

The Famished Road

The Famished Road:
Ben Okri's Imaginary Homelands

Edited by

Vanessa Guignery

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4534-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4534-2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction.....	1
To See or not to See: Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Vanessa Guignery	
Chapter One	17
Ben Okri in Conversation Vanessa Guignery and Catherine Pesso-Miquel	
Chapter Two	30
Episodes and Passages: Spiralling Structure in Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Kerry-Jane Wallart	
Chapter Three	47
African Gothic: Ben Okri's Aesthetics of the Uncanny in <i>The Famished Road</i> Christian Gutleben	
Chapter Four.....	59
Inconclusiveness in Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Claire Omhovère	
Chapter Five.....	77
The Spirit of Conviviality and the Demons of the Marketplace in Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Gerd Bayer	
Chapter Six	92
Hunger and Food Metaphors in Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Mariaconcetta Costantini	

Chapter Seven	109
Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> and the Problematic of Novelty Philip Whyte	
Chapter Eight.....	121
"Redreaming the World": From Orature to Emerging Genres in African Writing, with Reference to Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Vicki Briault Manus	
Chapter Nine.....	136
Revolution Revisited: The Politics of Dreaming in Ben Okri's <i>The Famished Road</i> Adnan Mahmutović	
Selective Bibliography.....	153
Contributors	163
Index.....	167

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume comprises a selection of papers presented at an international conference organised in October 2012 at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon (France). It is published with the support of the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, the City of Lyon, the Rhône-Alpes Region and the French Department of Higher Education and Research. I am very grateful to Catherine Pessa-Miquel, Diane Gagneret and Claire-Lucie Polès for their precious help. My warmest thanks go to Ben Okri who illuminated the conference and most generously granted permission to publish his interview.

INTRODUCTION

TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE: BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

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In her essay on the novels of E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf writes: “Our business is not to build in brick and mortar, but to draw together the seen and the unseen” (167). In Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), the urban and economic development of London at the turn of the century is marked by “bricks and mortar rising and falling with the restlessness of the water in a fountain” (59), while the eponymous house in the countryside remains a spiritual sanctuary for Mrs Wilcox. In Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), the thick bushes and forests of West Africa are being cleared to make way for roads and house foundations—“Piles of brick and cement were everywhere” (Okri 2003: 123)—but the spirit-child Azaro is intent on maintaining a connection with the invisible world and the primeval river. This entails adopting what Okri calls “a new seeing” (2011: 136), which implies to look “at the world with new eyes” (2003: 571; 1994: 23, 281), to “see with the heart, see right to the core” (2012a: 58). These latter quotes, excerpted respectively from a collection of essays (*A Time for New Dreams*), two novels (*The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*) and a poem (“The Core” in *Wild*), all testify in varied forms to Okri’s insistent advocacy for a new way of observing and expressing the world that is alert to both the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. A “visual as well as visionary artist” (Hoffman 487), Okri might well be looking for ways to apply Rimbaud’s programme in his famous letter to Paul Demeny of 15 May 1871: “I say one must be a *seer*, make oneself a *seer*. The Poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, gigantic and rational *derangement* of *all the senses*”

(377, emphasis in the original)—a visionary and phenomenological project that André Breton and the Surrealists would also embrace.

In the poem “An African Elegy”, written in February 1990, the persona purports to have heard the dead tell him to live this life “[w]ith fire, and always with hope”:

There is wonder here.

And there is surprise

In everything the unseen moves. (Okri 1992: 41)

In *The Famished Road*, Dad echoes these words when trying to convince his son to remain in the world of the living: “There is wonder here and there is surprise in everything that you cannot see” (389). The ambivalent syntactical structure in the last two lines of the extract from the poem (depending on whether the reader marks a pause after “surprise” or is transported by the run-on-line) and the ambiguity of the phrase “the unseen moves”, gives way to a more explicit formulation in the novel. In both cases, the speakers celebrate the powerful enchantment of what cannot be seen but can be deeply felt. As Okri writes in his poem “On Klee”, “What lingers in the soul / Often bypasses the eye” (2012a: 63).

The first volume of Ben Okri’s trilogy gives a prominent place to the sense of sight and simultaneously redefines the contours of vision as a phenomenological and spiritual experience. As a “non-normative African child” (Barker 162) and an *abiku* with, in Okri’s words, “a dual reality” but not a “double identity” (in Gilbert), Azaro, who purports to have three eyes and one ear (493), is endowed with the gift of seeing things from both the secular world and the supernatural realm: “That boy can see us!”, one of the spirits exclaims at the marketplace (19) and Azaro has to pretend not to see them. This “double sight” (Smith 5) or “second sight” which he must “learn to use” (Highfield 144) could be epitomised by the new eye that opens “out of the centre of [his] forehead” (Okri 2003: 266) and absorbs a brilliant light of mysterious origin and essence. On the other hand, the spirit-child draws attention to the limitation of “human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see” (3). In “Dialogue of the Masks” in *A Time for New Dreams*, spirits discuss the blindness of “these living ones” who “do not see much”, “[e]ven with their eyes wide open”, “[e]specially with their eyes wide open” (Okri 2011: 71).

