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Kathie Birat

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## “Through a bending light”: Ben Okri’s Poetic Commitment

Ben Okri’s relation to commitment is complex, for he rejects any direct association between writers and specific causes (although he has spoken out when necessary, as in his defense of Ken Saro-Wiwa). This article examines Okri’s poetry, in particular the poems collected in *Wild*, in the light of a vision of artistic commitment which owes much to his interest in the Greek and Roman classics and which suggests a comparison with other poets like W.B. Yeats who have treated worldly commitment in terms of the paradoxical relation between political engagement and aesthetic distance.

The poetry of Ben Okri cannot easily be qualified in terms of commitment, if the idea of commitment is construed in an ideological or a political sense. While Okri has spoken out in the press on issues related to Africa and to his native Nigeria, he has always deliberately refuted any desire to express himself as an African writer. In an interview published in *Granta* in 2011, he was asked whether his book of essays, *A Time for New Dreams*, was a manifesto. He answered by saying :

I don’t think it is. A manifesto is too definite, too deliberate. I am working with suggestiveness, with hints and orientations. In a way it is a cubist text because I am wandering round the different facets of this big subject—what it means to be where we are now, and how we are going to leap from this place to our new place with full consciousness and intelligence. (“Interview” n.p.)

While Okri has written about Africa, even about the violence he witnessed as a child during the Biafran War, he has never attempted to represent that violence in a specifically realistic way, or to use his writing as a platform for expressing ideological positions.<sup>1</sup> He has spoken out on issues affecting Africa and Nigeria when he has deemed it necessary, as in June 2014 when he published an article in *The Guardian* concerning the abduction of a large number of schoolgirls by Boko Haram (“The Missing Girls of Chibok” n.p.), or when he signed jointly with a number of other writers, including Harold Pinter and Chinua Achebe, a letter of protest published in *The New York Review of Books* concerning the trial of Ken Saro-Wiwa.<sup>2</sup> However, he has consistently refused to see African writers as being “read for their novels about slavery, colonialism, poverty, civil wars, imprisonment, female circumcision—in short,

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<sup>1</sup> Ben and his parents returned to Nigeria in 1965 after his father had completed his law degree in London. The Biafran War broke out in 1967, and since Okri’s mother was half-Igbo, the family had to move several times after their return to Nigeria. The story “Laughter under the Bridge,” published in the collection *Incidents at the Shrine*, reflects his experience of the war. The story “In the Shadow of War,” published in *Stars of the New Curfew*, also deals with a child’s experience of war.

<sup>2</sup> Saro-Wiwa was the leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and was “arrested on May 22 [1995] on charges of allegedly inciting Ogoni youths to kill four leading Ogoni figures during a rally on May 21” (“The Case of Ken Saro-Wiwa” n.p.). The events leading to the arrest of the writer took place under the regime of General Sani Abacha, who seized power in 1993 in a military coup. Saro Wiwa, along with eight other leaders of MOSOP, was charged with treason and sentenced to death by hanging. Okri played an active role in organizing protests for the liberation of Saro-Wiwa.

for subjects that reflect the troubles of Africa and black people as perceived by the rest of the world” (“A Mental Tyranny” n.p.). In speaking of his relation to writers of an earlier generation, like Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi, writers he considers as reflecting the situation of newly-independent countries, he has said:

So it was a literature tied very much to politics. And then there was a long hiatus and then my generation and then it was quiet—I was the only one, and I felt I was paddling in this canoe of literature all by myself, with the older generation established and there. But I felt it was a new era because it was no longer a literature tied to independence, it was becoming a literature on its own, literature as literature. (“Ben Okri on Teju Cole” n.p.)

In his novels and short stories, Okri has not distanced himself from Africa and Nigeria as subjective, emotional and cultural locations. On the contrary, from the very beginning he has filtered Africa through the perception of his narrators, using their subjectivity as the locus for an exploration of all facets of the continent, the beauty and violence often being mixed in inextricable ways.

