Apprehending Global Civilisation in *The Magic Lamp*: Giving the World a New Literature

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Abstract

The argument in this article is that Ben Okri's ekphrastic *The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age* (London: Apollo, 2017) reveals an ontopoietic or heightened awareness literature of the "imagiNation", to borrow a neologism from Dieter Riemenschneider, the purpose of which is a Heideggerian transformation of our global intelligence through a mythic conjunction between poetic text by Okri and art images by Rosemary Clunie. In this new kind of literature, healing accrues from a creative rising above the unnatural boundaries that separate human beings from one another and from their globalised eco- phenomenological environments. Okri envisages a special brand of spatial- temporal coexistence to be found in the bordering of our state of consciousness with our subconscious mind, melding our past with our present. The article situates global civilisation within the notion of globalisation, terms that cover a whole range of distinct political, economic, and socio-cultural trends, embedded within which are ideological connotations that encompass regional, national, and international topographies as well as aesthetic, ethical, and psychological domains. Four excerpts from *The Magic Lamp*, in which Okri adopts a fabulist literary mode that invites comparison with the world of dreams—as suggested by the book's subtitle, *Dreams of Our Age*—serve to illustrate an international literature that tends to transcend the borders between the realist or mimetic and the fantastic or magical, by blending, juxtaposing, interposing, or contrasting the cerebral with realism, as happens during dreamtime.

Keywords: Ben Okri; global civilisation; *The Magic Lamp*; ontopoiesis/heightened consciousness; refiguring the literary; fabulation; dreams

Refiguring the Literary in Global Civilisation

In a conversation with Ainehi Edoro pertinently entitled "Giving the World a New Kind of Literature", a title which in itself invokes border crossings, Ben Okri asserts that, in terms of the trajectory of literature, he has "watched a literature rise from protest and self-definition, from anti-colonial, Africanist dimensions to satires and cries against the failures of independence, from prison writings and social realisms into something altogether different but into which all that has gone before has played a part. Now the literature is international" (in Edoro 2020).

Okri seeks to build a phenomenological, Heideggerian bridge from within our Age of Estrangement via a reconfigured international literary mode in which image–text creativity can help to lead us into a genuinely meaningful postmodern age. For instance, *The Magic*

Lamp: Dreams of Our Age opens up the imagination of the West to an Eastern sense of marvel, with genies emerging from lamps, illustrations of sacred Egyptian ibises and herons flitting across pages, and the jackal-headed god Anubis, weigher of souls against a feather in the afterlife, in a piece entitled "The Mystic Betrothal" (Okri 2017, 15–18); the legendary magic tree of our destiny in "The Star Tree" (103–106); the Judeo-Christian myth of how "we became outsiders" in "When We from Angels Fell" (107–11); an African ontology in "Bird Talk in a Tentative World" (11–14); and futuristic time travel in "*L'Épogue Magique*" (31–33), with its telling injunction to "Unveil Your Eyes" (33). It thus seems appropriate to follow Italo Calvino's (1992, 49) description of his own brief compositions and to refer to Okri's comparably ephemeral legends and images from folk literature worldwide that give narrative form to Rosemary Clunie's paintings as *petits poèmes en prose* (little prose poems). This collection recognises subtle forces connecting macrocosm with microcosm and intercontinental mythologies, ranging from those that link ancient Egyptian and Celtic myths to those of the Neo-Platonic firmament to the spirits of metal transformed in the alchemist's crucible (cf. Calvino 1992, 19).

Classification is always problematic with an experimental author such as Okri, whose works defy pigeonholing. Opting for the illusionary dream, Erica Wagner concurs: "Like dreams, these stories resist interpretation" (2018, 3). One could argue that these pieces extend Okri's own sub-generic category of "stoku" (cf. Gray 2016), an amalgam of "short story" and "haiku", but they are more condensed and more consciously transcendentally poetic. Wamuwi Mbao insightfully proffers the term "ambient literature" in describing the book's African "defence of magic as the vital energy behind life, an energy that cannot be summoned at will, but which instead appears in introspection". He elaborates, implicitly referring to Okri's imagiNation project: "The stories locate their politics in the realm of feeling: some characters express longings for worlds that have vanished, but a different set of characters in a different story are just as likely to remake a world that seems on the brink of annihilation" (Mbao 2018; cf. Gray 2018). The symbolism of both image and text reflects a complementary consciousness of the most delicate natural forces and abstract ideas of space and time.

