

When chaos is the god of an era: rediscovering an *axis mundi* in Ben Okri's *Starbook* (2007)

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The article begins by contextualizing Ben Okri's concept of reality within a traditional, cultural framework. A brief discussion of the trajectory of African writing and the standard classifications of the mode of the Okri *oeuvre* as either non-realist or magical realism follows. The argument challenges both appellations in reference to my recent interview of the author (16 February 2011) in which Okri redefines 'reality' in terms of the full keyboard of life. The stance, ultimately, eschews classification of a paradise lost and regained, thus avoiding any classification that might contradict the mercurial unfoldment of the Spirit in *Starbook* (2007). This article proceeds to provide the rationale for the title chosen by quoting from both Okri's *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988) and *Starbook* (2007), and by linking the ideas of chaos and consolation as integral to enlightenment. Short discussions on cosmic consciousness, transpersonal experience, the sublime, the myth of eternal return and what is understood by an *axis mundi* follow – drawing principally on Mircea Eliade and Gerald Larue and showing how these concepts can be applied to a reading of Okri's eleventh prose work.

Key words: African realities; *axis mundi*; chaos; cosmic consciousness; Mircea Eliade; Ben Okri; *Starbook*; the full keyboard, the myth of eternal return

The injunction to readers (reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Looking Glass*) in Ben Okri's most recent publication, *A Time for New Dreams* (2011: 83), conceives of texts as simulacra [mirrored images], erasing the boundaries between author/reader that may exist where symbols obscure essence through a seeking of correspondences:¹

Don't just read the words. Go into the mirror. That is where the **real** secrets are. Inside. Behind. That's where the gods dream, where **realities** are born. (my emphasis)

Compare Mircea Eliade's ([1954] 1989: 5) correlative: **reality** is conferred through participation in the 'symbolism of the centre', through an *axis mundi*.

¹ Gilles Deleuze (1983: 52-52) redefines simulacra as 'dissimilitude' or 'disparateness'. More pertinently, one can deduce that he contends that 'reconstitution' lies at the heart of a postcolonial aesthetic because simulacra offer ceaseless mutations and series of variations that violate the hierarchies and, importantly, the stasis and unity of colonial aesthetics.

An interview with Okri (16 February 2011) concerning my perception that his view of **reality** is innately optimistic – as encapsulated in *Songs of Enchantment* when, from the silence of ‘unblindedness’, Azaro’s father in conversation with his son, a ‘spirit-child’/an *abiku*, is moved to muse that ‘The light comes out of the darkness’ (1993: 287) – elicited the following telling response:

No, I wouldn’t call it optimism so much as realism. But, it is important how one defines realism. Realism takes in what is seen, felt, touched; what is unknown and unseen. The primordial African spirit views reality from a wider spectrum [than the Western one]. It is informed by the metaphysical sense embedded in all the great traditions, but particularly in the African tradition. The African world view takes in the hierarchy of metaphysical beings which, in turn, leads to a number of essential questions: What constitutes one’s reality? Is one’s reality true only for that individual? Isn’t our reality limited to what we are taught to see?²

His basic assumption can be construed as one ‘of a world of wholeness that is obscured with illusion as a result of dualistic thinking’ (cf. Milstead’s [1998: 5-6] definition of Zen Buddhism). Okri elaborated on his perception of reality with an *a priori* analogy:

A piano with only five keys is a reality. But, if we include all the keys, the white keys and the black keys, this is a different reality. **So reality depends on our cultural perception of the keyboard of life.** Using the full keyboard, Azaro’s father discovered a new perception of fundamental questions, especially the question of what constitutes the nature of reality. Is it outside oneself or fatally linked to human sensibilities? How does one construct reality? One cannot truthfully tell an African tale according to Jane Austen’s reality or an early nineteenth century English tale according to an African reality. Dialogue with the West is thus difficult, because reality is not universal. (my emphasis)

This excerpt highlights Okri’s interest in difference rather than commonality. His premise entails defining the ‘universal’ (if such a term retains an application) from within a given cultural framework, ‘which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness’ (White 1973: 551). His point about Austen – that her reality differs essentially from his African one – is the really important point, and the one that sheds light on *Starbook*’s (2007) non-dualistic, allegorical form of realism.³

² Jerry Fodor (2011: 24) likewise remarks: ‘The long and the short is: one sees what one believes at least as much as the other way around. One views the world from the perspective of the “paradigms” to which one is antecedently committed.’

