

Phenomenological ecology in two occasional poems by Ben Okri

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Abstract

This article begins with a brief discussion of the three terms: the poet, onto-poiesis and eco-phenomenology. An explication of its thrust, viz. the significance of sowing/sewing 'a quilt of harmony' (*Wild* 2012: 20), in relation to the broad yet symbiotic theme of cosmic ecology follows. The discussion proceeds by presenting a close critical analysis of Ben Okri's 'Lines in Potentis', a poem commissioned by the then Lord Mayor of London in 2002 in commemoration of the bombing of the City of London and which is featured in Okri's most recent anthology of poetry, *Wild* (2012: 26-27). Both my thrust and my argument are predicated on another occasional poem from *Wild*, 'A Wedding Prayer' (2012: 20-22), which is not analysed in any detail. Axiomatic to the interpretation is the poet's own conception of 'wild', cited on the dust cover of the anthology, as 'an alternative to the familiar, where energy meets freedom, where art meets the elemental, where chaos can be honed'. More precisely, for this London loving Nigerian poet, 'the wild is our link with the stars . . .'. This is not aesthetic posturing. As I attempt to show in my reading of the focal poem, it has to do with mystical unrest viewed from an eco-phenomenological 'enjoyment of literature, of beauty, of the sublime, the elevated, as well as our compassion for the miseries of humankind, [and] generosity towards others . . . inspired by the subliminal passions of the human soul' (Tymieniecka 1996). As the conclusion attempts to show, this projects some of the epistemology of Africans in Africa and the Diaspora. It does this by invoking the contentions of fellow African phenomenologist, Achile Mbembe, in comparison with Tymieniecka's argument that the soul is the 'soil' of life's forces and that it is thus the transmitter of life's constructive progress. Such progress is from the primeval logos of life to its annihilation in the anti-logos of man's 'transnatural telos' (Tymieniecka 1988: 3).

Key words: *A Way of Being Free*; 'A Wedding Prayer'; climate change; eco-phenomenology; London; metaphysics; Ben Okri; onto-poiesis; occasional poetry; Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka; *Wild* (2012)

The poet, onto-poiesis and eco-phenomenology

Rooting his argument firmly in onto-poiesis or the phenomenology of life, Ben Okri asserts that ‘the poet is the widener of consciousness’ (*A Way of Being Free* [1989]1997: 3). Implicitly invoking an eco-phenomenological or phenomenological ecological standpoint, he explains how this raising of consciousness, that is, the process of onto-poiesis occurs poetically: ‘[Poets] speak to us. Creation speaks to them. They listen. They remake the world in words, from dreams’ (ibid.). Okri muses about this mystical dialectic: ‘Intuitions which could only come from the secret mouths of gods whisper to them through all of life, of nature, of visible and invisible agencies’ (ibid.). Underlining the relation of eco-phenomenology to the fluid nature of reality, Okri explains: ‘The poet turns the earth into mother, the sky becomes a shelter, the sun the inscrutable god ...’ ([1989]1997: 2).

Okri’s view of the role of the poet and the source of poetic inspiration accords with the late Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka’s concept of eco-phenomenology as the philosophy of ‘our relationship to the earth’ (1996: 2). In defence of her unique brand of phenomenology, she explains not only its theoretical base, but also its application. Drawing an analogy to climate change and the current ecological crisis, she explains that people generally see these as physical problems, resolvable through technological innovation. By contrast, eco-phenomenologists approach these problems from a metaphysical perspective, thus requiring ‘a fundamental re-conceptualization of human values and our relationship to nature’ (2008: 2).