Embedded in "globalisation" and "global civilisation" are ideological connotations that encompass regional, national, and international topographies as well as aesthetic, ethical, and psychological idioms. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Willem Scheuerman begins by highlighting globalisation's multiple connotations, noting that it covers "a whole range of distinct political, economic, and cultural trends". Despite the complexity, he rightly asserts that the concept "remains crucial to contemporary political and academic debate" (2018). Although this article focuses on a globalised imagiNation in Okri's fabulist[1] international literary experimentation, it is apposite to note that in contemporary popular discourse these terms seem all but synonymous with Westernisation or Americanisation, in terms of their political orientations and free market policies in the world economy.

Scheuerman points to the normative challenges of globalisation, noting that "the wide-ranging impact of globalization on human existence means that it necessarily touches on many basic philosophical questions" (2018). If in the context of "human existence" these philosophical questions pertain, as they seem to do, to social democracy rather than to universal truths underpinning great literature, a tacit assumption appears to be that the "haves" are obliged to pay closer attention to the "have nots" "with whom [their] fate is intertwined in ever more intimate ways" (Scheuerman 2018). In Okri's apprehension of

globalised civilisation, the binary logic and essentialist paradigms that prop up the West with its positivistic disciplinary approaches disappear.

And, while social theorists endorse Scheuerman's view that globalisation refers to "fundamental changes in the spatial and temporal contours of social existence" (2018)—where space and territory undergo a radical change that affects the temporal structure of crucial forms of human activity—engineers, such as Sunil Maharaj, celebrate the newer perspective of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Maharaj describes it as a "game changer", marked by breakthroughs in scientific fields "including robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, internet of things (IoT), quantum computing and biotechnology" (2018, 26). Such techno-scientific advances likewise seek to address eco-phenomenological crises: global warming and population explosion, with the attendant challenges of water shortages, food security, energy generation, housing and health issues, as well as education. The latter are aspects highlighted in the poetic prose extracts considered in this article.

This discussion does not seek to redefine globalisation or global civilisation, but rather to allude to its socio-cultural and technological impact on the growth of human consciousness worldwide. Yet, there is a distinct dichotomy between scientific and imaginative consciousness, as Edwin Muir pointed out in "The Poetic Imagination". Muir draws a distinction between technological and human progress (1949, n.p.):

> Applied science shows us a world of consistent, mechanical progress. Machines give birth to ever new generations of machines, and the new machines are always better and more efficient than the old, and begin where the old left off … But in the world of human beings all is different … Every human being has to begin at the beginning, as his forebears did, with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problems of good and evil, the same inclination to ask what life means.

In a statement that points to the mode of *The Magic Lamp*, beginning with an extract from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* lamenting any book that does not include pictures (a neat allusion to the collaboration with Scottish painter Rosemary Clunie), Okri at once endorses and modifies Muir's point of view about starting from scratch as did our forebears. He posits that "[i]n a sense the real literature of a people begins with the passing of writers into the realm of the ancestors. Literature begins with the dead. For that is when we can start to see the meanings of their works which may have been concealed from us when they were alive. Their body of work derives new authority from death. Then a literature begins to cohere" (in Edoro 2020).

Such ancestral consciousness would seem to eschew both the scientific and power impulse and invoke, instead, Bertrand Russell's theory of education, in which education is purpose-driven—to train not just good citizens of the state, but also "citizens of the world" (Lenz 2017, 11). These model individuals would be equipped to bring a globalised imagiNation perspective to the improvement of society through heightened consciousness—that is, through self-apprehension or ontopoiesis.[2]

This resonates with Okri's vision of a special brand of spatial and temporal coexistence to be found in the bordering of our state of consciousness with our subconscious mind, melding past and present. The contrary images of darkness and light in the Okri–Clunie text–image publication *The Magic Lamp* are part of an ancient, continuing, and public tradition. The elucidation "Dreams of Our Age", in the book's subtitle, evokes a heightened consciousness

that invests ordinary stuff with metaphysical conjectures. In the ancient philosophy of the East, too, as Brian Grassom reminds us, dreams take two forms: "one is illusion, and one is vision" (2016, 59). This article refers principally to the latter, "a harbinger of liberation", albeit that both types belong to the larger dream that is "dreaming in and through us" (59). There are also two basic kinds of consciousness: the first concerns "the objective study of the brain", while the second has to do with phenomenal consciousness—"where feelings come from"—according to David Chalmers (1996; in Papineau and Selina 2013, 19, 21). *The Magic Lamp* turns on both aspects of consciousness: causal roles (objective/clinical) and physical realisations (sensibilities).