³ As Anthony Chennells (2006:49) observes: ‘The first coups of the 1960s and the uneasy slide into dictatorship and rule by corrupt elites in so many African countries made it even more important that the possibility of an ideal Africa should be represented as the real Africa. Allegory is often used to present this ideal Africa and, although in Western literary theory allegory is traditionally seen as opposed to realism, in the African novels of these decades the allegorical becomes a form of realism because Africa’s diverse realities are displaced by an

This paper attempts to explore some of the ambiguities as well as the possibilities of interpreting an Okri novel. Each of his novels has its own questions to ask; and each finds its own ways of asking them; each challenges the reader to be self-critical. 'Each, in short, has its own way of being a novel' (Williams 1986: 6).⁴

The paradigm shift from socialist realist modes to more Africanized forms of representation epitomizes the growth of West and East African writing: from Ousmane Sembene (*God's Bits of Wood* [1962] 1970) to Ayi Kwei Armah (*Two Thousand Seasons* 1978), and from Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*A Grain of Wheat* 1967) to Okot p'Bitek (*Song of Lawina* 1966 and *Song of Ocol* 1967) or Margaret Ogolo (*The River and the Source* 1994). By contrast, it has been argued that Okri's writing has, from the start, traced a single trajectory: non-realist or magical realist. In an article entitled 'Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri's Writing', Ato Quayson (Gurnah 1995: 144), for instance, makes a plausible case for what he calls the author's 'non-realist' form of representation:

Ben Okri's writing is particularly relevant for assessing **non-realist narrative modes** in African writing because he focalises several aspects of narrative through a prism of indigenous beliefs . . . it manages a careful balance between fantasy and **reality**.⁵

More characteristic of criticism of Okri's works and prompted by his Booker Prize novel *The Famished Road* (1991), other critics prefer the term '**magical realism**'. Angelique Serrao's estimation of *Starbook* is typical: 'Okri mixes a range of styles which successfully weaves a story of magical realism with African myth to develop a novel that is truly unique.' (2010: 2) If magical realism defines the shift away from a linear perspective of reality towards a world

idea of Africa that allegory can contain. Behind the clamour proclaiming and demanding new national loyalties that have replaced the competition of empires, the calmer, more authoritative voice of a united continent can be sounded, a sort of immanence that African fiction, which often uses allegory to further its polemic, can represent.'

⁴ I defer to Michael Williams's Austen text here as both Austen and Okri have, to my mind, undoubtedly elevated the state of the novel.

⁵ Quayson (Gurnah 1995: 144) continues: 'His ghostly writing raises fundamental questions about narrativity as well as about the relationship between literature and what it purports to represent . . . not only is it highly poetic and surreal . . . it manages a careful balance between fantasy and reality.'

view that undercuts traditional empirical, rational tenets and embraces not only holistic patterns of reality, but the **chaotic** and unexpected manifestations of human experience, one can hardly quarrel with this all but canonical reading. However, these are terms that Okri tacitly refuted in our recent conversation.

As the opening excerpts show, his refutation has to do with his perception of **reality**, which is closer to the Platonic. Asked if there was an element of the Platonic notion of the ‘real’ and the ‘really real’, he responded: ‘Yes, but also the Scandinavian concept of reality’.

Pertinently, in the *Prose Edda of Snorri*, a representative philosophic introduction to Norse cosmogony, the seeress is summoned from her grave in a piece entitled ‘Völuspå’ (‘The Prophecy of the Seeress’). She tells the assembled gods of the first-created things: ‘In the beginning how the heavens and earth/Rose out of Chaos . . .’ (Hollander 2008: 1)⁶ And in ‘The Lay of Rig’ (from the *Poetic Edda*), ‘the god Heimdall [Rig] was the progenitor of the three human estates: slaves, freeman, and nobles. This mythologic, gnostic and heroic poem celebrates the institution of monarchy, the princely races of the motherland. Heimdall, “the One Shining above the world” is the warder of the gods’ (Hollander 2008: 2 n.2). Clearly, *Starbook* – its title, epic qualities and parallel estates – is predicated on a symbiosis of both these skaldic verses.

Although the author has emphasized the realistic dimensions of his work,⁷ his concept of realism is cultural relativist and must be seen to embrace the ancestors, myths and legends, which are an integral part of the real world, of urban life and of rural life and of life beyond

⁶ She [also] tells how man is given the breath of life, how a golden age of innocence (among the gods) ends with the coming of the Norms (the Fates), who wreak havoc upon the world (Hollander 2008: 1).

⁷ ‘Okri, one of the most important new voices in contemporary African literature in English, is very conscious of the post-independence realities of African societies; hence his works are often satirical and critical of the various political and economic crises that have plagued African countries since the end of the colonial period . . .’ Killam & Rowe (2000: 198).

life. Local beliefs are thus part of the real world, not parallel with, but simulacra of it. Robert Bennett (1998: 2) coincidentally summarizes this aspect, when he remarks:

Okri has tried to keep his work from being simplistically labelled as magical realism. In particular, he emphasizes that he is not trying to create a world of magic and myth that exists next to the real world as much as he is trying to extend our sense of the real world itself to include myths and magical events within it.

