morphological categories

and of the various syntactic structures in a given poem surprises the poet himself by the striking and unexpected presence of symmetries and asymmetries, by the balance between structures, by the efficient accumulation of parallel forms and striking contrasts, and finally by the strict limits placed on the number of morphological and syntactic elements used in the poem, these limits making it possible to grasp the perfect mastery of the elements used. (*Huit questions* 97-98 my translation).

It was to this complex configuration that he assigned the term “poeticity” in order to distinguish it from “poetry,” which he saw as inevitably tainted with assumptions generated by tradition. In the essay “Poetry and Life” in *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri asserts that: “Poetry is a descendant of the original word which mystics believe gave the impulse for all creation” (*TND* 5). This statement, like many of the poet’s remarks, is open to a wide variety of interpretations, ranging from Saint John’s opening phrase in the Gospel to various spiritual visions of the relation between language and reality. At the same time, it does not contradict Jakobson’s belief in the formalist analysis of poetic language. It suffices to see “the word” as a synecdoche for language as a system. Jakobson, who was fascinated by the relation between the rules underlying grammar and geometry, devoted a detailed analysis to two of the “painter-poets” who have inspired Okri.^{xii} In the same way, Okri has referred to the intimate connection between different forms of artistic expression.^{xiii} It is neither useful nor pertinent to try to determine whether Ben Okri’s vision of poetry as being inscribed in what could be seen as a spiritual quest is, in a sense, in contradiction with a formalist approach, which sees the “poeticity” of poetry as being related to the autonomy of language. It is wise, however, to avoid reading Okri’s poetry as the reflection of a thought system, keeping in mind that when the speaker of the poem “Heraclitus’ Golden River” says “Poets pray to the goddess of surprise” (*Wild* 93), Okri is speaking of what the Russian formalists, and Viktor Shklovsky in particular, would have called “defamiliarisation,” the way in which the poetic use of language displaces it from the familiar contexts which make it invisible.^{xiv}

If an approach to poetry inspired by Jakobson’s insights can be helpful in reading Ben Okri as a poet, it can also be useful in situating him within the tradition of English poetry. In *Poétique de l’évocation*, Marc Dominicy attempts to situate Jakobson with respect to different approaches to the relation between the referential status of poetry and its internal organisation, a controversy that he traces back to the “stylistic” paradigm of Wordsworth and the “organicist” model of Coleridge. Certain theoreticians, like Gilles-Gaston Granger, attempt to account for the “style” of poetry by distinguishing between “the *a priori* codes of the linguistic system” and a “series of *a posteriori* codes which organise the message by rigidifying the distribution and the arrangement of all kinds of elements which are normally without significance (number of syllables, distribution of vocalic timbre, etc.)” (14 my translation). However, as Dominicy shows, the Russian Formalists’ attempts to preserve the concept of style produced a certain number of contradictions, partly because their notion of “defamiliarisation,” crucial to the link between language and the poet’s perception of the world, could also be demonstrated in folklore (22-23). Theoreticians who followed the organicist approach, which nourished in particular New Criticism, refused to admit any distinction between inside and outside, relying on Coleridge’s conception of poetic imagination as “the addition, to an already active perception by which the individual constitutes himself as a subject, of a voluntary and conscious procedure which ends up by ‘melting’ all of the components of the text in an ideal and unified totality, an ‘alliance of opposites’ which produces the dialectical synthesis of hitherto antagonistic elements” (Dominicy 26, my translation). It is possible to link Ben Okri’s approach to poetry to both of these visions: his insistence on the reworking and perfecting of the poem in order to make it

the most perfect vessel possible for the channelling of a spiritual vision through the mind would appear to align him with the organicists; however his willingness to explore the same thoughts and motifs across the boundaries of different genres argues for an awareness of the role played by the *a posteriori* codes that constitute style. If one examines Okri's comments about his own work or about writing in general, one discovers a certain number of contradictions which make it difficult to arrive at a coherent aesthetic theory. Several statements found in *A Way of Being Free* point to Okri's awareness of style as the expression of the writer: "One definition of style, or voice, could be patterns of words guided by self-mastery" (*WBF* 27); "Writers have one great responsibility: to write beautifully, which is to say to write well." (*WBF* 60). However, to focus on these remarks to the detriment of his emphasis on art "as a bridge between the secular and the spiritual aspects of humanity" (Rowell 214) would be to fail to take sufficient account of the vital connection between art and life which, in spite of the specific problems it raises in the context of contemporary poetry, lies at the core of both his poetic inspiration and his practice.