To see or not to see, that is indeed the question. In an interview in 2002, Okri insisted on the necessity of “seeing clearly” as being an “important part of literature, and of writing, maybe of living too”. He playfully added: “I often say that there ought to be a department of Seeing Clearly in all universities” (in Gilbert). In his collection of poems *Mental Fight* (1999), the writer argued that we should take advantage of the new millennium “To clean our eyes, / To see the world differently, / To see ourselves more clearly” (63).

In *The Famished Road* however, instruments of vision are not presented as conducive to insight and are often associated with ignorance or with deadly or disturbing experiences. The white road engineer’s “binoculars” and “eyeglasses” (332) fail to help him perceive the cultural, communal and magical significance of the forest that represents “the beginnings of dreams, the boundary of our visible community, the dreaming place of spirits” (Okri 1999: 83). They also fail to make him foresee that the road he is building can easily revert into the original river and drown him, thus taking revenge on the ecological catastrophe provoked by deforestation.¹ The white man’s “blue sunglasses” (552)² do not help him find his way out of Africa until after he has given them over to Mum, but once they become Mum’s possession, they make “her look slightly mad” (531). A witch’s eyes look “monstrous” after she has put on a pair of glasses (477). The blind old man’s “yellow spectacles” (520, 523) covering his “green and half-dissolved” eyes (359) that sometimes turn “purple” (330) can neither restore his sight nor cure him of his mischievous nature, while the ancient mother’s “dark glasses” (334) hide hollow sockets and “eyes of red stone [...] the exact colour of blood” (336)—ruby eyes that, according to Brenda Cooper, are “redolent of illicit, corrupt money, the colour of the blood spilt in the violence and greed of the

¹ A recent trend in criticism of *The Famished Road* analyses the novel from a bioregional, environmental or ecocritical perspective (see Highfield, James, Ogunfolabi, Wu).

² Brenda Cooper first writes: “The sunglasses are the masks of old syncretized with the changes brought by whites and by colonialism. They link up with the way deities or ancestral spirits, or the spirits of natural forces, are manifested through masked performances and rituals” (72). But she then argues that the sunglasses are “more than a simple reincarnation of the ancient mask”, and “even more than the postmodern recognition of the relativity of perception”, as they are also prosaically a product of Western technology that protects Mum’s eyes from the burning sun (74).

time" (104). It is certainly no coincidence that the three thugs who are harassing women at the marketplace and persecuting the photographer, should be wearing "dark glasses" (197ff), a reminiscence of the two men in Madame Koto's bar wearing "very dark glasses" (125) that covered "birdlike" and "ghostly" white eyes (128), polishing their spectacles and even at some point bringing "out an eye" and polishing it (129).

If, in *The Famished Road*, instruments of vision are often presented as means of concealment of evil doings rather than tools of enlightenment, eyes themselves are often a manifestation of the grotesque as evidenced by the description of deformed creatures either from the spirit world or from the world of the living. Thus, in Madame Koto's bar Azaro can see a man with "a swollen eye" (124) that gets more bloated as he drinks, "as if his eye were a stomach all to itself" (128), as well as "cross-eyed" clients (102) and "green cross-eyed spirits" (104), spirits "with blood pouring out of their eyes" (256) and a bald head with "sorrowful eyes" on all of its sides (256). One spirit has "eyes at the side of her face" (18), another "a single twinkling eye" (30) and a man has eyes "on his cheeks" (78). The three-headed spirit has "about ten eyes in all", one head "red with blue eyes", the other "yellow with red eyes", the third "blue with yellow eyes", colours that hurt Azaro and "burn out [his] sight" (342). The beggars all have eye issues: one has "one eye much higher up on his face than the other" (just like the madman in the bar [99]), a second seems "to have three eyes", another is "almost completely blind" and the young girl is "blind in one eye" (476). These physical deficiencies or deformities seem to suggest a loss of confidence in the scopic order and the power of both internal and external vision.

Azaro himself sometimes temporarily loses the use of his eyes (331, 386), while other characters are plagued with permanent sightlessness, such as the old man who has been blinded by a "flaming-yellow angel" (311)—though a woman purports he "can see when he wants to" (367)—, and more generally, as Dad argues in his thundering speeches, people who "refused to learn how to see properly" (480) and who, because they "use only their eyes do not SEE" (572), or, as Okri notes in an essay, "only see what [they] are prepared to see" (2011: 137). The capital letters in the former quote reflect Dad's louder tone of voice but also point to the utmost importance bestowed on what Dad considers as genuine vision (which is metaphorical more than literal) after he has become fully aware of

his own spiritual and political blindness—"I am blinded" (Okri 2003: 572), "I earned my blindness because I refused to see" (Okri 1994: 289)—but is progressively learning how to use his eyes: "I am beginning to see" (Okri 2003: 572). This new insight entails being responsive to what is not immediately visible, such as "the unseen suffering of others" (Okri 2003: 566). As Dad remarks in *The Famished Road*: "When you look around and you see empty spaces, beware. In those spaces are cities, invisible civilisations, future histories, everything is HERE" (571).

