ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
39.1 (June 2017): 189-204
ISSN 0210-6124 | e-ISSN 1989-6840

"A Dangerous Love": Ben Okri's Persisting Commitment to Literary Experimentation

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A once high-profile post-colonial writer, it is noticeable that the London-Nigerian novelist and essayist Ben Okri has all but dropped out of view as far as the literary establishment is concerned. While his earlier works still receive much academic attention and are deemed highly influential, critical engagements with his later fiction are almost non-existent. With this in mind, our aim is to map out the many transformations the author's work has gone through and offer explanations as to the reasons behind certain negative receptions of the author's work. To understand the new directions the author's current writings have taken, one must analyse the totality of his novelistic writings as a single collective body striving towards a sustained renovation of the literary form. Our premise is that this experimentation might, contrary to its aim, be hampering the author's success, and our study shall, therefore, examine in detail the experimental nature of these later works and offer a series of perceptions as to their possible shortcomings.

Keywords: Ben Okri; post-colonial writing; literary experimentation; spiritual resource-bases; hybridism; New Ageism

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"Un amor peligroso": el empeño tenaz de Ben Okri hacia la experimentación literaria

En los últimos años parece que los círculos literarios han dado de lado al que fuera considerado escritor post-colonial de renombre, Ben Okri, novelista nigeriano afincado en Londres. Mientras que sus primeras obras aún son objeto de estudio y son consideradas muy influyentes, apenas se han hecho análisis críticos de sus trabajos más recientes. Partiendo de esta idea, nuestro objetivo es definir las numerosas transformaciones por las que ha pasado la obra del autor para explicar las razones que hay detrás de ciertas recepciones negativas de la misma. Para comprender la nueva dirección que la obra actual de Okri ha tomado, se debe

analizar la totalidad de su producción novelística como si se tratase de un todo que pugna por lograr una renovación continua de la forma literaria. Partimos de la premisa de que la experimentación podría, al contrario de lo que perseguía, estar impidiendo el éxito del autor, y el presente trabajo, por tanto, examinará en profundidad la naturaleza experimental de sus últimas obras para ofrecer una serie de percepciones sobre sus posibles limitaciones.

Palabras clave: Ben Okri; literatura post-colonial; experimentación literaria; bases de recursos espirituales; hibridismo; discursos nueva era

> We can't ask new literature to be like the old, to give us the same pleasures as those that have gone before. […] That would be mere repetition.
>
> Ben Okri, *A Time For New Dreams* (2011)

1. Introduction

Ben Okri likens the literary form to a recipient which holds the text together and allows its literariness to stand the test of time. From an early stage in his career, one can witness the author's commitment to this literary form, something he once defined as an entity "moving towards infinity" (Wilkinson 1992, 83).[1] A salient aspect of Okri's works is his singular vision of what constitutes reality, and this ontology informs his creative process profoundly, at both an imaginative and a formal level. It is for this reason that we feel it fruitful to provide a brief analysis of Okri's earlier works analysed from these perspectives, so as to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the directions which the author has taken in his more recent narratives. What we propose is that Okri's search for a new form is an attempt to recreate the ineffable quality of mysteries that can only be expressed in quasi-mystical terms, while deeper truths about what an augmented reality encapsulates become juxtaposed against the real world in its outer form.

There is a certain irony to the fact that *Dangerous Love* (1996), which Okri himself does not rate highly due to its more conventional form, was the author's last novel to have garnered acclaim. Similar postcolonial authors, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah for example, have made life-long careers out of producing works of a similar nature and quality. In this light, our position is that Ben Okri's unbending commitment to experimentation with form could well be jeopardising his career as a writer.