Before examining more closely the poems in Okri's second collection, *Wild*, it would be useful to examine some of the major ideas expressed in interviews and essays, ideas which have contributed to a tendency to read his poetry for ideas rather than perceiving it as poetry. Many of these ideas can be found in *A Way of Being Free* and *A Time for New Dreams*. While the essays and the poems can be seen as illuminating each other in a form of cross-fertilization, Okri's tendency to explain his ideas and theories about art and its relation to life, culture and history may also leave little place for the reader's imagination, in spite of the writer's insistence on the importance of the reader's participation in the act of creation.^{xv} Okri commented on the form of *A Time for New Dreams* by saying that he was "interested in finding the place where poetry and the essay meet" and that whereas "essays are usually a full exploration of an idea," he found that this approach "was too laborious for what I was trying to do in this book" (*Granta* 2011). This does not simplify the task of grasping what is specific to the poetry. The ideas that Okri has expressed through all the forms of his writing—fiction, essay and poetry—and particularly those relating to spirituality, creativity and the future of mankind, have been scrutinized in some detail, although they cannot be seen as constituting a system corresponding to a specific ideology or even philosophy. Douglas McCabe's examination of *The Famished Road* in the light of New Age spirituality constitutes a particularly close examination of the implications of Okri's use of the *abiku* in ways that can be related to the major tenets of New Ageism, a "distinctive spiritual belief-set" (McCabe 6) that McCabe carefully traces back to the nineteenth century. McCabe was essentially concerned with demonstrating the inappropriateness of the categorizing of Okri's fiction as postmodern and postcolonial (10), which explains his concern with demonstrating the connection between New Ageism and "individualistic features of modernity" which are in blatant contradiction with Okri's belief in the spiritual regeneration of mankind. His clearly polemical approach reveals the complexity of the background to Okri's ideas, while at the same time failing to take sufficiently into account the way in which a fictional treatment of ideas affects their perception.^{xvi} In examining Okri's messianic ideas in the perspective of the artist's relation to William Blake, whose writing directly inspired the poem *Mental Fight*, Matthew J. A. Green, contrary to McCabe, sees Blake's rejection of the modernist view of the individual as the basis for seeing Blake's ideas as part of "the philosophical underpinnings and implications of Okri's magic realism" (18-19) and also as the source of Okri's linking of the material and the spiritual in *Mental Fight*.^{xvii} Renato Oliva characterizes Okri as a "shamanic writer," relating the dreams of Azaro's father in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* to the shaman's capacity to "dream and imagine the future" (189).^{xviii} Oliva furthermore suggests an affinity with William Butler Yeats, whose poetry was deeply affected by Blake and whose interest in magic and the occult suggests the appropriateness of seeing

Okri in his relation to Yeats. The very depth and variety of the research conducted in a search for a clarification of Okri's relation to philosophy and ideology testify to the vivacity of his engagement with many of the major philosophical and aesthetic currents of modern times while at the same time demonstrating his refusal to be categorized.^{xix} However, an approach which takes its cue from the poems themselves, rather than treating them as ancillary to the thoughts expressed in Okri's fiction and essays, should yield an interesting perception of the writer's theory and practice of the art of poetry. Such an approach would also make it easier to avoid any temptation to see the poems as paraphrasing ideas expressed in other forms in the essays and fiction.

The Dialogue of Form and Meaning: *Wild*

The poem "The Soul of Nations" from the collection *Wild* provides an interesting starting point for an examination of the relation between form and meaning in Okri's poetry. This poem clearly demonstrates Okri's desire to create an ironical tension between form and meaning which contradicts any temptation to limit one's reading to the quivering surface evoked in the penultimate line ("History moves and the surface quivers" [28]).^{xx} The poem plays on the time-worn metaphorical connection between the river and destiny—the lines "Just as rivers do not sleep / The mind of empire still runs deep" is a direct allusion to the expression "Still waters run deep":

The soul of nations do not change;
They merely stretch their hidden range.
Just as rivers do not sleep,
The mind of empire still runs deep.

The reference to "stretch[ing] their hidden range" suggests both a literal and a metaphorical reading of the word "range," an interpretation which relies, like the allusion to rivers, on the tendency to read colonialism in terms of geographical and topographical metaphors. The first line of the third stanza—"Classes overflow their rigid boundaries"—uses the same fluvial metaphor to show how easily this type of imagery produces ideological interpretations of history. By using a classical metrical pattern, iambic tetrameter, and couplet rhymes, in an almost totally regular pattern, Okri demonstrates the power of the metaphors that underlie the imperial enterprise to shape people's thinking. However, his use of sound reveals, as it does in many of his poems, a sensitivity to the semantic ironies that underlie similarities in sound. In the line "A gathering of native and alien streams," the assonance of "native" and "alien" stands in ironic contrast to their difference in meaning. In the same way, in the third stanza:

Classes overflow their rigid boundaries
Slowly stirring dreary quandaries:
Accents diverse ring from its soul,
A richer music revealing the whole.

the /i/ of rigid is repeated in "ring" and "richer," reinforcing the meaning of the lines, which suggest the capacity of "alien" populations to transform the rigidity of boundaries by enriching the cultures of the countries to which they migrate. The poem "Migrations" begins with a similar use of an image suggesting metaphors, like that of the "melting pot," which have traditionally been used to characterize the effects of migration:

The world is a cauldron
In which we are mixed.