Coincidentally, for Aristotle, natural generation and artistic creation are also purpose-driven, yet qualifiedly so. Comparable to Okri’s ‘invisible agencies’ and Tymieniecka’s ‘metaphysical perspective’ regarding climate change, there is no impassable gulf between *physis* and *poiesis* for the renowned Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Consider, for example, Aristotle’s statement in his *Physics*: ‘It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating. Art does not deliberate.’ In other words, this is what constitutes the natural generation, just referred to. Aristotle’s illustrations serve to elucidate: ‘If the shipbuilding art were in the wood, it would produce the same results *by nature*. If, therefore, purpose is present in art, it is present also in nature. The best illustration is a doctor doctoring himself: nature is like that. It is plain then that nature is a cause, a cause that operates for a purpose.’¹ This purposive generation can profitably be applied to the first of Ben Okri’s occasional poems, selected for this discussion, but not analysed in detail. It can likewise be used as a lens to interpret the second occasional poem that is the focus of my discussion.

‘A Wedding Prayer’ and ‘Lines in Potentis’: two occasional poems

It is precisely this natural or purposive generation, referred to above, that gave rise to the argument of this article, the thrust of which was inspired by a line from Okri’s ‘A Wedding Prayer’. Evincing an eco-phenomenological or phenomenological ecological viewpoint, Okri writes:

. . . Love has brought two
Rivers into one way, one dream;
Has sown a quilt of harmony.

And scattered some magic
Fragrance upon the sea. (Stanza 1, ll. 6-10; emphasis added)

The metaphysical conceit of the love of two people having ‘sown a quilt of harmony’ leading to their commitment to marriage is transcendently eco-phenomenological; the pun on SOW (connoting regenerative husbandry as in the nurturing of plant life as well as the procreation of life) and SEW (as in stitch craft) encapsulates the *double entendre* of the conscious act inherent in spending a life together as well as the responsibilities of wedded life. Symbolically, too, SOW invokes the Biblical axiom of ‘As you sow, so shall you reap’ (Gal. 6: 7), while SEW recalls Joseph’s coat of many colours and all that it signifies. Add to this Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka’s (1998: 3) claim that the soul is the ‘soil’ of life, the transmitter of life’s constructive progress, which flows from the primeval logos of life to its annihilation in the anti-logos of man’s ‘transnatural telos’ and Daniela Veducci’s explication that ‘the eros and logos of life within creative inwardness’, open out ‘all the strings from the knots which analysis of poetic creativity reveals’ (Tymieniecka et al. 2014: 17) and one realises that Ben Okri’s aesthetics rests on the identification of dramatic scene. As Barthes (1978: 70) argues, whether the scene is pictorial, theatrical or literary, ‘it admits within its field’ only that which ‘is promoted into essence, into light, into view’. Accordingly, the scene implies a high quality of thought; it is both social and moral.

This occasional poem was commissioned to celebrate the nuptials of a bride and groom and is, at once, profound and idyllic. It is dedicated to Ieva and Ivor,² to life and to the procreation of life as expressed in the injunctions to the bridal pair: ‘May you never lose your/ Laughter, your playfulness,/ And your music . . .’, juxtaposed with ‘Be fruitful in enchanting deeds/ And in futures . . .’ (Stanza 6, ll. 65-67 & ll. 69-70).

Explicit in the second poem, ‘Lines in *Potentis*’ – also occasional, because it was commissioned as explained below – are the same eco-phenomenological motifs: ecology, love, music, dreams, nature, harmony of the soul and magic as the opening lines attest:

One of the magic centres of the world;
One of the world’s dreaming places.
Ought to point the way to the world:
For here lives the great music of humanity. (Stanza 1, ll. 1-4)

In this focal poem, the canvas is broader and addresses a wider audience in its intersection of the diachronic with the synchronic, of history and contemporary society. It is also more overtly didactic in its appeal. Addressed to the cosmopolitan society of Londoners, the ‘Workers of the world’ (Stanza 4, l. 42), the poem appeals for ‘[t]he harmonisation of/ Different histories, cultures, geniuses and dreams’ (Stanza 1, ll. 5-6). This is not simply a utopian vision for, as Eckhart Tolle (2005: 308) explains: ‘At the core of all utopian visions lies one of the main structural dysfunctions of the old consciousness: looking to the future for salvation.’ Commissioned in 2002 for the London Assembly and inscribed around the curving structure of the Greater London Authority Building [the City Hall], ‘Lines in *Potentis*’ was read by the poet in Trafalgar Square on 14 July 2005.