An excerpt from "A Vanishing World" (Okri 2017, 19–22) serves to illustrate this Nigerian writer's interconnected conscious/subconscious awareness of the doom on the horizon wrought by globalised humanity: "Then there comes one riding a horse with a golden saddle. His eyes are blue from a long Atlantean journey. In his saddle-pack a host of stories like genies from lost temples and forgotten pyramids. He comes while our world is on its last page" (19). This exemplifies the nature of a transglobal and timeless imaginary. The final phrase—"our world is on its last page"—enunciates the theme. "I think," says Václav Havel, "there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended" (1995, 3). (Perhaps it ended when the first man landed on the moon in 1969.) This *petit poème en prose* is a cautionary tale about humankind's blindness to the end of time itself, to "the last page of our age" (Okri 2017, 22). The second paragraph depicts graphic signs of our times: "There is blood in our eyes and rape in the scent of history. Women are bruised at night across the cities and are abducted in the dry North.[3] Flowers are starved of pollen. There are oil spills in the guts of Dolphins and the fragrance of melted icecaps above the masts of polar ships" (22). This apocalyptic exemplum reflects one of the tragic truths of global capitalism, of world border crossings. It captures a dense and cryptic warning of the sixth extinction,[4] with implicit allusions to violence against women, human trafficking, fundamentalism, climate change, endangered species, industrial pollution, and holes in the ozone layer.

Yet all is not doom and gloom. In an artistic context, Okri, as a late-20th-/early-21st- century writer, moves beyond the Renaissance project of art as beauty, beyond the 18th- century separation of art and culture, and beyond the 19th-century aesthetic of art for art's sake, to a borderless art of global enlightenment. In *A Time for New Dreams*, he states that "literature makes us deal with something new and partly known". Foregrounding another game changer, he elaborates: "That is why we can't ask new literature to be like the old, to give us the same pleasures as those that have gone before" (2011, 62). "Good writing," says Salmon Rushdie, "assumes a frontierless [*sic*] nation"; "Writers who serve frontiers have become border guards". Suggesting that such policing is counter-intuitive, he adds: "[In] our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings. We know this by the stories we tell ourselves; for we are story-telling animals, too" (2003, 16).

As story-teller *par excellence*, Okri looks to fellow Africans to produce a new international literature that "*mirrors*, reveals, liberates" (2011, 62; emphasis added). With Africa's "weird resilience", he believes, "she will flower and bear fruit as the Nile once flowered into the Pyramids, or like the savannahs after the rains" (62). Here, Okri evinces high-order thinking or HOT-consciousness "imagiNation" writing, to borrow a coinage from Dieter Riemenschneider (2005), the purpose of which, like fabulation, is healing by rising above the unnatural boundaries that separate human beings from one another and from their eco-phenomenological environment.

Riemenschneider coined the term “glocal”, asserting that the New Literatures in English are “located at the interface of global and local concerns”; they create “a glocal literary discourse that establishes its very own imagiNation” (2005, 14). If one assumes, with Riemenschneider, that the “imagination” is to be found in a special type of spatial coexistence of our state of consciousness and our subconscious mind (15), then Okri’s “Life Is a Street Corner” is a simulacrum exploring the power of the imagination or intuitive creativity to create the glocal and unify states of consciousness.[5] In doing so, it transcends not only artificial cartographic borders between one nation and another, but also the countless borders between us and them, time and space, centre and margin, writer and reader, the “haves” and the “have nots”—divisions that sustain the Doomsday theme of both “The Vanishing World” and “Life Is a Street Corner”. Some, however, dismiss talk of the collapse of civilisation as we know it as that of the street-corner prophet warning that the end is nigh.

The thematic structure of “Life Is a Street Corner” progresses from precarious existence in the world to the possibility of an ideal existence. The third-person omniscient narrator opens with the implication that communal life is falling apart (Okri 2017, 63; emphasis added):

> A face is where roads *meet*. One road cannot make a city. It takes many roads to make life a fiesta.
>
> A face is where rivers *meet*. It is where times *meet*. Each person is a marketplace.