An enlightened vision can thus turn emptiness into excess, as marked by the hyperbolic plurals in the previous quote, and collapse past, present and future into a 'here and now' that is "compacted into a moment" (361) and immediately accessible. This heightened perception is one that Azaro and the spirit-children are endowed with, gifted as they are with the ability to foresee the future—"Our minds are invaded by images of the future" (4); "Futures not yet visible crowded the spaces" (337)—as well as see "in the emptiness [...] the ghost figures" of the past (521). The photographer on the other hand, the "awakener of the people's political conscience" (Whyte 23), has the ability to capture the present—albeit sometimes distorted—with the powerful and magical "third eye" that his camera has become (Cooper 108). If the photographer can unflinchingly stare at crude reality and dire poverty through the lens of his camera, Mum's eyes are "narrowed as if they were endlessly trying to exclude most of what they saw" (265), while the hanged man in the disturbing picture has his eyes "bursting open, [...] wide open, as if he had seen too much" (304).

As one of the guides says in *Astonishing the Gods*, "[w]hat you see is what you are, or what you will become" (Okri 1995: 11), or as Okri writes in "Healing the Africa Within", "[w]hat you see is what you make" (2011: 136).³ Therefore, Azaro's visions in *The Famished Road* (which usually start with his shutting his eyes, as though it was necessary to shut out common vision in order to have access to a different perception)⁴ vary according to the instrument, person or

³ In a tribute to the South African activist Steve Biko, Okri referred to the way nations can heal after a long trauma and advocated "an active vision during which time a future is dreamed of, shaped and put into place" (2012).

⁴ When Azaro shuts his eyes, this paradoxically does not deprive him of vision but gives him access to a different reality. This is underlined when he meets the three-headed spirit in the bar. Twice, a voice in Azaro's head tells him to

animal through which he sees the world(s) around him—a multiplicity of views that may be conducive to greater understanding as suggested by the three-headed spirit: “When you can see everything from every imaginable point of view you might begin to understand” (376).

Thus, when the spirit-child unwillingly floats into the blind old man’s consciousness and sees the world “upside-down” through his eyes, the nightmarish visions of “the most horrifying spirits” (360) with wounds that dripped pus and green spit pouring from their mouths, reflect the old man’s evil nature. When hypnotized by the deep-coloured eyes of the duiker and drawn into the animal’s consciousness, Azaro is granted the magic animal’s wisdom and all-encompassing vision, travelling “through deluded generations, through time” (524), having access to both the ancestral past (in particular the colonial invasion) and the multifarious crimes of the future (amongst which ecological degradation and the destruction of indigenous culture). When the spirit-child wears the frightening mask found in the forest, he sees “a different world” (284, 286), a “different reality” (286), an “other world” (284), a “new world” (286) in which an old man is transformed into a beautiful young boy and an anthill mutates into a grand palace of turquoise mirrors, a world that is populated with teratological hybrids—“a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull”, “dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws”, “cats with the legs of women” (284)—, both “ugly and magnificent” (284), graceful and monstrous.

This oxymoronic and paradoxical world, in whose darkness each spirit is “a sun” (284) and where “[o]rdinary things became riddles” (285), is one that welcomes contraries and is marked by ontological instability and constant metamorphosis. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), William Blake wrote: “Without Contraries is no progression” (xvi), and Okri’s art seems indeed to progress constantly through oppositions, antitheses and oxymorons that are brought together in an inclusive mode, thus defying any binary and exclusive view of the world. Therefore the road is also a river, a clearing is “both exactly as [Azaro] remembered it and different” (285), Ade relishes “the captivity of freedom” and Azaro “the liberty of limitations” (559), a man’s face is “strange, almost familiar” (304) in the same way as it is

shut his eyes, and twice Azaro obeys but can still see: “I shut them and could still see” (342), “I did [shut my eyes] and could still see” (347), thus suggesting that his connection with the world of spirits does not rely on common vision: even with his eyes wide shut, he can perceive another sphere of reality.

“the strangeness” of a street “which was so familiar” (21), the dead shake off “their rust of living” (211), the voices of the women at the market are “both sweet and harsh” (190), the ancient mother in Azaro’s vision gives off “an air of contradictory dreams” (334), the man emerging from an anthill has a face that is “both a hundred years old and childlike” (282), the light that dazzles the *abiku* is hot but does “not burn”, radiant but does “not blind” (267).

According to Christian Gutleben in this volume, the amalgamation of the familiar and the strange, the supernatural and the mundane, the dead and the living as well as the collapse of ontological and temporal boundaries are “an assertion of ontological continuum” (48) in a novel that functions “according to the principle of contiguity and similarity” (50). In his own contribution, Philip Whyte argues that the special prism through which Azaro filters the world “neutralizes any possibility of establishing a hierarchy between magic and non-magic representations” (113) and opens instead the possibility of a “third space” that echoes Homi Bhabha’s concept of a zone of exchange and negotiation (Bhabha 37) that rejects antinomies and monolithic categories, focusing instead on borderlines, crossings, in-between spaces, interstices, splits and joins. As Ben Okri says in the interview reproduced in this volume, “[w]e see the world in demarcations. But Azaro as part spirit sees through the filter of a pure consciousness” (24). His enhanced consciousness and panoptic vision are marked by a boundlessness that merges realities—the seen and the unseen—and temporalities—past, present, future—instead of keeping them strictly separate.