2. The Road to Textual Hybridity

Fifteen years after the publication of *The Landscapes Within* (1981), Okri re-wrote this same novel under the new title of *Dangerous Love* (1996). José Santiago Fernández Vázquez had detected the classical *Künstlerroman* motif operating within *The Landscapes Within*, and the author sought to re-address the individualistic prerogative that operates behind this motif (2002, 32). Ayo Mamadu (1991), for example, had correctly identified the protagonist's lack of a meaningful engagement with his community in favour of a withdrawal into the inner self. To understand how Okri re-wrote this individualistic ethos in favour of a more West-African collective consciousness one must turn to a very significant moment in both novels where Omovo, the novel's

[1] This article is the result of research supported by grants FFI2015-63739-P (MINECO/FEDER) "La estética del recuerdo: empatía, identificación, duelo [The Aesthetics of Remembering: Empathy, Identification, Mourning], funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. These grants are hereby gratefully acknowledged.

budding artist and main protagonist, encounters a group of Egungun masqueraders within the forest. In *The Landscapes Within*, the perceived violence of these masquerades was transmitted through a Modernist stream of consciousness, and the narration of this episode was, furthermore, performed at a confused distance, as if the narrator were incapable of deciphering the deeper significance behind the unfolding events.[2] The ritual importance of the Egugun masqueraders is that, having taken on the identities of important ancestors, they then beat their audience with *atori* whips, although this violence is always performed within a highly ritualized framework. Similarly, in *The Famished Road* trilogy ([1991] 1993), the terrific masquerade figure became a symbolic representation of the ruling class's violation of inherited ethics within postcolonial Nigeria and, as Williams Rea assures us, "masks are themselves part of a wider structure of control over power or knowledge […] [and] this control is often regarded as being linked into general ideas about ancestral knowledge and legitimating" (1998, 100). Nonetheless, while *The Landscapes Within*'s form was not able to adequately deal with the epistemological significance of the Egungun rite, a revisiting of this same scene in *Dangerous Love* brought forth its deeper significance. Omovo's spiritual awakening, the shift from an individualistic to a communal prerogative (the rejection of the *Künstlerroman* motif) is, furthermore, activated by his contact with these masqueraders. Therefore, by strategically appropriating this Yoruba tradition and displaying its transformative power, Okri was reactivating a cultural memory that had previously, in *The Landscapes Within*, been silenced. In *Dangerous Love*, the scene is described as follows:

> Masked figures, bearing whips, burst out of the forest. [...] The lesser figures, whose masks didn't have the size or the fearsomeness of the chief masquerade, began whipping one another. [...] They whipped one another's feet. [...] There was no malice in their actions. [...] They whipped the year's evil from one another, dancing round Omovo. They didn't touch him. (Okri 1996, 270)

Turning to the formal construction of this passage, we can detect the use of parataxis, defined in linguistic terms as the ordering of propositions or clauses without indicating the relation of co-ordination or subordination between the said propositions or clauses. Daria Tunca gives a detailed account of how Okri used these paratactic structures in *Dangerous Love* (2014), and if one examines *The Famished Road* trilogy at this synchronic level one can find a similar use of parataxis. This particular device

[2] In Yoruba culture, the tradition of the masquerade, known as Odun Egungun, is celebrated during festivals. The purpose of these annual ceremonies is to honour the dead and thus assure the ancestors a place among the living. The ancestors compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of the past generations of their clan, town or family. In *The Famished Road* trilogy, there is a violation of this tradition and the subsequent breaking down of the natural order established by tradition as, rather than being framed with the controlled ritual of the Egungun, the masquerade is now portrayed as being anarchic and out of control.

is employed to suggest the rhythms of West African oral discourses, although our interest here is to link the use of parataxis that Tunca establishes at the cohesive level, and an interpretative parataxis that operates at a diachronic level. Certainly, one of the difficulties in reading Okri has to do with the way discrete episodes are narrated; the reader is asked to hold suspended a series of seemingly disconnected events, and it is only towards the close of the narrative that a fruitful interpretation appears to emerge. In contrast to parataxis, the hypotactic prose we find in much canonical literature tends to establish continual relations between propositions and clauses through connectives that are structured around an additive process pointing either backward or forward. Okri's prose displays a marked lack of logical connections and, we suggest, it is precisely this lack of subordination found at the discursive level of the text which is also reflected at the level of plot structure. We therefore propose that a distinct inner logic as regards the narrative events is created in the sense that there is a lack of a more conventional form of narrative cohesion that connects the discrete episodes. Therefore, while a hypotactic prose directs the reader toward a specific narrative arch, the use of parataxis creates a distinct mode of interpretation. For example, the foreshadowing of future narrative events are noticeably absent; the events are not syllogistically connected but, rather, function as a series of, seemingly, isolated incidents.