Whereas the first poem celebrates the conjoining of human life, the second commemorates post-human life after the bombing of London.³ Okri's prayerful dream, as he recalls the horrors of the Blitz from a 21st century perspective, is akin to that of Revelations – his is a vision of 'a new heaven and a new earth',⁴ the foundation of both being awakened consciousness or ontopoiesis. The recollection of historical facts is part of a purposive mythic pattern the poet employs in order to capture a series of moral crises that he not only portrays but also seeks to embody in this poem. This is borne out in the injunction to '... .tell/Everyone that history, though unjust,/ Can yield wiser outcomes' (Stanza 1, ll.7-9). An enumeration of a list of contraries that follows articulates just what these 'wiser outcomes' may be for a Nigerian poet imbued with the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which itself is a correlative of the Biblical Commandment: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. Both notions endorse an African renaissance stance:

And out of bloodiness *can* come love;
And out of slave-trading
Can come a dance of souls;
Out of division, unity;
Out of chaos, fiestas. (Stanza 1, ll.10-14; emphasis added)

The repetition of the modal verb 'can' highlights the transformative metamorphosis envisaged. Explicit in Okri's Africanist cosmogony is the Blakean aphorism that 'Without Contraries is no Progression' (Keynes 1996: 149, Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'). As Okri too avers: 'There can be no absolutes: no absolute good or evil, no absolute way of living. No absolute truth. All truths are mediated and tempered by the fact of living. Being alive qualifies all things' ([1989]1997: 54). 'Poets,' Okri muses in *A Way of Being Free* ([1989]1997: 2), 'seem to be set against the world because we need them to show us the falseness of our limitations, the true extent of our kingdom.'

The epistemological implications are that without paradox, without the various trials and tribulations in one's encounter with what religions call good and evil (but what Blake refers to as Innocence and Experience) one cannot attain perfection of Being.

Thus, the vision of London, 'City of tradition, conquests and variety;/ City of commerce and the famous river' (Stanza 2, ll. 15-16), as a sacred *axis mundi* – implied in the 'magic centre' quoted earlier, alludes to an awakening of consciousness – that is, to an awakening to the realisation of Presence and its power (*potens*) to effect change. The flow of the river [of life] into the sea in 'A Wedding Prayer' becomes the inscrutable flow of the cycle of the seasons, 'Awaiting an astonishing command/ From the all-seeing eye of Ra' (Stanza 2, ll. 29-30), in 'Lines. . .'. Not only does this aesthetic evocation of the Egyptian sun god transliterate John Keats's 'Hyperion' – 'One moon with alteration slow had shed/ Her silver seasons four upon the night' – it also embodies the awakened consciousness. 'When we look out on the world with all its multiplicity of astonishing phenomena,' Okri (1997: 19) asks rhetorically, 'do we see that only one philosophy can contain, explain, and absorb everything?' He elaborates in answer: 'I think not. The universe will always be greater than us.' (ibid.) As mere microcosms within the macrocosm, Okri suggests

that 'Our mind[s] therefore should be like Keats's thoroughfare, through which all thoughts can wander' (ibid.). Okri surmises therefore that our minds 'should also be a great cunning net that can catch the fishes of possibility' (ibid.). In an interview given on the occasion of the conferment of *Laurea Honoris Causa* in Philosophy (27 August 2008), Tymieniecka asserted that the very essence of her philosophy – and, evidently that of Ben Okri too – 'is our relationship to the earth and to the cosmos' (2008: 2).