This blurring of boundaries and mingling of opposites is reflected in the structure of the narrative, which is marked on the one hand by a sense of fluidity and even of dissolution of temporal and spatial markers, and on the other hand by a cyclical dynamic in which beginnings and endings meet, and the “wind of recurrence” blows gently over the earth (215). Several contributors to this volume develop the metaphor of the spiral to refer to the specificity of an ebbing and flowing narrative that moves in loops, twirls and arabesques, similar to the moth that, in Azaro’s household, circles “the candle flame in a descending spiral” (83), the flies that “spiralled in the air” in Madame Koto’s bar (250), or the mosquito coil with “its smoke spiralling to the ceiling” (60) and forming “blue spirals” around Dad’s head (504), a coil of which only “a spiral of ash” remains in the morning (60). The wind turns into “little whirlwinds” and sends “dust and bits of paper and rubbish” spiralling upwards (205) while the

crowd is “caught in the spiral of its own fever” (148). Even Azaro is led “in a spiral” to the centre of the marketplace (197) and often feels his “being whirled” (207) or “twirled” (314). Such arabesques and images of curls and curves mimic the stylistic loops and coils of Okri’s writing as well as the winding structure of the book which denies any linear and teleological progression.

In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the King of Hearts orders the White Rabbit to read a set of verses sequentially: “Begin at the beginning and go on until you come to the end; then stop” (94). In his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012), Salman Rushdie contrasts the King’s injunction with the performance of an oral storyteller he attended in Kerala in 1986:

[The storyteller] stirred stories into one another, digressed frequently from the main narrative, told jokes, sang songs, connected his political story to the ancient tales, made personal asides, and generally misbehaved. (81)

To the writer’s surprise, the audience neither hissed nor booed but cheered and was thoroughly enthralled by the performance. Rushdie wonders:

Did it do so in spite of the storyteller’s complicated story-juggling act or *because of it*? Might it be that this pyrotechnic way of telling might in fact be *more* engrossing than the King of Hearts’ preferred version—that the oral story, the most ancient narrative forms, had survived because of its adoption of complexity and playfulness and its rejection of start-to-finish linearity? (81)

This celebration of the serpentine line obviously finds echoes in Rushdie’s own novel-writing, for example in *Midnight’s Children* (1981), which won the Booker Prize ten years before *The Famished Road* and is narrated in spiralling loops and detours even if the addressee, Padma, keeps bullying the narrator “back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next” (38). Ben Okri himself said in an interview: “a story is not a beginning, a middle and an end” (Anon.), and he remembers the intriguing stories told by his mother: “She’d tell you a story. It’d begin a propos of nothing and not quite end” (in Gilbert). In a similar fashion, *The Famished Road* deconstructs the concepts of linearity, causality and teleology, undermining the notions of beginning and ending, and favouring digressions, an episodic composition, circularity and repetitions. Even

if the novel starts with the biblical phrase “In the beginning” (3) and refers to “the myths of beginnings” (3), it concludes with a challenge to the very notions of beginning and end as Azaro considers the probability “that there are never really any beginnings or endings” (559). In between, the narrative line meanders, shifts forwards and backwards, takes detours and side paths, just as Azaro loses himself in a “maze of streets” (167), a maze and labyrinth of “dreaming objects” (335-336), gets caught in an “invisible labyrinth” (79) and in “the labyrinths of a stranger’s secret life” (334).

In her analysis of the paradigm of inconclusiveness in *The Famished Road*, Claire Omhové reminds us, in the words of the Maori writer Witi Ihimaera, that one of the characteristics of oral narratives is that they do not end but continue in “an unending spiral going forward and returning” (Ihimaera 313). *The Famished Road* clearly opts out of the conventional Western teleology and closure as well as the linear time of history, to favour a spiralling and digressive prose that coalesces past, present and future—an “ecstatic model of spiral time in which the present, the past, and even the future stretch into each other” to quote Adnan Mahmutović in this volume (146). The novel thus endlessly covers “almost the same, but not quite” the same ground, to apply Bhabha’s formula to a different context (122). As Ben Okri says in the interview in this volume, the narrative is not so much repetitive as spiralling: “It appears to go back to the same place but it doesn’t” because of a “constant micro transformation in perception at every point of that spiral” (26).