First articulating (dis)ease, the concluding lines culminate in the potentiality of a sentient utopian[6] vision (63–64; emphasis added):

> Life is a minaret. Life is a crowded square. A stock exchange. The winding shores of a river.
>
> Life is also eloquent in the pastel of a street corner, where silence *meets* destiny.

One could argue that the staccato domino effect of the cryptic final sentence masks a classic example of transcendental consciousness. In an analytical context, the use of the rhetorical device of anaphora, the repetition of “A face” and “Life” in these two excerpts, gives fresh meaning to familiar words. The conscious strategy of linking faces to roads, rivers, and time, on the one hand, and to cities, streets, and the marketplace, on the other, is subtly indicative of the multifaceted journey of life on planet earth. The reiteration of the monosyllabic verb “meet”, braiding the images together, foregrounds the shallowness of social coexistence in the global village. The symbolism of the corner, as a meeting place or crossroads, is enhanced by the multiple connotations of the abstract noun “life”. In its physical dimension, it is lived life accruing from global civilisation. Yet, ambiguity seems patent: life is “a minaret” (a call to prayer or to fundamental religion), “a crowded square” (symbolic of glocal and/or global overpopulation), “a stock exchange” (signifying mechanised materialism or commercial acquisitiveness), and “the winding shores of a river” (Nature writ large or life’s vicissitudes). “Life” can be transposed to embrace a metaphysical dimension prefigured in life as “a fiesta” (joyfulness or a *danse macabre*), in “the pastel of a street corner” (artistic or superficial creativity), but, ideally, it is “where silence *meets* destiny” (transcendental spirituality) (64; emphasis added). Here, the mythic conjunctions enlarge our understanding of the world. Such meditations on the global culminate in the imagined mirrored reflection of one’s face in familiar or glocal city facades, a “portrait” of that “delicate face” “made of all that dreaming, all that suffering. Beauty squeezed from time” (63). The sentiments, coupling suffering,

dreaming and beauty, invoke a conjoining of oriental and occidental aesthetics, serendipitously leading into the next prose poem to be discussed, “The Spirit Lifts”.

Sustaining the psychological crises of global civilisation, this prose poem can be seen as a modernisation of the classical Sisyphus myth,[7] as invoked in “I bear more weight in me, more troubles than the earth does … Weighed down by time and thought and all the obscurities of the light. Weighed down by my own eyes. Everything I see takes on density. I roll the great boulder of the earth with every thought” (87). The sombre tone of the narrating, experiencing “everyman” captures the all-too-familiar trials and tribulations of modernity. “Modernity,” says Sarah Lincoln, “is to be found in the self- regard of modern subjects, their attempt to make sense of their often confusing and alienating circumstances” (2012, 249). This follows Fredric Jameson’s view that modernity constitutes the impulse “to make sense of—to document and to order or aestheticize—the disruptions, dislocations, and disjunctions brought about by modernization itself” (quoted in Lincoln 2012, 249–50). As Lincoln points out, for Jameson, the way ‘“modern’ people feel about themselves” (250), and their effort to “make something coherent” out of their often profoundly ambivalent encounter with modernisation (wrought by global civilisation) and the promises and expectations it spawns, is that which represents the real “modernity” (Jameson 1998, 136). The debilitating predicaments of modernity’s mirrored reflection in “The Spirit Lifts” are spelt out in the opening paragraph: “My troubles are all around me. They are all in me. They are like the ochre of our sentient stones. I am weighed down by the buildings and the yellow earth. I have forgotten about breathing because I am always frowning. The flowers are gone from the edges of the green. The life and the light to me are lost. I stand on my feet, but in truth I am on the ground” (Okri 2017, 87). The rhetorical device of amplification—here, a quantitative piling on of the agony—is underlined by the syncopated alliteration of “life … light … lost”. The extract echoes the view of a growing number of writers that rather than becoming more resilient, the contemporary world is becoming more and more vulnerable. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the (dis)ease may only be the beginning of our problems.