Time is an illusion.

No condition is fixed. (71)

In this poem, the deliberate use of end-stopped lines suggests once again a tension between form and meaning, between the “mixing” alluded to and the conceptual frames in which migration is usually thought. In the stanzas that follow, the use of run-on lines challenges the “boundaries,” which are both physical and conceptual. The final stanza displays a surprising result of the comparison of the migrants with pollen, for their fertility produces the “griev[ing]” that makes “receive” (rendered problematic by the breaking of the line) rhyme with “grieve”:

That pushes us from the warren

Of cruel histories into lands

Whose earth many not receive

Us. But we’re like pollen.

We’re fertile, and we grieve.

One of Okri’s most persistent preoccupations, in all of his writing, is the notion of change, also identified through terms like “transformation” and “metamorphosis.” His fiction relies on the motifs of transformation and metamorphosis found in Yoruba folktales to explore the proximity of the real and spirit worlds.^{xxi} While this concept can be seen as having its roots in the “animist logic” which Garuba evokes in referring to Okri’s fictional use of “the traditional resource base of the Yoruba” in *The Famished Road* (270), the notion of transformation drives much of Okri’s thought in his essays and poetry.^{xxii} In the essays, the concept of change is related to the striving for individual and collective improvement. In the first essay of *A Way of Being Free*, entitled “While the World Sleeps,” Okri discusses the role of the poet as one who transforms the world in the opening lines:

The world in which the poet lives does not necessarily yield up the poetic. In the hands of the poet, the world is resistant. It is only with the searching and the moulding that the unyielding world becomes *transformed* in a new medium of song and metaphor. (1 my emphasis)

The same essay ends with another call for transformation:

Poet, be like the tortoise: bear the shell of the world and still manage to sing your *transforming* dithyrambs woven from our blood, our pain, our loves, our history, our joy. (15, my emphasis)

Okri’s poetry mobilizes language and form to reveal the tension between the transformation produced by poems themselves in their linguistic play and the underlying ideas treated in the poems, that often revolve around a cultural resistance to change. They thus demonstrate, in poetic form, the ideas expressed in “While the World Sleeps.” The poem “Towards the Sublime” would appear to be a direct transposition of the ideas expressed in the essay into poetic form:

Have you noticed that in all true

Transformations what emerges

Is stranger than before,

And higher, richer, magical?

It is as if mass yields
 Light, or pure power, pure
 Vision given upward
 Form beyond form—
 Transcending all the laws
 Of its previous condition. (56)

In these first two stanzas, the key words found in the first paragraph of the essay—“yield” and “transformation”—are both present. However, the poem creates additional effects through its formal organization. The use of enjambment increases the reader’s expectation by associating the notion of going “beyond” to the passage from line to line, each line “yielding” an additional idea. The arrangement of sound demonstrates the speaker’s affirmation that “what emerges / Is stranger than before”, for while the alliterations of “true transformations” and “pure power” and the assonance of “Vision given” suggest augmentation through repetition, the shift in vowel sounds from “given” to “upward” to “form” and the contrast in the vowel sounds of “emerges” and “stranger”, two words that are connected by the copula “is,” all suggest that transformation relies on change, and hence on difference. The poem displays the ideas with which it is concerned, suggesting how deeply transformation is linked to form and allowing the poem to create a resonance which is not contained or limited by the ideas which might lend themselves to paraphrase. A similar engagement with the notion of change and its formal expression can be found in “Heraclitus’ Golden River.” The reference to Heraclitus, who furnishes the epigraph to the collection *Wild*, reflects Okri’s interest in classical culture, but also his involvement with questions of time; the paradox of time and eternity have come to be identified with Heraclitus and his well-known comment about never stepping in the same river twice. That Okri is fascinated by the paradox of immobility and change can be seen in his ironic reworking of the terms of Heraclitus’ famous statement:

And as we keep
 Things the same, the river
 Works beneath us,
 The god works ironies
 On our lives. The river runs; (92)

The poem is concerned with the futility of resisting change:

The giants who built walls
 Meant to be proof against
 Time and the desert ravages
 Found in the sleep
 That the walls had become
 Change, had moved, had dissolved; (93)