Okri also points to the fact that Azaro’s time is “neither cyclical nor linear”, but “vertical” as certain scenes are placed outside of time, “contracted or expanded” according to the way Azaro perceives them (26).⁵ Thus Azaro possesses the magical mental ability to elongate a cherished moment and, conversely, condense a long period of time in a brief snapshot, for instance see “a future history in advance, compacted into a moment” (361). The spirit-child can also experience the same episode—his encounter with the boy chasing the metal rim of a bicycle wheel—twice, the first time in forward motion, from the boy’s sudden apparition to his puzzling erasure (310), the second time in reverse, from the boy’s absence to his transformation into a shadow and eventually a human being (420). A reminder of Martin Amis’s

⁵ This third perception of time could be related to the vision “with a third eye” that Brenda Cooper (67) associates with the new eye opening out of the centre of Azaro’s forehead (Okri 2003: 266-267).

novel *Time's Arrow* (1991), which narrates the story of an American doctor (formerly a camp doctor in Auschwitz) in reverse chronology, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the same year as *The Famished Road*, this narrative palindrome points to the reversibility of chronology in a novel that does away with temporal conventions and with notions of beginnings and endings. The episode also fits in with the general cycle of birth, death and rebirth, which is that of the *abiku*, and with the fact that it is not unusual for the dead to come back as spectres among the living.

Kerry-Jane Wallart also sees the novel's narrative as a "gyre-like spiral" that "avoids the traditional binary opposition between linear and cyclical times" (39): "a distortion of the road in the picaresque novel as well as of the straight arrow of progress in the apocalyptic tale" (39) or the apprenticeship novel, the spiral is related to the baroque aesthetics marked by a rhetoric of excess and overflow, as well as an "oxymoronic coincidence of contraries" to quote Christine Buci-Glucksmann (48). Following Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* (75) and Michel de Certeau in his essay on the philosopher, Buci-Glucksmann argues that the baroque explores the "madness of vision"—*La folie du voir*—and substitutes the totalizing vision and "ocularcentric" discourse of modernity (Jay 3) with a concentration on "an invisible that is at once present and absent" (Buci-Glucksmann 176). In his analysis of discourses surrounding vision, Martin Jay remarks that "the typical mirror of the baroque" is the "anamorphic mirror" that distorts the visual image (48) and alerts the viewer to the existence of "an alternative visual order" (48). Azaro's visions of anomalous beings with very long legs and short bodies (126), "elongated faces" (256), "deformed" bodies, "twisted arms" and "elongated necks" (491), may well partake of this anamorphic dimension. These nightmarish perceptions can sometimes be the result of intoxication, hunger or exhaustion on the part of Azaro,⁶ but they also testify to the spirit-child's gift for alternative visions which he tends to naturalize as not signalling a "suspension of everyday reality", but as being "completely entrenched within quotidian existence" (Barker 176). What is striking about these distorted apparitions indeed, is that after a while, the strangeness of these strangers "goes out of focus" to quote Paul Gilroy (3), a phrase that, according to Gerd Bayer in this volume,

⁶ Clare Barker remarks that "Azaro's visions of embodied spirits and his journeys to the spirit world exist in inextricable parallel with a narrative of 'disability', exemplified by fits, blackouts and hallucinations" (167).

“sets out to de-emphasize difference, not pretend that it does not exist” (80).

In a piece from *A Time for New Dreams*, entitled “Dramatic Moments in the Encounter between Picasso and African Art”, the persona of the artist declares: “After me there will be no habits of seeing, no standards of doing set in immortal stone” (Okri 2011: 73). In the same way as Okri has argued that he is “always pursuing new ways of telling stories” (Anon.) and that “[a]n old way of seeing things has to be destroyed for the new one to be born” (in Wilkinson 81), the critic and reader might wish to aim for “[a] new criticism” that has accepted “the fact that the old way can’t serve the world any more” (in Fulford 50). Bearing that in mind, the following contributions offer a variety of approaches that are also new ways of reading *The Famished Road*, and are careful not to force on the novel such constricting labels as “magic realism” or “postcolonial fiction” which have sometimes been indiscriminately applied. One could argue instead with Ben Okri that the novel has found “the form unique to itself by which its individual soul can be expressed” (Okri 2011: 126).

Vicki Briault Manus thus argues that the Western desire to label African fiction partakes of an “imperialist pattern of appropriation by naming and classifying” (131) and that *The Famished Road* precisely does not fall easily into ready-made Western categories but can probably be better understood in the context of African orature and Yoruba cosmogony. Claire Omhovère likewise encourages readers to think beyond the binaries of Western thought and shows that the novel repeatedly frustrates any horizon of expectations related to “predictable narrative, generic, or even poetic patterns” (67). Choosing an unpredictable route, Christian Gutleben therefore explores the manifestations of the Gothic mode in *The Famished Road*, pinpointing the novel’s African singularity in its conception of the uncanny and the marvellous, while Kerry-Jane Wallart analyses the way the novel borrows from the picaresque tradition but also from apocalyptic literature and the aesthetics of the baroque.