Reflecting Shelley’s much earlier claim, in “A Defence of Poetry”, that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (in Leitch 2001, 717), the second part of this prose poem parts company with realist narrativity to introduce Okri’s own culture- bound propensity towards mythmaking. Inspired by the legends, myths, and fairy tales of Africa, this section serves to awaken or reawaken interest in our own perhaps suppressed or forgotten culture, thus implicitly constructing a discrete imagiNation (Riemenschneider 2005, 16). The reprieve is couched in the fabulist mode, which suggests “a freeing of the narrative act from the demands of objective presentation, and a new thrust in the sheer act of telling or confabulation”; it is a mode of telling that attempts to “enter or reconstruct arcane written or spoken records” of cultural mythology (Christie, Hutchings, and MacLennan 1980, 162). In this prose poem, amelioration accrues from “something” tentative and inexplicably mysterious: “*Maybe* it was the glimpse of colour. *Maybe* it was an unexpected breath. *Maybe something* beyond the limit of the air touched my inward eye” (Okri 2017, 87, 89; emphasis added). The narrator first elaborates on possible reasons for the curious mood swing, reiterating the idea of the unfathomable; it could have been “*something* within”, “*something* formless”, “*something* made of an unseen light”, “*something* higher”, “*something* like the clear spaces”, before climaxing in “*something* like *love*” (87; emphasis added). Thus, it is not mood-changing chemicals but the universal power of love that dissolves the “mountain of fear”—itself the catalyst of borders.[8] The poet speaker thus conceives of himself as a giant bird[9]—an archetypal symbol of freedom, of ascendance, of the coexistence of the conscious and subconscious mind, but also, in Africa, of body and soul: “My arms have turned to

feathers, my upturned face acquires the pure shape of a beak. As the air loves the sky, so I am soaring above the roof tops. My fears have been abandoned to the ochre of the earth" (89). At the turn of the millennium, Havel asserted that "we are going through a transitional period", when it seems "that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were rising from the rubble" (1995, 3). In the Okri excerpts, too, the unidentifiable "something" conveys the inexplicable—that which is beyond human understanding— while the qualitative amplification of this numinous experience of metamorphosis into a bird allegorises remediation via the transcendence of the soul, heightening the mythmaking.

Northrop Frye (1970) once reminded us of the way in which (good) storytellers break old moulds, while paradoxically being indebted to their predecessors. "Literature," Frye says, "is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, its mythical concepts, sun gods and the like, become habits of metaphysical thought" (1970, 294). That this immersion is insidious is implied in Frye's codicil: "In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images" (295)—and, I would add that this occurs whether the influences be written and objective, or oral and subjective.

This brings the discussion to "The Stoic's Season", which sustains the cult myth of globalisation, understood as humankind's response to or awareness of powers outside and beyond ourselves, to a wholly "other", be it "the numinous experience" or "the religious experience" (Larue 1975, 9, 10).

This piece is more poem than prose. Yet, once again, Okri adopts a fabulist literary mode that invites comparison with the world of dreams—as suggested by the book's subtitle, *Dreams of Our Age*—and that tends to transcend the borders between the realist or mimetic and the fantastic/magical, by blending, juxtaposing, interposing, or contrasting the cerebral with realism, as happens during dreamtime. Underpinning the fabulist mode, which not only deepens subject matter but also opens a newer set of parameters, is an inwardness built on a covert acknowledgement of Sigmund Freud's insight into humankind's spiritual deprecation and mutilation, where "schizophrenia can be seen in our society as a political inability to translate human values into significant action" (Christie, Hutchings, and MacLennan 1980, 161). R. D. Laing points to the relevance of Freud's perception in our time: it is "to a very considerable extent his demonstration that the ordinary person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be … The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of normal man" (1967, 22). With regard to fabulation in the globalised African context, Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings, and Don MacLennan offer a useful analogy, noting that "where romance writers were concerned with travellers in a real, through mythically tinged Africa, [fabulist] writers … know that today's explorers have only the region of the mind to traverse" (1980, 161).

In four short quatrains, "The Stoic's Season" poeticises the observed eco- phenomenological crises mentioned at the outset regarding techno-scientific advances of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, closing the hermeneutic circle by returning to the pivotal global concerns thematised in the metaphor of "the last page of our age" (Okri 2017, 19), quoted earlier. As with "The Spirit Lifts", this prosaic poem turns on the amelioration of life's vicissitudes, albeit through the ethics of integrity, faith, and reason, rather than love. The first three

quatrains catalogue why “[w]e’re all drowning with fear” (Stanza 3, l.3). Stanza 1 introduces the growing consciousness of global warming, food scarcity, and rampant hunger (82):

It has been rather dry of late
There’s not much food on everyone’s plate
Even in the marketplace
Hunger speaks on every face.