His eclectic approach to writing has been the object of much commentary, as was made clear by some of the conflicting readings of *The Famished Road*, in which he also included dimensions of African spirituality and oral culture. However, his poetry has received very little critical attention, in spite of the fact that the writer has often insisted on the central place occupied by poetry in his work. In an interview with Tepper Anderson of *Vanity Fair* he said that the impulse to his work was “primarily poetic: it’s a sound, it’s a beat, it’s a mood” (quoted in Guignery 24). There are several possible explanations for this absence of critical attention to the poetry. First of all, poetry is difficult to talk about if you want to look beyond the themes that are obvious on the surface. Secondly, poetry written by writers considered as postcolonial poses particular problems, since there is an even greater tendency to search for meaning than when reading novels. In his book, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Jahan Ramazani has evoked the problems specific to poetry in the postcolonial context:

On the one hand, postcolonial criticism is largely grounded in mimetic presuppositions about literature. But since poetry mediates experience through a 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. [...] While theoretical inquiry is not necessarily inimical to poetry [...], the genre also demands specifically literary modes of response and recognition—of figurative devices, generic codes, stanzaic patterns, prosodic twists and allusive turns. (4)

To look at Ben Okri's poetry in terms of commitment is even more complex, for poetry is often seen as eluding or avoiding commitment in the ideological sense of the term. Yet it is important to avoid confusing commitment with political commentary. Poetry often makes it possible to take a broader view of commitment by providing an aesthetic distance which should not be confused with an absence of engagement. This position would appear to be more compatible with Okri's view of poetry.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to focus on two of Okri's three published volumes of poems, *An African Elegy* (1992) and *Wild* (2012), in order to explore the questions raised by his poetry, how it relates to the other genres in which he works and how it can be seen as being related to commitment in the broad sense in which we can apply this term to Okri. *Mental Fight*, a long poem published in 1999, which takes its title from a poem by William Blake, is also deeply concerned with commitment, but its concerns are so broad that it raises other questions which cannot be treated in the scope of this article. The poem defies any attempt to relate it to a specific context in its evocation of a kind of millennial experience:

The new era is already here:  
Here the new time begins anew.  
The new era happens every day,  
Every day is a new world. (62)

What I wish to argue specifically is that the most effective sense of commitment, seen as a balance between the centrifugal forces of history and the centripetal impulse of poetic form, can be found in certain poems collected in *Wild*. It is important to keep in mind, as T. S. Eliot said in accepting the Nobel Prize in 1948, that poets, by reading the works of other poets writing in other languages and in turn influencing the works of poets from other cultures, give a universal dimension to what is sometimes considered, in Eliot's words, "the most local of all the arts":

We must remember the immense debt of every considerable poet to poets writing in languages other than his own. [...] When a poet speaks to his own people, the voices of all the poets of other languages who have influenced him are speaking also. And at the same time he himself is speaking to younger poets of other languages, and these poets will convey something of *his* vision of life and something of the *spirit* of his people, to their own. (quoted in Draugsvold 50)

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<sup>3</sup> This point is made by Sarah Fulford in talking about the controversy surrounding C. D. Balzer's reaction to Jacqueline Bardolph's postcolonial reading of *The Famished Road*. Fulford points out that Balzer's objection to a purely postcolonial reading is important because it "raises questions about the relation between aesthetics and politics in Okri's work" (234).

Eliot was underlining both the impact of poets on other poets and the universal, transcultural aspect of poetry, which, even when rooted in a specific political or cultural context, addresses the most fundamental and essential emotions and aspirations of all human beings, thus giving it the capacity to transcend local contexts. It is in this light that Ben Okri's vision of commitment can best be understood.

One of the poems in *An African Elegy*, "Darkening City: Lagos 83" is dedicated to Odia Ofeimun, a fellow Nigerian who has denounced corruption in Nigeria. In 1983 Shehu Shagari, whose government was known for widespread corruption, had been reelected. Okri's poem is clearly a tribute to Ofeimun's vision of Nigeria, his political involvement and his denunciation of the corruption that characterized Shagari's regime. Ofeimun is known for seeing the poet as having an obligation to express his political commitment:

I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considers right and deserving expression. (in Wilkinson 66)

While Okri's desire to evoke violence through imagery in his own poem is clear, it is difficult for a reader outside the African context to relate to a violence which remains allusive, in spite of the specific time and place mentioned in the title. The absence of the narrative thread found in short stories and novels makes identification with the situation evoked even more problematic. In the collection *Wild*, Okri approaches a similar subject in a different way. In the poem entitled "The Screamer," he evokes the massacre in Jenin.<sup>4</sup> The poem opens with a long evocation of the massacre built on a series of subordinate clauses that leave no space for the expression of emotion:

Three days after the massacre  
In Jenin, with the bulldozed dead  
Under the rubble and men shot  
Down and children blinded  
By the blast of tanks  
That crushed their frail houses  
Into powder and blood,

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<sup>4</sup> This poem refers to the events that took place in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank in April 2002, when Israeli forces entered the camp, which was considered by Israel to serve as a launching site for terrorist attacks. There was considerable controversy surrounding the number of deaths among the Palestinian population. The United Nations Security Council voted to authorize a fact-finding mission to determine the number of deaths, but Israel refused to cooperate with the mission. A UN report announced 52 Palestinian deaths, half of them civilians.

And a man in a hot room  
Howling for two white days  
With no-one to help him,  
And with the town blocked off  
So that the massacre  
Could be unleashed without  
Any foreign witnesses...

The effect of this accumulation of visual images, reinforced by the use of short lines and by the alliterations and consonantal echoes in /b/ and /d/, is to force the reader to imagine a scene related to a situation which the world “had watched with eyes / Averted from the future / Catastrophe that would be born.” The speaker is not in Jenin, but in England. Separated from the scene of the massacre, which he can only picture in his mind, he finds an echo of his own need to howl in horror when he hears a woman screaming:

Then as I crossed the blue  
Bridge, a golden red sun  
Fading over the church,  
The air was stunned  
By the sudden eruption  
Of that which words  
Dare not describe.  
The screams burst on the air,  
And three men stood frozen  
On their boat, and knew  
The horror of a hell not seen,  
In the gasping shock of their stance.

The slant rhyme of “sun” and “stunned” underlines the disruption of the harmonious picture of evening by the “sudden eruption” of the scream, which announces a horror heard rather than seen. The “gasping shock of their stance” conveys, through hypallage, the violent conjunction of sound and sight in the reaction of the three men.

The poem ends with the poet remembering

How I howled when told on the phone  
That my mother had died.  
If I had screamed  
Much longer than I had

I would have gone quite mad.

What is clear from the difference between this poem and the previous one from *An African Elegy* is the creation of a connection between inside and outside that resonates inside the speaker. The speaker of the poem establishes a link between sounds and sights experienced with different degrees of proximity and links the impact of the scream to a context involving what he sees and hears. The relation between feeling and perception becomes the center of the poem.

In order to provide a different perspective on Okri's conception of commitment, it would be useful to approach this notion through the examination of several poems from the collection *Wild* that offer a glimpse of the relation between aesthetic and political commitment. Okri has made a number of statements, particularly in his essays, on the relation between poetry and politics. In the essay "Poetry and Life" from *A Time for New Dreams*, he says:

Poets want nothing from you, only that you listen to your deepest selves. Unlike politicians, they don't want your votes. (132)

In an aphorism found in "The Joys of Storytelling III" from the collection of essays *A Way of Being Free*, he approaches the relation between art and politics from a slightly different angle:

Politics is the art of the possible; creativity is the art of the impossible. (1237)

The tension between art and politics or ideology is a common and persistent theme in poetry and in art in general. One of the modern poets often associated with this theme is W. B. Yeats, who was actively involved in the struggle for the independence of Ireland. Some of Yeats's most famous poems are explorations of the tension between a worldly and an aesthetic vision. Such poems dramatize the position of the artist, caught between involvement in the world and the more distanced viewpoint of the artist.<sup>5</sup> Even fairly early poems like "Fergus and the Druid" explore this theme.<sup>6</sup> In his famous poem "Byzantium" the speaker evokes the golden

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<sup>5</sup> Yeats's relation to public issues was complex. Even his famous poem "Easter 1916," written in homage to the Irish republicans who risked their lives for the cause of Irish independence, expresses mixed feelings about some of the people involved and about the long-term effects of sacrifice, which "[c]an make a stone of the heart" (179). The poet Seamus Heaney, in a review of Roy Foster's biography of Yeats, refers to him as "a born publicist who was also a silence-seeking poet, a self-made controversialist whose public stances often caused him much private pain [...] a cultural administrator and committeeman who did not believe in democracy in the arts [...]" (Heaney n.p.).