The form of the poem becomes an ironical reflection on the paradoxes of stability and change through its use of polyptoton, a rhetorical figure which involves using different forms of a

single root. Thus the word “change” appears as both noun and verb (“Love is seduced by change, / Itself unchanging,” or “Change, had moved, had dissolved; / Or worse, that the feared things / Had seeped in underfoot...Or changed the frontiers / Of their rigid dialogue.” [93]). In the same way, the speaker evokes “our iron will, our willed philosophies” (93). Similarities of sound are also used to reflect the paradoxical way in which immobility, the desire for repetition, ironically produces change:

The river runs;
 Fields unfurl strange
 New mushrooms; libraries yield
 New books in the charged
 Margins of the old. (92)

The alliteration of “river runs,” the consonantal echo of “Fields unfurl,” the assonance of “runs,” “unfurl,” and “mushrooms,” as well as the linked rhyme of “charged / margins” create a phonetic background of repetition which stands in counterpoint to the evocation of “new mushrooms” and “new books.” As in the poem “Towards the Sublime,” the use of enjambment drives the poems forward and undermines the desire to state certitudes and affirm stasis:

The air is dryer where no change
 Is better. Old ways kept
 Old, protected from the devils
 At the gate, stiffen
 The mind’s luminous dance. (92)

The movement of the poem underlines the image of the dance, which becomes a metaphor for the resolution of paradox. In this case the paradox involves the relation between stable patterns and movement, or change. The regulated rhythm of dance, like the metrical pattern of the poem, reconciles stability with change:

No change is good; dancing
 Gracefully with change is better. (94)

It is this capacity to transform his poems into the verbal expression of the paradoxical relation of form and meaning that suggests a similarity to W. B. Yeats. Like Yeats, Okri views art not as capturing reality, but as revealing a gap, an opening, through which a possible relation to the real may be glimpsed or imagined. Yeats imagined this relation in the poem “Sailing to Byzantium” in the “form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake,” an image of eternity which he contrasts with the passing of time. (*Collected Poems* 192) He saw the paradox of artistic form and of the relation between body and soul in the well-known image of the dancer and the dance in the poem “Among School Children” :

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance? (*Collected Poems* 214)

Okri's image for the paradox of form and meaning is the "bending light" that one finds in the poem "On the Oblique in Horace":

That's what true art is for:
To make us see what's important
Through a bending light.^{xxiii} (78)

In the poem "Piano" he uses visual and auditory images to explore the relation between inner and outer worlds which music, painting and spatial images suggest without being able to represent them directly:

There are no spaces
But are full of unheard
Melodies, colours of spirit.
Arches mirror
The curved universe within,
As the sky mirrors our
Secret eternity. (49)

The echo of "curved" in "universe," in which the /3:v/ sound is reversed in /v3:/ and the phonetic similarity of these sounds with "unheard" point to the way in which sounds offer a hint of the correspondence between inner and outer. This poem also emphasises the fluid boundaries between different artistic forms, a theme that is common in Okri's writing and that he shares with many other writers. He evokes this idea in the essay "Beyond Words" in *A Way of Being Free* :

When literature works on you, it does so in silence, in your dreams, in wordless moments. Good words enter you and become moods, become the quiet fabric of being. Like music, like painting, literature too wants to transcend its primary condition and become something higher. Art wants to move into silence, into the emotional and spiritual conditions of the world. Statues become melodies, melodies become yearnings, yearnings become actions. (89)

The use of a work of art as an oblique way of talking about the invisible reality of the mind finds precise expression in the poem "Venus at her Toilette; after Velasquez" inspired by the painting "The Toilet of Venus." The painting represents Venus, seen from the back, reclining on a sofa and observing herself in the mirror. While the goddess evokes the curves that express the sensuality of the moment ("I lie here in curves luminous" [*Wild* 75]), the curve, as in the poem "Piano," can only suggest "love's true nature," which cannot be seen by the eyes but must be sought "in the mind's maze," as expressed in the second stanza:

The eyes see but forms and the seven
Lonely colours. Not much heaven.
You may as well be blind.
All else majestic is seen in the mind. (89)

The visual, while evoked, remains elusive. Like the poem "Piano," this poem is concerned with the relation between inside and outside. However the painting itself cannot mirror in its physical reality the nature of the "mystery" that is love. The relation between the visual and the spiritual is a paradoxical, tangential one. Once again sound is used to create an auditory

echo of the conundrum suggested by the poem. The word “mirror,” central to the poem, is made to rhyme with “rigour” (“Unless it’s to look within, with rigour, / Do not look too long in the mirror.”), but also with “terror” in an internal rhyme in the first stanza :

Only the god of love may hold
 The mirror in which you may look
 (Without terror, without being bold)
 Upon love’s true nature, as in a book. (89)

If rhyme can be seen as a phonetic “mirror,” the similarity of sound draws attention to a possible tension, at the level of meaning, between the words evoked; the mirror does not merely reflect in an unproblematic doubling, an idea expressed in other ways in the poem. In the same way, the reference to “look[ing] within, with rigour” creates a meaningful contrast between the two uses of “with,” as preposition and as a component of the adverb “within.” The chiasmatic structure of “In there, within,” in the penultimate line contributes to the same effect. The materiality of language is deliberately brought into play, revealing the impossibility of making language a simple mirror of reality.