The term “dry” encapsulates climate change, deprivation, and lack of insight. Pared down to the plainest of englishes, this ditty sets the factual tone and poetic ploy of rhymed couplets. Significantly, the poem comprises *eight* such couplets, the mode invoking international symbolism: the Chinese symbol for eternity, science’s mobius strip depicted in Max Escher’s figure-of-eight ant-painting, inferred in the last line of Stanza 3: “This has been going on year after year”.

Stanza 2 tells of the resultant “misery” of global economic downturn, exacerbated by social media in our information age. The line “In the papers there’s economic doom” anticipates the global phenomenon of the generation gap in which the elderly lose faith (“The old have lost their creed”) and the younger generation are ensnared by one of the seven deadly sins—the result of global capitalism (“The young are devoured by greed” [Stanza 3, ll.9–10]). In *On the Art of Poetry*, the early classicist Horace explains the technique: “Such is the power of words that are used in the right places and in the right relationships, and [with] such grace that they can add to the commonplace when so used” (quoted in Dorsch 1965, 87). The closing stanza sustains the syntactic strategy. Paradoxically, the disconcertingly simple diction masks the tonal shift, introduced by the adversative “But”, reflecting its quasi-biblical evocation of the parable of the “seven lean years” (Stanza 4, ll.13–16; emphasis added):[10]

But in the garden called Integrity
Dwell two wise souls, with dignity
In *lean* years they kept faith with reason.
Lean years are the Stoic’s season.

The self-creativity of consciousness or spiritual awakening is where the artist achieves healing by rising above the unnatural boundaries that separate human beings from one another and from their eco-phenomenological environment.

Conclusion

This is a collection that links the internal world of past experiences with the external world of present sensations and, in linking them, produces the imaginative worlds of the poet’s mind. Whether expressed through text or complementary images, this is a book shot through with arcane wisdom, transmitted through myths, legends, and folktales, or via the collective unconscious that forms the basic cultural resources of all societies. The abstractions of Clunie’s paintings, arguably inspired by the parallel worlds in Okri’s award-winning *The Famished Road* (1991), coupled with Okri’s forever-new experimentation, have resulted in a style that is even more dialogical in its oppositions than usual and, for that reason, more compellingly experiential, creating a dramatic eidetic visionary effect. In a tacit allusion to Heideggerian philosophy,[11] Okri states: “[T]he book is both an allegory and a discovery; it allegories our times and the creative process, and it discovers a new functionality, a new alchemy” (Personal communication, 2018).

All the pieces discussed ultimately turn on a globalised world of myths[12] reflected in a litany of voiced or implied abstractions: suffering, dreaming, beauty, faith, integrity, patient stoicism. Like fabulation, "myth must be viewed as a literature that developed out of concern for survival and the desire to understand the implications of what it means to be human" (Larue 1975, 9). Gerald Larue summarises: "Myth may be understood as the human effort to discriminate between an understanding of life, not as bare existence, but as the relationship between the totality of body, mind, spirit, and the world—the effort to achieve harmonious relationships (peace) within the totality of one's environment" (9).

The excerpts illustrate the erasure of borders, situated as each is on symbolic street corners where such conversations about the state of existence are likely to occur among concerned citizens of the world. Pertinently, intensification of the interconnections throughout African societies and across the globe, facilitated by the development of information and communication technology, has increased the facility of the movement of ideas, discourses, capital, people, resources, and services in a very short space of time. These temporal and spatial shifts have had an impact on how language, culture, and work are organised and carried out by individuals in various contexts. In an economy which is increasingly a service economy, language, education, work, and culture have become key in the realisation of work tasks, but also in the production and marketing of a product or service. Thus, in global civilisation, emphasis is placed on language, culture, and conversation. Underlining his interest in global inclusivity in his "new kind of literature", Okri admits to his "cross-culturalism" (quoted in Gray 2012, 13; emphasis added):

> I am fascinated by similar threads that run throughout philosophy that appear to come from the primordial tradition. For example, visits to the underworld and trickster gods occur in literature from very many parts of the world. This is not because human nature is similar; it is more profound. These threads running through so many cultures give me a sense not of diversity, but of *one source*, a *unity*. Myths tell parallel stories. They enrich one another, and the future of the race depends on paying more attention to these streams that fascinate me and enrich the quality of life.