A good example of this can be found in *Infinite Riches* (Okri 1998), specifically within the repeated episodes where Azaro, the *abiku* spirit child, and his father experience situations that involve fire. These episodes are not linked to any larger plot structure in the conventional sense but, rather, must be construed as narrative events that happen against what we might define as a flat background. We use this term *flat* in juxtaposition to the pyramid structure of dramatic plot development, which includes: exposition, rising action, climax, falling climax, denouement, etc. In contrast to this, many narrative events in *Infinite Riches* function independently of each other and, at an interpretative level, the reader has to construe how the motif of fire is intimately related to the book's main theme of karmic transformation. So, while the discrete events marked by the repeated motif of fire operate against this narrative flat surface, overall meaning is only gained through symbolically linking each of these fire episodes together. Okri's narrative strategy, therefore, consists in creating fissures within the temporal and the spatial, a feat performed through a concatenation of seemingly unrelated adventures. Opinions, it must be said, are divided as regards Okri's continued use of disconnected narrative episodes; events that do not lead to recognizable denouement. Critics like Douglas McCabe (2005; 2013) find these narrative non-sequiturs tiresome and frivolous, while others such as Maggi Phillips (1997) and John Hawley (1995) see Okri's incantatory style as creating a unique perspective within postcolonial literature.

The aforementioned episodes in *Infinite Riches* and their common theme of fire are paradigmatic of the spiritual nature that impregnates Okri's narrative, something that has gained prevalence in his later works. As the author himself affirms, form embodies a spiritual quality, that is "a meditation on the mystery of life, [...] the

visible manifestation of spirit," and a defining feature of Okri's fiction is how he strives to deconstruct the real from its opposite, the unreal, so as to create a diffusion of the existing boundaries between man and nature (Okri 2011, 127). In *Infinite Riches*, we find a merging of form with Okri's appropriation of Yoruba myth and, in this respect, serves to initiate this imaginative process that seeks to reconstruct a multi-dimensional reality. The author first explored transmitting this otherworldly sensation through the short story format, and the formal strategies he employed in these yielded an ontological shift within his next narratives, *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988). As Ato Quayson points out, these short stories were the constituent stages of this experimentation and he assures us that "there has been an effort to problematize protocols of representation by routing several aspects of narrative discourse through the prism of indigenous beliefs about spirits and their relationship with the real world" (1995, 148-149).

A collapsing of the boundaries between the real and the supernatural was a recurring feature in *The Famished Road* ([1991] 1993). The author employed a formal element to create this effect. Similar to a musical score where two scenes are played off each other in a contrapuntal composition, the real and the supernatural in the novel are often narrated at the same time. Therefore, while in the majority of West African fiction the boundaries between the real and the supernatural were clearly marked, this contrapuntal device merges these two worlds into a simultaneous narration and thus heightens the reader's sense of the supernatural being embedded within pedestrian reality. This technique is repeated throughout the novel; for example, in many of the scenes that take place in Madame Koto's bar we find grotesque ghouls from the otherworld mingling with the parishioners. What we can therefore conclude is that the contrapuntal form establishes a simultaneous protocol which creates a cacophony of experience, as if too many instruments were being played at the same time. This form is important in shaping the reader's perceptions of Azaro's world. When we encounter this contrapuntal form it tells us that Azaro finds himself in a liminal space where he is not capable of dividing these two worlds and its boundary thus becomes porous with the supernatural impinging upon the real to create a cosmic chaos.