Philip Whyte analyses Okri’s telescoping of rational and magical modes of representation (two modes that are usually kept apart in postwar West African fiction), and addresses social and political issues such as the role and status of the African writer within an evolving postcolonial context. Adnan Mahmutović examines on the one hand the politics of freedom and the spirit of revolution in the novel, and on

the other hand points to the creative as well as destructive forces of dreaming and imagination. Both Gerd Bayer and Mariaconcetta Constantini concentrate on the importance of feasting and social interaction and conviviality in *The Famished Road*. Gerd Bayer exposes the novel to the contemporary debates about humanism and demonstrates that, for all the presence of spirits, ghosts and dehumanized monsters derived from the traditional folklore, “the novel manages to refocus attention on the human itself” (81), especially through scenes of communal social engagements and explicit comments on social realities. Drawing from anthropological and cultural theories (Lévi-Strauss, Bakhtin), Mariaconcetta Constantini analyses food signifiers as well as images of hunger and satiety, but also greed and cupidity, to examine the contrary processes of deprivation and regeneration, shortage and vitality that are at work in the novel.

All the essays included in the volume explore the “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie 1991a: 9) conjured up by Ben Okri in a novel in which the concepts of home and homecoming are crucial to a wandering spirit-child in “exile” (5, 6) who repeatedly journeys back and forth between his worldly home and his supernatural one. The plural of “homelands” is thus justified as Okri presents the reader with several homes and several “gradations of reality” (in Ross 338) in which the marvellous and the magical coexist with quotidian reality. While spirits usually long “for an early homecoming” (5) from the world of the Living and urge Azaro to “go home” (79), Azaro’s “homecoming” (34, 50, 224) to his “new home” (40) in the compound after having lived in the policeman’s house is duly celebrated. Several chapters, sections or paragraphs start or end with Azaro coming or running home after school or after having been confronted with confusing or frightening experiences in the forest, at Madame Koto’s bar or at the market. As the young boy is taking “the expanding paths back home to Mum” (105), the echoes in sonorities of the monosyllabic words “home” and “Mum” suggest how much of a comforting refuge the single-room home as well as his worldly nuclear family have become. In this volume, Mariaconcetta Constantini shows that after his hunger strike, Azaro is “significantly cured by the love permeating Mum’s cooking” (98), and meals shared at home are one of the regular activities that bind the three members of the family as closely as the symbolic three-legged chair, even if hunger and deprivation often plague them. Although Dad declares: “Suffering is our home” (387), he also tells his son: “You have wept *for us* [...]. We have suffered *for you*” (387, my emphasis), thus pointing to the ethical

dimension of suffering as the site of an encounter, a responsiveness and responsibility for the Other, as Levinas would argue.

The polysemy of “home” in the novel—referring both to the spirit world and the mundane one—brings to mind the situation of diasporic peoples for whom “home” has become an unstable concept. Amitava Kumar points out the ambiguity of the formulation “There’s no place like home” that both “suggests that there can be no other place like home”, but also that “the idea of home is a delusion” (xviii). Postcolonial discourse has examined the difficulties for the migrant, the hybrid, the exile, to achieve a sense of rootedness and belonging in one particular place. Like Azaro, the migrant is a figure of the “in-between” and the “interspace” (Okri 2003: 6), “a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (Bhabha 19), lives on the borderline, in a transit zone, in an interstitial space or, to quote the three-headed spirit in *The Famished Road*, “the dreaded interspaces” (384). An indefatigable wanderer, Azaro is maybe most at home in movement, along his “imaginary journeys” (Kumar xix).

The homelands of *The Famished Road* are certainly “imaginary” and invisible as the novel is not explicitly bound to a specific geographical and historical place or nation—Nigeria is never named in the book and Clare Barker refers to a “defamiliarization of fixed points of reference” (160)—even if the novel clearly draws from West African indigenous cultural beliefs and practices as Vicki Briault Manus and other contributors demonstrate in this volume. Salman Rushdie, who wrote *Midnight’s Children* while he was living in North London, explains that writers in his position, “exiles or emigrants or expatriates” may be “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back”, but they cannot reclaim what they have lost: “we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (1991a: 10). In the same way Okri, who wrote *The Famished Road* in London and has a special fondness for Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), has created invisible spaces of the mind and what Benedict Anderson called “imagined communities”, emerging out of a “sea of stories” dear to both Okri (in Gilbert) and Rushdie (1991b), a repository of tales, legends and myths that culturally and socially bind and define individuals and communities. In order to see, hear and feel these imagined territories in the appropriate Conradian mood, the reader will need to momentarily suspend disbelief and embrace Okri’s highly personal definition of realism as the representation of “[a]ll that is

there, what we see, what we don't see, the visible, the invisible" (in Blishen).

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CHAPTER ONE

BEN OKRI IN CONVERSATION

VANESSA GUIGNERY

(ÉCOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE DE LYON,
INSTITUT UNIVERSITAIRE DE FRANCE)

AND CATHERINE PESSO-MIQUEL

(UNIVERSITY OF LYON 2)

18 October 2012, ENS de Lyon¹

Before we start this conversation, I want to say how much of a pleasure it is to be here. I've heard so much about this institution, its history, its place in French culture that it is a real thrill to be here. It's my first time in Lyon and I think it is beautiful. I went walking through the market today. When I go to a new place I tend to do two things: I go to its museums and its markets.