Reading the poems collected in *Wild* makes it possible to perceive in a different light a remark the writer makes in the essay “Poetry and Life”:

Poetry returns us to the surprise of our similarities. It brings us back to the obscure sense that we are all members of a far-flung family, sharing feelings both unique to us and oddly universal. (*TND* 5)

A hasty reading might lead the reader to assume that the writer is diluting his individual vision in a sea of universal sentiment, or even sentimentality. However, Okri’s vision of surprise is not so simple. In “Heraclitus’ Golden River,” as mentioned above in relation to Jakobson, the speaker tells us that “Poets pray to the goddess of surprise” (*Wild* 93). As our analysis of the form of this poem has shown, the surprise of poetry is hidden to some extent in the relation between form and meaning. Only the full experience of the poem, in all its dimensions, can provide access to the inextricable connection between sound, image and thought which constitutes the real “surprise” of all poetry.

The Dialogue of prophecy and poetry: *Mental Fight*

In addition to his two collections of poetry, Ben Okri has published a long poem entitled *Mental Fight*, subtitled “An Anti-spell for the 21st century.” The poem is dedicated to “Humanity in the Aquarian Age,” a fact that justifies for McCabe his designation of the poem as a “verse-pamphlet celebrating the dawn of the twenty-first century” (10). The title is taken from the preface to Blake’s prophetic poem *Milton*:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
 Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
 Till we have built Jerusalem
 In England’s green and pleasant Land. (Blake 245)

The poem, divided into eight sections, is a militant call to action, to “remake the world.”

Will you be at the harvest,
 Among the gatherers of new fruits?

Then you must begin today to remake
 Your mental and spiritual world,
 And join the warriors and celebrants
 Of freedom, realisers of great dreams. (*Mental Fight* 62)

It displays the rhetoric of prophetic poetry, making use of devices like anaphora (“Everywhere an excess of dreams, / Of forebodings, of art forms, / Of rituals, and ways and interpretations, / Of roads, and signs and wonders, / Of prognostications, and wayward visions.” [17]), epistrophe (“They enable us to pass from / The illusion of our lesser selves / To the reality of our greater selves” [5]), epanalepsis (“Seeing clearly or inventing what we see;”[18]), anadiplosis (“At the perfect conjunction / That is also a living moment. / A moment lived through.”[20]) and rhetorical questions (“Is time exhausted? [...] Is nature exhausted? [...] Is humanity exhausted?” [23]). While the poem is essentially written in free verse, it also makes use of rhyme and other sonic effects like alliteration:

We rise or fall by the choice we make
 It all depends on the road we take
 And the choice and the road each depend
 On the light that we have, the light we bend,
 On the light we use
 Or refuse
 On the lies we live by
 And from which we die. (15)

The militancy of Okri’s poem is related to the need to reject traditional ideas of civilisation and cultivate a capacity for clear thinking in order to realise the full potential of humanity. As in the poems of *Wild* and the essays, inner and outer are closely connected:

You can’t remake the world
 Without remaking yourself.
 Each new era begins within. It is an inward event... (63)

In its open optimism and, as McCabe has pointed out, its relation to what can be called New Age philosophies, *Mental Fight* is a disconcerting work. Its tendency to enumeration (“Many thoughts, forms, philosophies, / Regressions, advancements, tendencies, ...” [17]) may leave the reader with the impression of skimming a broad range of notions without the rooting in close observation that characterizes a poem like Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, another prophetic poem which Okri’s seems at times to be echoing. While cultural productions like ritual and theatre are mentioned (“With us, things must have a beginning. / Theatre grew from ritual, / And ritual grew out of the silence” [6]) they are not developed as consistent motifs throughout the poem. The poem becomes most meaningful when read against the background of the works that inform and inspire it, but also of Okri’s other works, which attempt to deal with the same preoccupations in different ways. At the end of the poem, Okri rephrases the famous words about time with which T.S. Eliot opened “Burnt Norton,” the first section of *Four Quartets*:

The illusion of time will give way
 To the reality of time...