Mid-way through the writing of *The Famished Road* trilogy, Okri produced *Astonishing The Gods* (1995), a short novel which was, already, signalling a creative shift away from both *The Famished Road*'s Yoruban resource-base. Where *Astonishing The Gods* does converge with *The Famished Road* trilogy is in its atemporal quality as regards the time of the narrative events and its marked reticence to specify where the events take place outside of what the reader can discern as being generic African or European settings. The invisibleness of the protagonist remains an enigma throughout, and his wanderings through the unnamed location can be construed as a search for meaning, primarily for "the secret of visibility," while the transformations of the physical landscape, impregnated with "myth," reflect the

series of inner transformations he undergoes (Okri 1995, 159). In this respect, Okri uses a technique of defamiliarization which questions our perceptions of both time and space. This strategy thus produces a slowing down of the reading process and solicits a heightened attention to how temporal events interact within the narrative arch. Bereft of the temporal indicators of the more pedestrian novel, the reader finds her/himself moving through an ambiguous and disconcerting space that is akin to the oneiric. Within the novel, these non-defined temporal-spatial vectors serve to harness the potential of the dream narrative. They create a multidimensional cosmos that questions perceptions of reality and, by extension, realism as *the* organizing narrative principle; a rubric also applicable to *The Famished Road* trilogy.

This experimentation, however, we feel is weakened by a separate narrative voice telling the reader about the metaphysical nature of the protagonist's search, rather than the reader perceiving this in an organic fashion through the text. Furthermore, the unnamed setting fails to create what we define as a protocol of suggestion—the paralinguistic elements that the reader can access through a series of carefully selected descriptions and suggestions. On the contrary, while Okri's short story "In the Shadow of War" (1983) employs a similar reticence as regards the time and place of the action, the reader is offered a series of carefully honed motifs and symbols that bring forth the ghosts of Biafra. The same can be said of all of Okri's fiction with a West African setting, yet we propose that effective protocols of suggestion are missing from *Astonishing The Gods* and much of his later fiction.

3. The Search for Form

Okri assures us that a child's perception contains a certain quality of genius "that lingers in the depths of the mind, like an imperishable melody" (2011, 33), and, while place of origin must never become a creative straight jacket, it is the author's reconfiguring of his Nigerian late childhood into a literary form that we feel has produced his greatest works to date. The author left Nigeria at the age of nineteen to never return, yet, while many critics consider him to be an African writer, our view is that his identity affiliation is more cosmopolitan than national. As such, many of his later works serve as creative outlets for this cosmopolitan identity, yet we are of the opinion that West Africa, as a narrative setting, generates a richer protocol of suggestion when compared to those novels where the settings are, in some manner, vaguely European, although a specific location is never offered. *Starbook* (2007) did represent Okri's brief return to a West African theme, although the novel was temporally situated within the epoch of the Black Atlantic Slave Trade, while the setting is predominately an unnamed forest. The geographic location of the West African forest is something that had previously provided the author with a powerful creative source and was, in part, the reason for *The Famished Road*'s originality. Here, Okri had appropriated the Yoruban folktales of Daniel

O. Fagunwa where the forest transforms the mundane into a freakish experience that brings supernatural events to the fore. As in *The Famished Road*, Okri employs a contrapuntal technique in *Starbook* as a means to narrate the supernatural; the present time of the forest is played off a future time where the reader is offered glimpses of the prince's enslavement and his subsequent humiliation in the new world as a result of the Middle Passage. However, while in *The Famished Road* a West African resource-base was employed through the specific figure of the *abiku* child as a means to collapse ontological boundaries, the motif of the dreamtime is the device which *Starbook* employs to merge distinct narrative times into a single continuum. By the dreamtime we mean the shamanic practice of journeying into parallel realities through the consuming of hallucinatory drugs or practices of deep meditation, and it is through the latter that the prince embarks upon astral voyages that take him towards his own tragic future. Instrumental in his initiation into the dreamtime is the figure of the heron which the prince encounters in the forest, and, in this respect, Michael Harner speaks of entities that guide shamans on their quest for power and knowledge (1980, 56-59). This belief is common to all shamanistic-orientated cultures; in Mexico they go under the name of *nagual*; in Siberia they are called tutelary spirits, while in Australian aboriginal societies they are known as assistant totem. To acquire these guardian spirits, the shaman must initiate a spirit quest, in a remote pace in the wilderness, and it is for this reason that, in *Starbook*, the prince instinctively travels from his village and deep into the forest. As Harner assures, "[t]he guardian spirit is often a *power animal*, a spiritual being that not only protects and serves the shaman, but becomes another identity or alter ego for him," and the heron, in this respect, becomes the prince's power animal (1980, 54; italics in the original). This shamanic motif gives symbolic cohesion to the, many, isolated episodes regarding the heron, and through these isolated episodes we also come to understand the significance of the Middle Passage: how its futurity has already impinged upon the present narrative time of the forest.