We are very pleased and honoured to welcome you today and are looking forward to hearing you talk about your art. My first question is related to your mode of writing. You once said: "You can't write about Africa like Jane Austen"², and therefore you needed to adapt your mode of writing to the place you were writing about. You needed to find a specific tone and narrative voice to write about that place. Would you mind defining that mode of writing?

¹ The interview was edited with great care by Ben Okri. We are grateful to Laurent Trèves, Ann-Lys Bourgognon, Christian Gutleben and Vicki Brault Manus for taking part in the discussion, and to Diane Gagneret and Claire-Lucie Poles for transcribing the interview.

² In Davis Stenhouse. 2007. "It Came to Him Like a Dream", *Sunday Times* (19 August): 7.

That comment has been interpreted as being an attack on Jane Austen, which it isn't, because I happen to love her writing enormously. All I was trying to express was that a piece of writing has an approximate or a resonating relationship with the place that's being written about. And every place has, as it were, a tone that helps it come into being. I'm not saying there's only one tone, but there is a family range of tones by which that place is brought into existence through words. Every place has a tonal equivalent in words. The variations can be vast: you can have a tone as different as Lewis Carroll, Henry Fielding, D.H. Lawrence, or Jane Austen. But in a sense they all fall within the tonal range of what brings alive Englishness and the mood of England on the page. You can't use a tone that best brings out one place to write about another place, partly because a place is not just the physical landscape. It is not just the trees and the buildings, it is not even the history of its civilization. Places are complex things: they are constituted of what has been done there, the quality and the nature of thought that has been had there, the way history has leaked into the landscape and the people. A place is a concentration of moods, histories, beliefs, superstitions. All of this is compacted into the tone that the best writers use to evoke a place.

To use the tone of a Jane Austen to try and evoke Africa is inappropriate. In Africa myth transfigures reality. By myth, I also mean the rituals and beliefs of a people. All worldviews are superstitious. The world is not as we see it. The world is as we perceive it. Our perception makes our world. And Africa has its unique perceptions. One of the things I struggled hardest with, when writing *The Famished Road*, was to find the musical tone to convey that universe. I spent ten years trying to find that tone. Without it, that world could not have been conveyed. It's not got to do with description. It's got to do with things not seen that are actually an essential part of that universe.

You said several times that you consider yourself first and foremost as a poet, that "poetry is probably the most important part of [your] writing. It's the foundation: it's the source of everything else"³. You also said that a "great deal of The Famished Road was actually

³ In Anderson Tepper. 2011. "The Mysteries of the World: A Conversation with Ben Okri", *Tin House* 49 (Fall): 39.

*written in poetry, metrically*⁴. Could you share with us how you go about creating that rhythm, and could you also tell us whether or not the images come first and then the words later? How, in fact, can poetry be created within the prose?

I think there are two kinds of writers. The first kind is, for want of a better word, the organic writer. The world they're trying to create, the book they're trying to write, has to have a completely self-generating source, out of which everything emerges. The integrity of the work comes from the inner growth of the idea. Then there's the other kind of writer, who, for want of a better phrase again, is an external, composite writer. They put the work together, they shape it, externally, like sculpture. *The Famished Road* is an integral work. Everything is contingent in the book. Its core is something impossible, the idea of the spirit-child. And the spirit-child is a poetic being. The core is poetry because of the consciousness of the narrator. The spirit-child is part here and part there, part in this world and part in the other world, part in the world of the real, and part in the world of dream. The poetry comes out of that. For me poetry is, of course, rhythm and meter etc., but it is also a dual state of language, part here and part there, part dream and part reality, part intelligence and part intuition, part light and part shadow. The poetry of the book comes out of the fact that this character is constantly seeing the world with a dual consciousness. What appears not to be real to us is real to him, and what appears to be real to us is not real to him. The poetry is such that if you miss the beat, you are out of that world. The source is the open consciousness of the narrator.

I must say I tend to read The Famished Road as poetic prose. Genre is of course a very arbitrary category but I tend to read your essays as poems, your poems as essays, your novels as poems etc... so that when I read your work I don't feel any boundaries between genres. Is this something you experience as well or do you establish clear generic differences between your works?

I am a blender and a blurrer. I am fundamentally a poet, but primarily a novelist. This is another way of saying that for me everything comes out of the rich river. Why should an essay not partake of poetry, and

⁴ In Pietro Deandrea. 1994. "An Interview with Ben Okri", *Africa America Asia Australia* (16): 82.

why should poetry not partake of thought experiments that we associate with the essay? Demarcations are artificial things. Every genre is enriched by its boundlessness. Every genre for me always mutates into something else. The novel itself has never been fixed. Its boundaries have never really been defined. It's only recently that we've started to speak of one thing as being a novel and another thing as not being a novel. But actually the novel has always been a rather dangerous river that overflows its boundaries and invades the surrounding cities. That's the way it should be. It is a rich and fluid thing. Because we are talking finally, always, in the novel, about a rich and fluid condition, which is life. This doesn't mean I don't pay great attention to the perceived demarcations of genres. It's just that I am fascinated by the source, the origins. In the essay form my great favourites remain Plutarch, Bacon, Emerson, Montaigne, Camus. The Baconian essay is especially compressed. Poetry can learn from them. All the genres can learn from one another.