And time present is made
 Before time becomes present.
 For all time is here, now,
 In our awakening. (67)

Okri's words are a deliberate rewriting of Eliot's:

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation. (*Four Quartets* 13)

The epistemological link between the two texts lies in the treatment of "time present," which for Eliot remains a pure abstraction, emptied of its content by the paradoxical relation between past, present and future which makes time "unredeemable" rather than transforming it into a form of eternity linked to awareness. Okri inverts this paradox by involving time in a process of "awakening" which makes it accessible through collective awareness. Reading Eliot's entire poem against Okri's reveals many other points of divergence in the treatment of time. Okri's optimistic "Let's gather ourselves together, / Clear our minds, / Make ourselves present to ourselves / And to our age" (6) stands in clear contrast to Eliot's:

As we grow older
 The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
 Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
 Isolated, with no before and after,
 But a lifetime burning in every moment
 And not the lifetime of one man only
 But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (*Four Quartets* 31)

Okri's desire to rewrite the haunting words of Eliot's well-known poem testify to his awareness of Eliot's definition of tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot pointed out that tradition was not merely a question of repetition in the sense of influence. He claimed that it involved "the historical sense," which he defined in the following way:

[...] The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (48-49)

Okri's own remarks in his essays and interviews reveal a fluid relation to tradition which mirrors Eliot's remarks about the "simultaneous order" represented by works of the past. In

answer to a question about John Donne's effect on the metaphysical dimension of his work, Okri pointed out that while having been "aesthetically and metaphysically bruised" by Donne, he had derived the metaphysical dimension of his work in large part from the African tradition "which doesn't see reality as clearly demarcated as is currently seen in the west" (Interview *New Statesman*). He recognizes the constant presence in his mind of certain works from the past, like Homer's *Odyssey*, of which he said: "I read it often, not always from cover to cover. I treat it as a little book of surprises" (Interview, *The Telegraph*). However, in another interview he insisted on the need to "wander away from tradition" in the name of artistic freedom: "And so, an important job of the artist, from my point of view, is to widen our perception of reality, and to do that, you have to rebel in some way" (BBC The Forum). Okri's appeal to New Age spirituality in *Mental Fight* can be seen as consistent with Eliot's definition of tradition as "a simultaneous order." He brings together an African sense of the presence of the spiritual in the real, rooted in Yoruba thought, in which "the otherworldly domain (*orun*) coexists with the phenomenal world of people, animals, plants, and things (*aye*)" (Margaret Thompson Drewal, qtd. in Cooper 41) and a belief in the militant possibilities of artistic creativity inspired by Blake's iconoclastic vision.

In the same way that *Mental Fight* can be understood in terms of a dialogue between different traditions, it can also be viewed in its relation to other forms through which Okri has expressed his militant vision of human possibilities. Rosemary Gray reads *Mental Fight* in connection with the novel *Astonishing the Gods*, both works being concerned with "loosening the fetters of the past, and visualizing universal justice" (88). While Gray relates Okri's fable to Deleuze and Guattari's theories of deterritorialization, seeing in it "a rhizomatic renewal—a non-canonical philosophy of temporality, reflecting a universalist, mystical cosmogony" (96), the novel can also be viewed as giving a narrative, sensual and dialogic form to the idea of the "spiritual moment" evoked in *Mental Fight*^{xxiv}:

He felt as if he had stepped into the great old dreams he had heard tell about, where the dreamers find themselves in that place in all the universe where they feel most at home, and where their deepest nature can breathe and be free.

He felt he was in that place where he could step out of himself and into unbounded realms. (80)

The unnamed narrator finds himself embarking on a quest for an understanding of what can be seen as his historical invisibility ("He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn't exist" [3]), a quest that rapidly becomes an allegorical one, taking him to a strange island where, "Light poured upwards from below, as if the island's relationship with the moon and sky had become inverted" (8). The visual descriptions, like the dialogues with the various guides he encounters, are meant to illuminate the paradoxical relation between the abstract and the real:

He had no way of explaining it, but as he passed beneath the vast wings of the brilliant forms—radiating light like a new star—he seemed to feel an understanding of things before his time, beyond his time, beyond his life and quest, an understanding that flowed through from all the past and future ages. (14)

In the same way, the prophetic speaker of *Mental Fight* calls on humanity's capacity to grasp all of time through "sudden leaps of consciousness":

The speed and suddenness of an appearance

Is really only that moment

When we become aware

Of the change in a condition

(As in an enchanter's invocation)

A change that has been changing

All along, without our being aware of it. (16)