It is by the stories that we tell and are told that we may best imagine our better selves in a better world, where Heaven and Earth constitute a single indivisible unity, governed by cosmic laws. Okri explains: "[T]he metaphysical dimension to my work is something that comes out of the African tradition. There is something about that tradition which, because it doesn't see reality as clearly demarcated as is currently seen in the West, because we have this whole thing about realms of reality, [this] already gives you a metaphysical view of life, even if you are an atheist" (quoted in Elmhurst 2012). For Okri, boundaries between the supernatural world and that of humans are non-existent. His work initiates a dialogue with global creative artists in its intertextuality, diversity, richness, and complexity. Each defining point is fundamentally postmodernist, in the sense of opening up known socio-political and historical horizons and dismantling certitudes.

Notes

1 The term "fabulation" was coined by R. Scholes (1967).

2 Ontopoiesis refers to transcendental consciousness or heightened awareness. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (2012, 3) defines ontopoiesis as the deepest crystallisation of the logos of life in individualising being/becoming, and the cosmic factors that are primary in bringing in the

initial and final universal laws and regularities through which human intentional consciousness operates.

3 An allusion foreshadowing the Boko Haram kidnapping of schoolgirls in northern Nigeria in March 2018.

4 Dubbed the sixth extinction, or the Anthropocene's process of annihilation, also the New Pangaea Project, Elizabeth Kolbert aligns the era with "the period when modern humans first migrated out of Africa" (2014, 210). Paleo-biologist John Alroy has argued that the sixth extinction and, more specifically, that of the demise of the megafauna, is a "geologically instantaneous ecological catastrophe too gradual to be perceived by the people who unleashed it" (quoted in Kolbert 2014, 234), while David Papineau, in his *New York Times Book Review* (1992), asserts that "[t]he central message of Edward O. Wilson's stirring new book [*The Diversity of Life* (1992, ii)] is that *Homo sapiens* is in imminent danger of precipitating a biological disaster to rival anything in evolutionary history". Tom Jones and Ellen Stofan insist that "previous mass extinctions were caused by giant impacts or massive volcanic eruptions; this one is primarily caused by humans" (2017, 99).

5 See Ingarden (2013).

6 Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), a "placeless place", conceptualises a better world and hope for social change. *Eutopia* means "no place" rather than the good place it has come to signify.

7 Albert Camus famously wrote of King Sisyphus, fated to follow a routine of rolling a boulder to the crest of a hill, only to have it repeatedly rolling down again. The essay concludes: "One must imagine

8 Bill Ashcroft suggests that "[b]orders exists because of fear, and that fear is increasing" (2019, 5). He notes that border mania, concretised in the building of walls and fences, escalated after World War II, with borders increasing from seven to 15 in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell, to at least 77 today. This, he argues, reflects the terrified response to globalisation. One could also see this as a reference to Donald Trump's US/Mexican project.

9 "The ability of birds to soar into the sky has made them sources of wonder and fascination to human beings since time immemorial," says Anthony Stevens (1998, 360). Seen as messengers between Heaven and Earth, akin to the Yoruba god Ogun or the classical Mars, they are vehicles for the ascension of the immortal soul.

10 This phrase alludes to biblical wisdom writing: the parable of Pharaoh's dream of the seven fat cattle which ate all the grass and the seven thin cattle which, in turn, ate the fat cows. Joseph's interpretation of the dream led to his rise to power: his saving of one-fifth of the harvest, which sustained Egypt through the seven lean years, followed by the testing of his Hebrew brothers (Genesis 41: 1–14), underlines the word "integrity" in the poem and extends to honesty, faith, and due diligence.

11 Heidegger "believes that, at its greatest, art 'grounds history' by 'allowing truth to spring forth'" (1977, 65). This art "works in the background of our historical world … by partially embodying and so selectively reinforcing an historical community's implicit sense of what is and what matters" (Thomson 2019).

12 Myth is derived from the Greek *muthos*, meaning "word" or "speech", "the thing spoken", "the tale told", that which "is not to be understood as philosophy in the sense of detached reflection or a search for 'truth', nor as basic science in that it grew out of repeated experiences and observations", as Gerald Larue cautions in his *Ancient Myth and Modern Man* (1975, 9).

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