<sup>6</sup> This poem is a dialogue between Fergus, "the king of the proud Red Branch kings" and the druid, who possesses "the dreaming wisdom" that Fergus desires. It is a reflection on the relation between earthly power and the distance offered by a wisdom that allows one to be "many things" (Yeats 32-3).

bird that can “scorn aloud/In glory of changeless metal/Common bird or petal/And all complexities of mire or blood.” (243) Another example is the poem “Lapis Lazuli,” which ends with an image of two Chinamen “carved in lapis lazuli.” (292). The final lines evoke the paradoxical relation between the scene the men are observing and “their ancient, glittering eyes,” which “are gay” (293). Their relation to the scene is a metaphor for the inextricable paradox that underlies all artistic representation. While I have not found explicit references to Yeats in Okri’s remarks about poetry or art, Yeats is inevitably a part of his educational and artistic background, as are other poets to whom he has referred like T.S. Eliot or John Donne. In an essay entitled “Hospitality” in the collection *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri does refer explicitly to the famous poem by W. H. Auden “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” This poem is, of course, an expression of the relation between the poet and the world and contains the famous lines:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

There is a poem in *Wild* that explores the relation between the artist and the man of the world in a way that is reminiscent of Yeats. The poem is entitled “Virgil in Brindisi.” In this poem, Okri makes a particularly effective use of poetic form. The use of end rhyme underlines the central paradox of the poem by creating a contradiction between the formal self-containment produced by the rhymes and the inability of the poem to resolve the conundrum that is suggested by Virgil’s inability to complete his own poem, *The Aeneid*.<sup>7</sup> The title of the poem suggests a possible title for a painting, emphasizing the way in which space is used to generate a paradoxical relation between the poet and the emperor. The horizontal position of the poet “Lying in state” is contrasted with the “vertical” emperor, whose status is ironically undercut by the rhyme with the word “practical”:

The great emperor, vertical  
On another galley, was on a practical  
Mission, in a changing imperial sky.

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<sup>7</sup> When he died in Brindisi, Virgil had planned to revise *The Aeneid*. He purportedly asked the Emperor Augustus to destroy the poem when he died.



He could never have guessed  
That in his poet's unrest  
An eternal world would soar high.

The internal rhyming of “imperial” with “eternal” echoes the rhyming of “practical” with “vertical,” creating a meaningful tension between the four terms which define the relation between the emperor and the poet. The reference to the sea “clean as a slate” with its implicit allusion to the expression “a clean slate” creates an additional contrast between the man of politics, for whom a clean slate is always possible, and the poet, who can never be totally satisfied with his work. The rhymes also contribute to this effect by suggesting a stability which is belied by the poet's restlessness. Through an approach that is similar to the one used by Yeats in “Lapis Lazuli,” the poem reproduces in its form the tension between inside and outside, between medium and message that lies at the heart of poetic commitment. Poetry can only suggest a possible relation between politics and poetry by embedding that relation in the paradoxes of artistic representation.

Ben Okri's relation to the visual arts is an important aspect of his poetry and can also be seen as a clue to his attitude toward artistic commitment and to the relation between art and the world. In his essays he makes numerous references to the visual arts, as for instance in his essay “Creativity and the Minotaur,” (*A Way of Being Free*) which is a reflection on Picasso's painting “Minotauromachy” or the essay “Dramatic Moments in the Encounter Between Picasso and African Art” (*A Time for New Dreams*). Several of his poems involve observation of paintings, in particular “On Klee” and “Venus at her Toilette; after Velasquez.” Other poems deal with the difficulty of seeing in ways that problematize the gaze as an approach to reality. Painting and poetry treat the relation to the world in ways that are similar, for a poem, like a painting, is surrounded by a space which constitutes both a boundary and a connection to what lies beyond. While a novel through its mimetic dimension may suggest, however erroneously, a direct link with an extra-diegetic reality, a poem, like a painting, forces the reader to look inside the frame of its representational codes for a way of establishing a link with the outside world. While such an approach might suggest a retreat from commitment, it can also be seen as a way of attempting to identify and represent the forces that shape all human action. If one looks at the poems in which Okri refers to the visual arts or in which he uses *ekphrasis*, it is possible to observe the way in which he uses painting as a way of representing *en abyme* the relation between art and reality, as if reality could not be approached directly. This is a classical theme and Okri himself has found it in classical Greek and Roman authors. In the poem “On the Oblique in Horace,” he states this idea explicitly:

That's what art is for:  
To make us see what's important  
Through a bending light.