Reading Ben Okri's poetry poses many challenges to the reader, for its apparent transparency and its occasional militancy may make it difficult for the reader to construct a context, whether cultural or intellectual, within which to establish a dialogue between reader and text. The problems posed by the reading of Okri's poems correspond to some extent to the issues raised by Jahan Ramazani in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Ramazani discusses the problematic status of poetry in postcolonial criticism, which tends to read literature in a mimetic relation to historical and cultural contexts. As Ramazani says:

[...] since poetry mediates experience through language of exceptional figural and formal density, it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics and sociology of postcolonial societies; it is less favourable than other genres for curricular expeditions into the social history of the Third World; and consequently, it is harder to annex as textual synecdoche for the social world of Nigeria, Trinidad, or India. (4)

Although Ben Okri clearly rejects any attempt to classify him as a postcolonial writer, he is nonetheless often read in a postcolonial perspective. The interpretation of his poetry thus raises questions that are clearly expressed in Ramazani's statement. Only an approach which takes a long view of the dialogue between form and content, between tradition and innovation, between cultural context and individual perception, can make it possible to read Okri's poetry in the light of the contexts and traditions that inform it without losing sight of its function as poetry, a genre which speaks to human experience in ways that are specific and unique.

ⁱ I am referring to the articles by Rosemary Gray and Patricia van Schaik listed in the works cited.

ⁱⁱ Jakobson himself was particularly sensitive to the ambiguous relation between sound and sense, as evidenced by the French title of his series of lectures on phonology, *Six leçons sur le son et le sens*. (The title in English, *Six Lessons on Sound and Meaning* does not permit the pun on "leçons" and *le son*.)

ⁱⁱⁱ A complete list of the poems can be found in "Primary Sources" in "The Ben Okri Bibliography" published by Daria Tunca, University of Liège. Web. <http://www.l3.ulg.ac.be/okri/boprim.html>.

^{iv} Okri's vision of African spiritualities has been shaped by a number of contextual elements. His mother was half-Igbo and his father Urhobo. Both of his parents were Christian, but his father eventually adopted animist beliefs (Guignery 17). Vanessa Guignery points out in her discussion of the cultural context that influenced the author's writing of *The Famished Road* that Okri draws extensively on "the Yoruba literary tradition" rather than from the Urhobo or Igbo cultures of his parents and quotes a remark made by Okri in an interview with Pietro Deandrea in which he said, "I don't write from a tribal point of view" (qtd. in Guignery 25). Ato Quayson also affirms that "Okri is drawn to the Yoruba system as actualized by Soyinka and others rather than to the Ijo/Urhobo closer to his own ethnic origins" (*Strategic Transformations* 150, note 1).

^v The fact that the poem is called an "elegy" rather than a "dirge," a related term suggesting similar themes, is in itself significant. The Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor affirmed his link to traditional African forms of oral poetry, in particular the funeral dirge, by adapting into English traditional African dirges. The term elegy suggests to anyone familiar with English poetry Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," (1751) which stands in thematic contrast to Okri's poem through its traditional evocation of the brevity of life and the missed opportunities of the unknown dead.

^{vi} Robert Fraser refers to Okri's admiration for Okigbo, whose works he wished to make known within what Fraser terms the "rather insular" world of Cambridge University. Fraser explains that with this aim they organised an evening of readings and talks entitled "To sow the Fireseed: A Celebration of Christopher Okigbo (1932-1967)" (*Ben Okri* 97). Okigbo, while sharing Okri's grounding in the classics and the desire to shape a poetics free of the ideological pitfalls of movements like Negritude, also became involved in politics by siding with Biafra and lost his life in that context while defending the university town of Nsukka.

^{vii} Christopher Warnes, in his discussion of Okri's use of magical realism in *The Famished Road*, also sees "the ability to perceive multiple dimensions" as being rooted in "a putative Yoruba cosmology," but considers that this ability "is immediately generalised into an African way of seeing, and from there becomes a universal resource available to all, as McCabe's New Age reading makes clear" (141).

^{viii} Like other motifs, the mask is evoked throughout Okri's writing. An important passage in *The Famished Road* portrays Azaro's donning of a mask in the forest, a mask which permits him to see the world of the spirits. Interestingly, in a section of *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri pictures Picasso's discovery of African masks and imagines that "he saw the world with their eyes" (*TND* 66). He describes the masks as "whispering among themselves [...]. The spirits had been in great dialogue with one another. They had been debating how best to get their weird wisdom to enter into the broad stream of humanity" (*TND* 66).

^{ix} Robert Fraser describes Ofeimun's vision of poetry in ways which allow one to understand Okri's dedication of a poem to him: "For Ofeimun the art of writing is clearly two things: an act of inner cleansing, washing the mind of despair and hatred, and an assertion of some sort of primordial right, the relentless refusal of the human spirit to bow down before false idols" (*African Poetry* 309).