The appeal in 'Lines in Potentis' is for this 'magic centre' of the global village to use its regenerative power to 'Re-make the world/ Under the guidance of inspiration/ And of wise laws' (Stanza 4, ll.43-45), itself an ecological conservationist injunction. In a reworking of the Marxist tenet, 'Workers of the world unite ...', the injunction here is for the workers to unite, by implication, not because they have nothing to lose, but because the proletariat has everything to lose should they fail to heed the poet's plea. A history of natural and man-made disasters (The Great Fire, the plague and the Blitz) enables London's workers to comprehend their own potency and potential, to 'Tell everyone that the future/ Is yet unmade' (Stanza 2, ll.17-18). Thus the poem seeks to address mystical unrest, not bourgeois capital. The closing lines, in particular, resound with this mystical, this eco-phenomenological sensibility:

I want you to tell everyone
Through trumpets played
With the fragrance of roses, that
A mysterious reason has brought us
All together,
Here, now, under the all-seeing
Eye of the sun. (Stanza 5, ll. 57-63; emphasis added)

The two pivotal motifs that run throughout world mythologies – wonder and self-salvation – implicitly coalesce in these lines. The mystical is, as Joseph Campbell explains in a chapter tellingly entitled, 'Cities of God' from his *The Masks of God*, 'redemption or release from a world exhausted of its glow' ([1962]2011: 35).

'Lines in Potentis' is featured in Okri's most recent anthology of poetry, *Wild* (2012) as is 'A Wedding Prayer'. Axiomatic to my interpretation is the poet's own conception of 'wild' (cited on the dustcover to *Wild*) as 'an alternative to the familiar, where energy meets freedom, where art meets the elemental, where chaos can be honed'. More precisely, for this London loving Nigerian poet, 'the wild is our link with the stars . . .'. In an interview in *The New Statesman* (29 March 2012), Okri stated: 'I was interested in the wild, not as in wildlife or outside civilization but as a raw, formative energy that artists notice when they look at objects.' This is not aesthetic posturing; it has to do with that which lies beyond reason and rationality. It is predicated on the mystery of eco-phenomenology, on 'enjoyment of literature, of beauty, of the sublime, the elevated, as well as our compassion for the miseries of humankind, generosity towards others . . . inspired by the subliminal passions of the human soul', to quote Tymieniecka (1996). Okri's concept of 'wild' resonates with Tymieniecka's explication of the Sentience of the Logos which 'is carried in various guises through all the individualizations of life' and ' . . . which from this first germinal coming forth of life, appearance of life, to the fashioning of the individual,

which in the case of the human being, with its highest sentient spiritual unfolding . . . is really carrying the divine' (2008: 6). In 'The Passions of the Earth' (*Analecta Husserliana* LXXI: xi), Tymieniecka asserts that 'the human being is an ecological fruit . . . formed by the earth', whose life is sustained by 'the juices of the earth'. This, in turn, explains 'the cosmic dependencies of the human mind and human development' (ibid.). Having posited the notion that this has nothing to do with theology, but is rather just a metaphysical tendency of life itself, she added: '. . . the self-individualization of life, which is the basic instrument of onto-poiesis draws on the laws of the cosmos and the earth.' (ibid.)

One of these cosmic laws manifests in poetry, according to Okri in *A Time for New Dreams* (2012:3): 'We are, at birth, born into a condition of poetry and breathing. Birth is a poetic condition: it is spirit becoming flesh. Death is also a poetic condition: it is flesh becoming spirit again. It is the miracle of a circle completed, the unheard melody of a life returning to unmeasured silence.' The cycle of the seasons and the Cardinal Points of the compass, all of which feature in 'Lines . . .' are likewise cosmic laws. Significantly, the first season mentioned in 'Lines . . .' is Spring, a time of rebirth. In the poem, an anthropomorphised Spring (invoking its correlative – human birth) 'waits/ By the lakes, listening/ To the unfurling daffodils' (Stanza 2, ll. 25-27). This, perhaps, is an allusive conflation of William Wordsworth's definitive nature poems, 'To Daffodils' and 'Tintern Abbey'. The depiction of Summer shares the same esemplastic imagination: it 'lingers with the hyperborean worms', conscientised to nature's purposive way. The choice of the epithet 'hyperborean' endorses the indissoluble link between man and nature and highlights cosmic unity. The adjective (hyperborean) denotes or relates 'to the extreme north', while applied to the noun, 'worms', it could signify inhabitants 'of the extreme north' (*New Oxford Dictionary of English* 1998: 900). Furthermore, embedded in the signifier is a tacit allusion to Greek mythology; the Hyperboreans were members of a race worshipping Apollo [the Greek god of the sun] and living in a land of sunshine and plenty beyond the north wind (ibid.), coincidentally typifying an African setting. What then of the other two seasons?