To collapse these distinct narrative times, Okri also uses the device of gaps which are encountered as gateways, invisible to the uninitiated (O'Connor 2008, 20). Both the prince and the maiden move through these time conduits, which become the nodal points from which the characters embark on their travelling through passages and "into a dream, or as if from a dream fading in daylight" (Okri 2007, 288). This is also an appropriation of a shamanic resource-base; Harner tells us that the shaman moves through different cosmological planes, through special holes which are entrances that exist "in ordinary reality as well as in nonordinary reality" (1980: 31). In *Starbook*, these gaps occur as both physical spaces located within the forest space and as conduits inside one's own consciousness. The prince commences a process of initiation into the mysteries of human consciousness and it is during this process, which occurs at the master's workshop, that he enters a trance-like state and travels into the dreamtime through a gap. This takes him to the New World where he finds

himself "half naked in a marketplace, being sold for the price of a dog" (Okri 2007, 299). Through this collapsing of a teleological perspective in favour of a layering of narrative times the reader is thus primed for the future horrors of the Middle Passage.

Starbook can thus be considered to have drawn less from West African resource-base and more from shamanism, and *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), in this respect, also signalled a search for a form that relied less upon the Yoruba myths and folktales. What remains a constant within Okri's work, nonetheless, is his pronounced gravitation towards otherworldly themes, and *Tales of Freedom* (2009) continues along these lines where reality becomes fused with dream narratives. "The Comic Destiny," the longest piece in this collection, is structured around a series of absurd dialogues that function through a call and response technique; the characters engage with each other at cross-purposes, a device employed to create a comic effect. However, behind these absurdities lie traces of madness which are provoked by the unnamed predicament the characters find themselves embroiled in. These characters relate past brutalities in a nonchalant manner, which transmits a message to the reader that says, all is normal; however, this banality augments a pervading sense of absurdity and creates a contrastive effect which lends to the surreal quality of the freakish events. *The Famished Road* (1991) employed an analogous open tone for similar reasons; harrowing situations were given a neutral treatment as, perceived from Azaro's consciousness, death was an inspirational place, free from the constrictors of ordinary life. "The Comic Destiny" displays a similar attitude as regards life and death, and this theme is conveyed through the aforementioned open tone, the downplaying of tragic elements through linguistically neutral codes. Devoid of any psychological dimension beyond that which the *mise-en-scène* provides, the protagonists move through a liminal space delimited by the mundane and the supernatural. There is a dream-like quality to their existences, something that is heightened by the predominating *lieu vague*, a recurring feature in all of the other shorter stories in this collection.

In "The Comic Destiny," save a white house with a blue door and a table out front, the setting is empty and no attempt is made at creating a verisimilitude of place. As far as mimesis is concerned, this sensation of the bare stage seems to point towards a form that wishes to convey the surreal. This particular device points towards a more generalized tendency within Okri's recent writing where descriptions are kept to a bare minimum. The question of descriptive narratives and their aesthetic value *per se* is a debate that has run for some time, and how descriptive devices are managed within literature is still deemed paramount within contemporary writing. Vladimir Nabokov, for example, posits Nicolai Gogol as being revolutionary in his deployment of descriptive techniques for formal ends; Russian literature prior to Gogol, Nabokov tells us, was purblind inasmuch as it traded in "hackneyed combinations of blind noun and dog-like adjectives" (Nabokov [1981] 2002, 54). Where Gogol injected new life into the descriptive passage through a defamiliarization of what Nabokov determined as a series of automatized descriptors that "Europe had inherited from the ancients"