^x The poem is situated in the period of the regime of Shehu Shagari, who won the election of 1979. Although this period marked the return to a civil government, the regime was characterised by widespread corruption and incompetence.

^{xi} "Although rhyme by definition is based on a regular recurrence of equivalent phonemes or phonemic groups, it would be an unsound oversimplification to treat rhyme merely from the standpoint of sound. Rhyme necessarily involves a semantic relationship between rhyming units [...]" (Jakobson, *Selected Writings* 38).

^{xii} "Sur l'art verbal des poètes-peintres Blake, Rousseau et Klee" dans *Huit questions de poétique*.

^{xiii} In an essay entitled "While the World Sleeps," Okri has also said, in speaking of poets, "Words themselves speak to them and bring forth more words" (*WBF* 3).

^{xiv} Shklovsky used the Russian term *ostranenie*, translated variously as "defamiliarization," "making strange," "estrangement," and "en-strangement," in his writings on poetic language in the framework of his collaboration with the *Opoiaz* group, acronym for The Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Finer 15, 11). In *Theory of Prose*, Shklovsky said, "By 'estranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious.' The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity" (6).

^{xv} See for instance his remarks in "The Joys of Storytelling I": "The writer, functioning in a magical medium, an abstract medium, does one half of the work, the reader does the other. The reader's mind becomes the screen, the place, the era. To a large extent, readers create the world from words, they invent the reality they read. Reading, therefore, is a co-production between writer and reader" (*WBF* 41).

^{xvi} In her rebuttal of McCabe's arguments, Esther de Bruijn points out the importance of the photographer in *The Famished Road* as "a metafictional device" "meant to draw attention to this text as a work of art." She shows that "In the same way that the Photographer brings snapshots of 'real' life into dialogue with each other in his cabinet to create a variegated representation of history, Okri crafts a text that displays the complex negotiation of the cultural 'truths' of a modern-day African nation" (181).

^{xvii} Among the arguments on which Green relies is the discussion of Blake's relation to the radicalism of the 1790s found in Makdisi. Makdisi argues that Blake did not subscribe to "the notion of individual selfhood" which was one of the underpinnings of the radical politics of the late eighteenth century to the extent that its exclusion of others represented for him "the worst form of confinement and restriction" (5).

^{xviii} Okri himself refers to Shamans in the essay "Amongst the Silent Stones" (*WBF* 97).

^{xix} Another interesting analysis of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Okri's work can be found in Sarah Fulford's article "Ben Okri, The Aesthetic and the Problem with Theory." Fulford examines Okri's

deliberate evasion of “an Enlightenment rationale of being able to chart, to categorize, and to know” in the light of Heidegger’s theory of “‘the Open’” (247).

^{xx} Rosemary Gray claims that in this final line Okri “suggests that the demise of imperialism will be brought about by a coalition of the physical and the metaphysical” (147). However, the very irony of the poem suggests that the demise of imperialism is difficult to imagine.

^{xxi} “A common literary motif of Yoruba folklore is a person who takes the shape of an animal, or vice-versa. [...] In these narratives there is often a conflict between man and animal, and a serious attempt to reach a better understanding between the world of men and the world of animals” (Hallgren 87).

^{xxii} Garuba points out that animism is “an umbrella designation for a mode of religious consciousness that is often as elastic as the user is willing to stretch it” (267). He explains that “unlike Christianity and Islam, for example, which refer to particular religions, animism does not name any specific religion” (267). In commenting on Ato Quayson’s analysis of Okri’s use of animist thought, he emphasises the literary use that Okri has made of traditional sources (270). Quayson, in his article “Protocols of Representation and the Problems of Constituting an African ‘Gnosis’: Achebe and Okri,” emphasises the necessity of taking into account Okri’s literary experimentation in any analysis of what he calls his “animist ebullience” (148). Interestingly, he relates this narrative use of an animist perspective to the notion of “defamiliarisation” referred to above: “The animist ebullience which is a studied part of the narrative makes strange (in the Russian Formalist sense) the traditional beliefs in spirits” (270).

^{xxiii} Okri explains this idea of the tangential in the essay “Newton’s Child.” Interestingly, he associates it with African spirituality: “You might think there is a kind of perversity to inspiration. There might be. The subconscious loves mischief; its resident forces are trickster deities, Eshu, or Hermes, and other such figures who love tangents, invisibility, boundaries and enigmas” (*WBF* 21). In the same essay he says, “It is curious how sometimes the biggest tasks are best approached tangentially, with a smile in the soul” (*WBF* 22).

^{xxiv} “Now is a material event. / It is also a spiritual moment. / And the blinding light of the real / Can pierce through and tear asunder / The unreal” (*Mental Fight* 6).

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