Both Autumn and Winter are likewise anthropomorphised, a device that resonates with our dependence on the earth as well as a reverence for the mystery of seasonal or cyclic change. In an intertextual braiding of Keats's 'Ode to Autumn', 'To the West Wind' and 'To a Nightingale', shot through with Negative Capability,⁵ Okri's Autumn ' . . . dallies/ With the West wind/ And the weeping nightingales' (Stanza 5, ll. 50-52). Winter is depicted as clearing 'its sonorous throat/ At the Antipodean banquets, preparing/ For a speech of hoarfrost/ And icicles conjured from living breath' (Stanza 5, ll. 53-56).

Implicit in the evocation of the cycle of the seasons is not only a correlation with human life – *a priori* Being, birth, life and death and life-after-life or post-human life – but also a veiled bringing together of the four Cardinal points *viz.* North (hyperborean, already discussed), South (Antipodean; the Antipodes is an appellation for Australia and New Zealand), East (the land of the rising sun/Ra/Apollo) and West (the autumnal West wind). The seasons and points of the compass conjoin to unify the cosmos reflected in Okri's vision of the 'harmonisation of different/ Histories, cultures, geniuses, and dreams' (Stanza 1, ll. 5-6) already quoted.

Okri's treatment of humankind in both poems discussed in this article is likewise rooted in eco-phenomenology or phenomenological ecology. On the brink of a new life together in London, Viscount Ivor Guest and his bride, Ieva (a Latvian beauty), are enjoined to:

... Travel
Into one another, as into
A country you have long admired,
And read many fables about,
And now find yourself
Before its famed rivers
Its inspiring mountains. (Stanza 3, ll.20-26)

In contrast, 'Lines . . .' is addressed to the London populace, possibly the most cosmopolitan in the world, who are enjoined to attune to the Elizabethan Music of the Spheres, to 'Create the beautiful/ Music our innermost/ Happiness suggests. Delight the future./ Create happy outcomes' (Stanza 4, ll. 46-49). Londoners, Okri implies, are those who have awakened 'to their *essential true nature as consciousness* and recognize that essence in all "other", all life forms' (Toller 2005: 309; emphasis added); they feel a oneness with the ecology of the whole, as Okri suggests in 'Lines ...'

Tomorrow's music sleeps
In our fingers, in our awakening
Souls, the blossom of our spirit,
The suggestive buds of our hearts. (Stanza 3, ll. 31-34)

This single poetic quatrain foreshadows the closing lines of this poem with its 'trumpets played/ With the fragrance of roses', cited earlier, and reflects back to the opening line's 'one of the magic centres of the earth'.

Ultimately, 'Lines in *Potentis*' can be seen as an eco-phenomenology or phenomenological ecological blueprint for 'the way' to transform 'nightmare' into 'illumination' (Stanza 2, l. 20), transliterating St Paul's Letter to the Philippians,⁶ and encapsulating both Revelations' prophetic new earth and Parry and Blake's hymn to the New Jerusalem.⁷ All four of these intertexts embody the awakened consciousness that Tolle (2005: 308) asserts 'is changing all aspects of life on our planet, including nature, because life on earth is inseparable from human consciousness that perceives and interacts with it'. This statement, in turn, underlines the Aristotelian assertion that there was no impassable gulf between *physis* and *poiesis*, quoted at the outset of this article, as well as an eco-phenomenological epistemology. 'Ours is a condition,' asserts Tymieniecka (2008: 3), 'within the unity of everything alive, which depends on earthly and cosmic laws.'