(55), Okri has taken this question one step further in his eschewing of *all* description. This, however, we suggest, is risky and, contrary to the intention, might be creating an unnecessary flattening of the narrative. This strategic lack of description is coupled with an absence of character psychology, something that is a recurring feature in most of Okri's recent writings. It would seem that the author is suggesting that, through this radical minimalism, the reader is given more space to activate an unconscious response to the text and therefore participate in a more profound interpretative process. Coupled with this radical minimalism is the formal arrangement of apparently non-related situations which only gain coherence at the end of the piece. The absurd journey being made by the characters in "The Comic Destiny" emerges as a traversing of a purgatorial state, and this reading, once again, evidences the paratactic nature of Okri's form. In the first section of "The Comic Destiny," Pinprop is leading Old Man/Old Woman through the forest towards an unknown destiny. The pervading sense of hopelessness that permeates throughout the whole piece is offset by the idea of redemption, which is seen as the only reprieve from the existential void in which the characters find themselves. This redemption to counterbalance the postlapsarian wasteland which the characters move through comes in the final pages of the text when New Man/New Woman emerge naked from the white house into which is set the blue door and proclaim:

> 'Let's dream again,' said New Man. […]
> 'Of Eden when it was new.'
> 'And after we have restored it.' (Okri 2009, 105)

The remaining narratives within *Tales of Freedom* are comprised of much shorter pieces, what the author defines as *stokus* or an amalgam between the short story and the Japanese haiku. While in a haiku a *kiru* or cutting word marks the contrasting image and enhances the way in which the elements relate to each other, these *stokus* deliver the contrasting element through short, declarative sentences. Similarities can be found between "The Comic Destiny" and these *stokus* in both their oneiric quality and the open tone employed to relate darker aspects of human existence. "The War Healer," for example, tells the story of a newly-wed groom who must return to a fighting zone so as to continue his work as a healer and "burier of the dead" (Okri 2009, 187). His bride, subsequently, joins him and soon her bridal dress has become "all bloody and darkened with gore, mud, blasted out brains and intestines spewed up from all the shelling" (189). The nuptial white, stained with the colour of death, functions as a visual metaphor of love and hate occupying a common space, and it is this single contrasting element upon which the dramatic effect of the piece hinges.

It is "The Mysterious Anxiety of Them and Us," nonetheless, that best delivers the contrastive power of haiku that Okri was searching for through his compacted short story form. A group of people is gathered at the grounds of a magnificent estate where

an outdoor feast is laid out before them. The host, however, does not invite them to take their places at the table and a palpable anxiety arises as to how to proceed. The narrator now finds himself amongst those who have taken it upon themselves to start eating. He tells us, "[t]hose who were at table, ate. That's it. That's all," yet, behind these diners a body of people forms who have not come to the table but rather who wait passively for their situation to change (Okri 2009, 120). Through the single image of these people sitting at the plentiful table and the murmuring of those they have turned their backs upon, the narrator develops a contrasting theme, and in an attempt to mitigate the guilt that this unequal situation produces, a moral argument is generated to shore up this predicament: "So to turn around and offer them food would automatically be to see them as inferior. When in fact they behaved in a manner that made things turn out that way" (Okri 2009, 20). The contrasting aspect of the haiku thus serves to establish in the reader's mind the complex relationship we harbour as regards injustices or human suffering, and it is through form that this theme becomes effectively activated.