The image of the bending light is probably the best expression that Okri has given of his own vision of aesthetics and the way in which works of art allow us to see the reflection of others in ourselves and vice versa. The poem "Venus at her Toilette; After Velasquez," inspired by the painting at the National Gallery in London, demonstrates Okri's notion of the oblique. In the painting, Venus, seen from the back, is depicted gazing at herself in a mirror, which is held up by Cupid. The face in the mirror, somewhat blurred, is clearly not the face of the woman. The mirror has often been used in painting as a pictorial metaphor for the act of visual representation, creating thus a *mise en abyme* that captures in an endless reverberation the motion of the gaze itself, directed simultaneously into the painting and out into the surrounding world. Okri uses this dimension of the mirror to express the impossibility of capturing the object of love through a direct gaze, emphasizing once again the necessity of viewing the world "through a bending light":

From your gaze I conceal my face

So that you may find me more real  
In the mind's maze, and what hearts feel.  
Unless it's to look within, with rigour,  
Do not look too long into the mirror.

In there, within, you will find me:  
The source of the mystery.

Okri expresses in these lines the ambiguous status of the mirror, which both tempts and deceives the lover's gaze, by creating a contrast between the adverb "within" which suggests an internal understanding, captured by the mind, and the preposition "into" referring to the direction of the gaze which looks "into" the mirror seeking a visual confirmation of the nature of love. He uses syntactic and semantic ambiguity as a way of emphasizing the importance of the relationship between inside and outside, between internal comprehension and external reality. He plays, for instance, on the two possible uses of the word "with," in the line "within, with rigour." In the same way, "In there, within" produces a mirror image of the position of the preposition "in." The preposition "in" is repeated twelve times in the space of six stanzas,

problematizing literal and metaphorical uses of the word and thus revealing the complex relation between language and reality.

As in “Virgil in Brindisi,” the effect of this poem is also related to the use of sound. The use of end rhyme in an abab pattern, which becomes aabb in the final stanzas, as in “Virgil,” produces a contrast between the formal closure of rhyme and the complex relation between inside and outside suggested by the poem. Just as the mirror cannot produce an exact reflection of the Goddess, the poem cannot be seen as an exact reproduction of the ideas with which it is dealing. The rhyming pattern plays an important role in this relation, for rhyme can be seen as an acoustic mirror based upon the repetition of identical sounds. As Roman Jakobson pointed out, similarities in sound represent one way of drawing attention to semantic relations and therefore participate in the process of defamiliarization through which poetic uses of language create their effects.<sup>8</sup> In this poem, the internal rhyme involving mirror and terror and the end rhyme linking mirror with rigour undercut the seemingly harmonious relationship between the goddess and her reflection.

Another poem involving a painter is entitled “On Klee.” This poem is not based on a particular painting, but constitutes a reflection on the painter and his art. There was a spiritual quality in Klee’s fascination with the relation between music, rhythm and color that helps to explain why Okri would be interested in Klee’s approach to artistic representation. Klee’s interest in music, nature and color are specifically referred to in the poem:

Music and nature served you well.  
Graceful and free, you wove your spell.  
You find infinity in small spaces  
And magic in the most likely places.

Not for you the noisy gesture,  
The striking death or newsworthy posture.

In this poem, the regularity of form and the use of end rhyme suggest a deceptive simplicity and the need to look beyond outward form. The “noisy gesture,” with its use of hypallage, suggests the paradoxical relation between medium and meaning but also questions the nature of commitment and the relation to the world. The “hidden symmetry” referred to in the

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<sup>8</sup> “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 [...]” (38).

following line may be a reminder of William Blake's tyger; Klee shared Okri's interest in Blake, in particular his painting.