Conclusion

The conclusion attempts to show that this article projects some of the epistemology of Africans in Africa as well as in the Diaspora. It does this by invoking the contentions of Ben Okri's fellow African phenomenologist, Achile Mbembe, in comparison with Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka's argument that the soul is the 'soil' of life's forces and that it is thus the transmitter of life's constructive progress. Such progress is from the primeval logos of life to its annihilation in the anti-logos of man's 'transnatural telos' (Tymieniecka 1988: 3).

In an article entitled, 'African modes of self-writing', Mbembe (2005: 252-253) debates the contention of this unity in the more prevalent discourse of emancipation and autonomy (e.g., Franz Fanon in his *Black Skins, White Masks*), which Mbembe terms a 'paranoid reading of history'. He points to 'a tension between a universalizing move that claims shared membership within the human condition (*sameness*) and an opposing, particularistic move that "emphasizes difference and specificity" by accenting, not originality as such, but the principle of repetition (*tradition*) and the values of autochthony'. This latter invokes a fabricated mask of Africanity:⁸ distinctive races, cultures and the like, and distinctions between self and other etc., whereas my argument is premised on the notion of *Ubuntu* or the brotherhood of humankind (already mentioned), in the context of cosmic harmony. It is inspired by the subliminal passions of a contemporary poetic soul.

Tymieniecka (1997: ix) elucidates within an eco-phenomenological logic: 'The soul's creatively orchestrated swings, together with the generative propulsions of imagination, distil the primitive strivings endowed with *specifically human life-significance*.' As an endorsement of an eco-phenomenological passion of place or a phenomenological ecology in the hands of a true poet, she observes the resulting Affective Fallacy: 'On the wings of the creative imagination our subliminal passions carry us to unattainable realms, and we exhale beyond our frames with joy or enchantment as our dreams have us roam through shifting dimensions of sublunary reality. All passions "fly", charting nebulous spheres, as human strivings, dreams, forebodings, desires – in following their particular bents – seek fulfilment by crystallizing in a place ... that they imaginatively fashion and qualify with the significance of expectant strivings' (1997: xii-xiii).

Notes

1 Aristotle, 1941. *Physica* II 8 199B27-31. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKoen. New York: Random House, p. 251.

2 The poem was commissioned by Ivor Guest, the 4th Viscount Wimborne, a friend of Ben Okri, for his marriage to Latvian beauty Ieva Imsa. Their daughter, Greta, was born in 2011.

3 "Lines . . ." was commissioned by the then Lord Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. It was read by the poet at the memorial of the bombing of London (Rosemary Clunie, pers.com.).

4 Revelations 21:1.

5 Douglas Bush (1967: 58) explains Keats's doctrine of Negative Capability or intuitive empathy in the poet's own words: "The setting sun always sets

me to rights – or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel”.

- 6 Philippians iv, 8: “. . . whatsoever things are true, . . . whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely. . . Think on these things.”
- 7 The hymn “Jerusalem” by Parry and Blake obviously informs Okri’s vision; his second anthology of poetry is entitled, *Mental Fight*. Blake’s well known verse reads: “I shall not cease from mental fight/ Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand/ Till we have built Jerusalem/ On England’s green and pleasant land.” Blake’s epic poem, “Jerusalem”, seems, in turn, to have been inspired by *Apocrypha 21*: “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” For Blake, Jerusalem (the True church) was the Bride and Emanation of Albion (the Eternal Man) and of Jesus in Eternity.
- 8 See Archie Mafeje, 2000. Africanity: A combative ontology. *Codesria Bulletin* 1.

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