As we have already seen, Okri's past experimentation through the short story format yielded its dividends although it must be said that *The Age of Magic* (2014), Okri's most recent literary fiction, has not brought to fruition the experimentation with form that *Tales of Freedom* seemed to have been heralding. This novel functions as a sequel to *In Arcadia* (2002), and both this and *The Age of Magic* narrate a train journey across Europe which is divided into two parts. The basic premise of both novels concerns a film crew that has been commissioned by a mysterious patron to undertake the search for Virgil's pastoral idyll, and a closer reading of both texts reveals a certain affinity with Borges' "The Aleph" (1945), where the common themes include the excessive need for public recognition, the instability underlying the illusion of permanence and the ineffability of psychic experience. At a structural level, *In Arcadia* is conducted in two movements, the first being the (uncompleted) outward journey towards the Peloponnese and, the second, an inner search for a personal Arcadia. *The Age of Magic* furthers the train journey initiated in *In Arcadia* where the train tracks represent a metaphorical travelling through life, with death as a *memento mori* flanking the moving train on one side and the utopian ideal of transformation on the other. The text refers to the two sides as Hades and Arcadia respectively, and Alistair Fox (2005) establishes a link with similar themes found in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *La divina comedia* respectively. The underlying tensions created by these images of paradise and hell are contextualized within the dream sequence that opens *The Age of Magic*: Lao has fallen asleep and now finds himself in conversation with a Quylph, a mythical creature, who suggests that his fear of Malasso defines his actions.

Okri re-introduces Malasso from *In Arcadia*, a dark character that controls many of the narrative events from an unnamed location. In this respect, he can be seen as an invisible *metteur en scène*, imposing his arcane will upon the film crew, and it is through Malasso that the narrative attempts to create an overarching ambiguity. As a

presence, Malasso remains phantasmagorical throughout, and his relation to each of the protagonists becomes a device that merges their outer reality with their inner, psychic space. Furthermore, his presence is intimately linked to the dreamtime of each of the characters and, as in *The Famished Road*, there is an attempt to establish an interplay between a series of pasts, futures and presents within the narratives and which "extends to the mental lives of the characters [...] so that their dream lives constantly inform their daily doings and vice versa" (Fraser 2002, 69).

On a similar note, Christian Gutleben situates *The Famished Road* within the African Gothic genre, and sees the presence of ghostly figures in the novel as "historical beings" that serve to reactivate the ancestral culture of West Africa (2013, 53). While Okri has distanced himself from this resource-base, his interest in the spirit world continues to solidly inform his fiction, and Malasso, in this respect, can be seen as a gothic spectre. For example, when Lao awakes from his brief dream a figure appears from beyond the train window attired like a dark magician and hence the uncanny return of Malasso is linked to the oneiric subplot that runs parallel to the principal narrative; the merging of the outer journey with the inner. These attempts at creating parallels between the real and the oneiric/ghostly presences can also be found in the novel's denouement; Lao glimpses the Quylph and this induces in him a transcendental experience, a dream-like encounter with this benign spirit, which serves to finally liberate him from his self-doubt. The narrative mediates this epiphany through the motif of sight, "that whole world, that vast reality, came into being when he was not looking, when he was not trying to see" (Okri 2014, 269).

In an earlier work Okri asserted that "[t]o see something one must first be something. One must become oneself" (2011, 23) and much of his fiction employs this idea of vision; a recurring leitmotif that suggests a link to the discourses of New Ageism. Lao's subsequent transformation—his unconscious need for recognition and the solipsism that this drive produces—offers an alternative model to the Faustian motif explored earlier on in the text and, seen from a broader perspective, the journey towards the physical Arcadia takes on a metaphorical significance. Here, Lao chooses to see his personal Arcadia and it is in this moment of epiphany that he rejects his former perceptions of his own self importance. This personal denouement is linked to the book's larger theme of humanity's need to discover the magical facets to human existence; a quasi-mystic revelation present in most of Okri's fictional and non-fictional works. Alistair Fox (2005), in this light, defines *In Arcadia* as an exercise in postmodern utopian fiction, framed within such classical utopian texts as Thomas Moore's *Utopia* and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and this reading is also applicable both to *The Age of Magic* and "The Comic Destiny" where we can find many digressions on the perniciousness nature of a secular modernity that has stifled the magic present in heightened realities. Both texts champion the energizing role of art and the possibilities of a new way of being, understood as an active dreamtime that runs parallel to our pedestrian realities; an ideal that occupies centre stage in Okri's work.