What can be deduced from Okri's poems is that he sees the relation between art and ideology as one that is inevitably oblique. For Okri, as for many poets, poetry is a place where self and world come together on grounds that require a reassessment of the self, but also a distance from the immediate concerns of politics. One of the ways in which Okri achieves the necessary perspective is through reliance on the classics of Greek and Roman literature, and in his interviews and essays he insists on his regular reading and rereading of works like Homer's *Odyssey*. The apparent simplicity with which he introduces images and ideas from classical literature and philosophy into his poems constitutes another resemblance with Yeats. "On the Oblique in Horace" is a good example. The basic idea of the poem is stated overtly in the first lines: "We're not very good at looking/At life directly." However, sound and form once again make a direct approach to the subject impossible. Rhyme uses sound in ways that produce an indirect, suggestive approach to meaning. The /aɪ/ diphthong repeated in "eyes", "slide," "direct," and "hide" underlines and prolongs the idea suggested by the word "slide":

We're not very good at looking  
At life directly. Our eyes slide  
From the full-frontal gaze  
At the ordinary or the profound.  
Direct things hide.

In the same way, the use of enjambment rather than end-stopped lines undercuts any attempt to make the speaker's assertions fit into a form that would prevent the slippage of meaning from one line to another. Polyptoton also serves to produce a sliding of meaning from one grammatical form to another. The verb "to see," central to the meaning of the poem, like the verb "to be," appears in several different forms: "seeing life," "The barely seen," "To make us see." The verb "to be" is in addition reinforced by the internal rhymes of "beauty," "poetry" and "be" in the lines: "And so beauty in poetry must be:/Being there and not being there."

The poem "Migrations" is a particularly good example of the way in which Okri uses the form of poetry as an indirect way of approaching the problems of the present. The use of the plural in the title clearly shows that several instances, and perhaps several forms of migration are involved. Underlying the poem, with its reliance on simile and metaphor, is also the idea that poetic form is itself a form of migration, as suggested by the etymology of the

word “metaphor,” which means to “carry over.” The initial metaphor of the cauldron is perhaps an ironic comment on the proverbial “melting pot,” but it certainly complicates the notion of agency, as the “we” referred to is subjected to forces beyond its control:

The world is a cauldron  
In which we are mixed.  
Time is an illusion.  
No condition is fixed.

This somewhat stereotypical vision of migration will be undercut by the final metaphor, which associates pollen and fertility not with birth or rebirth, but with grieving; the rhyming of “grieve” with “receive” reinforces the effect of surprise, giving additional force to a word that obliges the reader to reassess the poem in the light of an idea that destroys any possible illusion of happy endings:

But about us scream the inhabitants  
Who’ve never known barren  
Lands, or tyranny, or such pain  
That pushes us from the warren  
  
Of cruel histories into lands  
Whose earth may not receive  
Us. But we’re like pollen.  
We’re fertile, and we grieve.

Also to be noticed is the way in which enjambment, as in other poems, contradicts any attempt to fix reality in simple statements produced in end-stopped lines. While the poem contains a large number of abstract terms—“world,” “time,” “illusion,” “boundaries,” “wars,” “evils,” “hunger,” “space,” “histories,” “race,” “tyranny,” “pain,”—it nonetheless rearranges these terms in a way that produces a shift in their connotations and surrounds them with “an empty space,” the white space around the poem itself, which mirrors the void into which the migrants find themselves projected.

In conclusion I would simply like to evoke the generic aspect of Okri’s approach to commitment. If you compare the essays found for instance in *A Time for New Dreams* and *A Way of Being Free* with the poems, you discover that many of his themes are common to both

genres. In the same way, his novel *Dangerous Love* (a rewriting of the earlier novel *The Landscapes Within*) is an exploration of the relationship between art and politics to the extent that it focuses on a young painter, Omovo, living in Lagos and persecuted for not presenting a positive image of his country. At one moment, Omovo is talking with an older painter and evokes the idea of the mirror in a way similar to its use in Okri's poetry:

“We don't look at ugly things enough,” he said. “Ugliness is the face we always turn away from,” the old painter said. Truth is an ugly old woman. But her ugliness exists only in the eyes. I would choose the face of the Medusa as a good image of the Truth. She is actually a profoundly beautiful woman and we can only face her with the help of a mirror. That mirror is art.” (Book 2, chapter 7)

This passage captures the essence of Ben Okri's vision of the relation between art and the world. It reveals in particular the strong thematic and formal connection between the writer's fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Reading Okri's work in these different genres allows the reader to grasp the effect of each medium he chooses while at the same time offering, from varying perspectives, a glimpse of the issues and contexts which have allowed the writer to develop his human and aesthetic commitment.

Kathie BIRAT

Université de Lorraine

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