You said at some point that, to you, the novel is a river.

The novel is a river, the short story a glass of water.

Talking about voice, Henry James explained in his preface to What Maisy Knew that he had wanted to restrict himself to the point of view of the child, but had wondered whether he should adopt the vocabulary and language of a child. In the end he decided not to restrict himself to a limited vocabulary, but of course that novel has a third-person narrator. Since it is not always clear from which point in time Azaro (the narrator) is telling his story, I was wondering whether the fact that Azaro (the character) is a child had induced you to adapt the language in any way, or if that did not come into account. Did you need to make sure that the language would not to be too complex, or was that never a question for you?

It was an important question. From the great child narrators of *Huckleberry Finn* to modern times, there has always been an ambivalent relationship between vocabulary and the voice. In this particular instance it is complicated by the nature of his consciousness, by the fact that he is a spirit-child, and by the fact that this novel is retrospectively told. The point of view of the telling and the teller is ambiguous. It is not being told in the time of the person that you're reading about. That ambiguous distance complicates the

vocabulary. The second thing is that some things are difficult to convey simply, certain states of mind, certain twilight conditions of perception. I agonised about the relationship between vocabulary and consciousness. I came to the conclusion that what is being felt, what is being sensed, are the most important things. Therefore I shouldn't worry too much about the register of vocabulary, so long as there's that transparency of the feeling and the perception coming through. Sometimes you can encounter a complex sentence in which a simple and pure emotion comes through. Sometimes you can encounter a simple sentence in which a complex and profound emotion comes through. The vocabulary is not really the primary means by which the emotion is expressed. It is sometimes the arrangement of words.

I've only spoken about what I'm about to say once. I'd like to express it again. It's about one of the ways in which *The Famished Road* was written. I used a technique which I now call echo writing. We tend to think we read words on a page sequentially, going down the page. But that's not actually how we read. When you are reading a line of prose sequentially, your eye also sees one word here and sees another word there. You see contingent words. That was very much part of how the story was told – the way in which you read a sentence but pick up a word just diagonally below or above. This influences the way in which you actually read the sentence you're reading. In a sense it was written like painting. I frequently meet people who say: "When I reread *The Famished Road*, certain things that I thought I saw on certain pages, when I went back, were not there. What's happened to them?". We read contingently as well as sequentially. I was playing with this and other curious techniques a great deal in that text.

I'm very interested in the voices in the novel that speak as indistinct and anonymous groups, as disembodied voices, commenting on what is going on (at the market for instance). It's not always clear whose voices these are as they're not identified individually. They might be said to symbolise public opinion sometimes, or they could be compared to a Greek chorus commenting on the situation. Can you tell us a bit more about the status of these voices?

I don't want to over-identify them. That's the way it works in the novel. You know the famous line from *The Tempest* by Caliban who said the island was full of noises. When Gustav Jung came to Africa for the first time, that's what he said. He stood on the soil, and he said this place, its history, all of its hidden histories, just rise up at you. That's

what Africa is like to anybody who is halfway sensitive. It is full of presences. It is full of all kinds of things that are ambiguous in the hierarchy of beings. Azaro hears them: nobody else does. When you're asking me for the exact identity of these voices you're asking me to break the seal of a mystery, which must remain that way. These voices are both in the text and in the world. They're dual. I'm trying to express the multifarious dimensions of textuality as well as of reality. There must be equivalents between these two things. The multidimensionality of reality must have its textual counterpart. Think of them as a rich opera of presences.

I would like to talk about your depiction of poverty in The Famished Road. When I read the book I was struck by the character of Mum, the way you painted her, the courage, the quiet dignity, the resilience, in spite of not knowing where the next meal would be coming from and all that. Some critics tend to criticise writers for having a "voyeurism of the slums", the dregs, for trying to describe a lower social class. Could you elaborate on that and on your depiction of dire poverty?

I didn't see it as dire poverty, because Azaro doesn't. Everything comes out of the integrity of a worldview. I'll keep coming back to this because until we get this straight, nothing else is really going to make sense. I'll be clear. He is a person with an ambiguous consciousness. Everything he sees is transfigured by knowledge of that which is beyond what he sees. He is a child born into the slums, into the ghettos of Lagos; incidentally, a place that I know well. I'm probably quite rare amongst African writers in that sense. I was fortunate enough to have spent a substantial part of my life amongst the poor. So I could write about it, not as if I were a traveller, but as if I were one of them. That has been the good fortune of my biography, as it were. I drew upon what I knew and what I had seen. In terms of the book this is significant, because Azaro's consciousness is elaborated by his condition. If Azaro had been born into a place like Ikoyi for instance, which is a rich part of Lagos, the orchestra of the story would have been diminished. The irony of having a consciousness of the infinite contained in the narrowness of poverty fascinated me a great deal. It allowed me to explore the irony of social conditions, because everything is modulated by consciousness.

The mother is for me a very tender creation, and Nigerian literature, African literature, is not very replete so far with mothers