4. Conclusion

The meshing together of the otherworldly with the mundane at a formal level has been at the heart of Okri's literary success and *The Famished Road* (1991), in this respect, was paradigmatic of the fine balance the author struck between these two vectors. There is, however, a sense that Okri's work has become progressively more spiritually orientated with time and has lost touch with the human struggles that *The Famished Road* poignantly portrayed. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992), however, had already detected what he defined as New Ageism in *The Famished Road*, while Douglas McCabe viewed the text as verging "on being a New Age allegory" (2005, 18-20) and thus problematized those interpretations that framed the text within a postcolonial/postmodern discourse. Regarding the otherworldly nature of *The Famished Road*, Ato Quayson's (1997) study was highly influential in defining the novel's spirituality as resting within a Yoruba resource-base, although Oliva Renato (1999) gave testimony to other spiritual discourses such as shamanism operating in parallel with this West African resource-base. In this light, *Starbook* (2007) initiated a third stage in Okri's writing where these pan-spiritual discourses now eclipsed what Quayson had correctly defined as a marked affiliation with West African spirituality. The astral voyage, telepathy, the collapsing of space-time, and so forth now became a central part of the form, and the West African resource-base was no longer employed. While we, in part, disagree with McCabe's (2005; 2013) reading of *The Famished Road* as purely New Age spiritualism (the novel is far more layered, polyphonic, and has too many political sub-plots to confirm this simplified reading), the author's later works do tend more towards the spiritual allegory that McCabe had detected at the margins of *The Famished Road*.

There are, however, two principal issues that we feel subtract from, rather than add to, the ineffability that Okri seeks to create through form. The first relates to the manner in which he pares the narrative down to a skeleton text. As a formal device, this economy attempts to produce a sense of the unfamiliar, yet part of the reason we feel that this economy does not work is that the bare *mise en scène* and a *lieu vague* presented in these texts fail to provide the protocol of suggestion we mentioned earlier on in this essay. While Okri produces a polished, minimalist style that suppresses all qualifiers and eschews verbal pyrotechnics that attempt to convey a sense of the unreal, considered an overarching aesthetic effect, this device falls short of its mark. While the elusive nature and predominant lack of closure did create a continuum within the reader in his earlier fiction, the lack of closure and elusiveness in his later works now, we feel, produces indifference.

The second error Okri has incurred is in his increasingly messianic vocation. This has eclipsed other, and more essential, elements of the storytelling form, which have become subordinated to these philosophical speculations of a marked spiritual nature. For example, in *The Age of Magic* (2014) there is a dubious connection between Lao's ideas and those of the disembodied third person narrator; they express the same

thoughts and this weakens the impact of these ideas as we see Lao as a mouthpiece for the narrative point of view. This particular defect in the structure is related to the author's habitual use of digressions in much of his work, digressions which mostly have to do with the author's utopian and spiritual leanings. This is also true of *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) and *In Arcadia* (2002), and while one can abandon the story to develop a particular theme, we feel this device is not appropriate for the kind of form Okri wishes to develop. We, therefore, suggest that there is a profound conflict of interests operating within Okri's fiction: a conflict between the writer of stories and the essayist, the latter a genre he dominates with much finesse. It is our opinion that the author would do better to limit these spiritual digressions to the essay form, and in his storytelling develop a more suitable form that better transmits his, respectable, belief in the nature of spirituality and human existence. In *The Age of Magic*, for example, while its strength lies in how Malasso as a multiple psychic projection versus an invisible *metteur en scène* has the potential to create a series of uncanny events that can destabilize the reader's perception of reality, this psychic transferral of the characters' dream material onto the action is, once again, arrested by digression—both gnomic asides and superfluous scenes. We therefore conclude that what the author may see as a conscious and purposeful expression of the form might well be the subjective illusion of the poet. Or perhaps it is that his work, like that of William Blake, whose poetic imagination has exercised a considerable influence upon Okri, may not be accessible to the spirit of the literary moment.

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Received 30 June 2016 Accepted 24 October 2016

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