Elsewhere, I have referred to Okri's spirit-in-life beings as leading sentient double lives (see Gray *The English Academy Review* 26(1) May 2009: 45). In *Starbook*, Okri states: 'Only in light can truth be found . . . Beyond is where it really begins' (2007: 118), which is itself an effective synopsis of what he writes in *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 12–13):

The greatest inspiration, the most sublime ideas of living that have come down to humanity come from a higher realm, a happier realm, a place of pure dreams, a heaven of blessed notions. Ideas and infinite possibilities dwell in absolute tranquillity.

Before these ideas came to us they were pure, they were silent, and their life-giving possibilities were splendid. But when they **come** to our earthly realm they acquire **weight** and words. They become **less**.

The discussion now focuses on weightless ideas: the chaos and sublime inherent in Okri's reality.

Evoking such contiguous contraries a couple of decades before *Starbook*, Okri (1988: 163) writes:

. . . when chaos is the god of an era, clamorous music is the deity's chief instrument. [Ede] didn't fully understand the thought, but it illuminated why he felt drawn to music that had clear, burning melodic lines like forces of nature.

Taken from his tellingly entitled short story 'When the lights return' in *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), the extract reflects the cosmic consciousness exemplified in the author's spirit-in-life fictional characters. Here, the professional singer, Ede, is making his way through the detritus of fly-infested slums (possibly Lagos) to his mortally ill, rejected lover. In a moment of contrite self-reflection and remorse, leading to the realization of how profligate he has been in his love for Maria, a fragile, fey beauty, Ede experiences a partially understood attraction to the music emanating from a nearby record store, to the 'burning melodic lines like forces of nature'. This illumination points to an indissoluble connection with the cosmos and cosmic

rhythms, a connection to a certain ‘valorization’ of human existence – to borrow a term from Eliade ([1954] 1989: vii). Stuart Holroyd (1989: 84–85) explains the operation of such transpersonal experience and its resultant epiphany:

Intellectually, it is an experience of illumination or revelation, a visionary insight into “the meaning and drift of the universe”, and understanding “that the life which is in man is eternal; that the soul of man is as immortal as God is; that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world is what we call **love**; and that the happiness of every individual is in the long run absolutely certain”.

Starbook likewise features a love relationship – this time between a dying prince and an ethereal maiden from an ephemeral tribe of artists, whom he secretly watches as she dances with a handful of close girlfriends, communing with nature beside an unspoilt river somewhere in Africa. This time, however, the relationship⁸ ultimately leads to a numinous coupling that bears fruit to ensure the continuation of the prince’s royal line despite his flight, and death shortly thereafter. (The lovers had been spied upon by jealous suitors for the maiden’s hand.) His was an ‘enchanted illness’ (p. 25), a ‘fatal happiness’ (p. 5); hers the ‘tragic happiness’ (p. 79) of a lost ingénue. Describing the ecstasy of their eventual love-making as the couple lie on the shore near a bank of flowers, Okri encapsulates the cyclical moment thus:

. . . they caught glimpses of what they had been to one another in time past beyond memory and what they would be to one another in the beautiful time to come beyond death, in another life, where the true story of their love would seem to begin . . . slightly frightened by the depth of love they saw deep within the other. It seemed a love too strong for mortal life, a love that would make itself the sole purpose of living, a love that was like eternity gazing into the mirror of eternity; a love that would do nothing but simply exist in the blissful light of the other as in the light of the sun after the darkest night. (2007: 394)

The epiphany of the lovers’ first kiss is described as a kiss of many lives – the ‘unimaginable dissolving of one soul into another’ (2007: 397), or an *axis mundi*.

⁸ Gerald Larue (1975: 9–10) explains: ‘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 . . . Myth can also be understood in terms of man’s response to or awareness of power outside and beyond himself – to the wholly “other”, to what Rudolph Otto has termed the “numinous experience” or what William James has called the “religious experience.”’

Despite the differences between these two pairs of lovers, what these characters share is nostalgia for a periodic return to a mythical time at the beginning of things beyond life. Theirs is a sacred history, transmitted through mythology. Their cultural reality embraces the ebony and the ivory of Okri's keyboard of life. The prince, like Azaro in *The Famished Road* trilogy, is an *abiku*, a spirit child who understands good and evil: 'He was very handsome and fair and bright and the elders suspected that he was a child of heaven, one of those children from another place, who was not destined to live long' (p. 4). She, likewise, 'was not a child from here . . . She is from a star no one has seen yet' (p. 101). In an earlier act of 'self-healing' (p. 125) following her initiation into womanhood, the love-sick maiden had voyeuristically created 'an inexplicable sculpture of a dying prince' (p. 211). 'The crude product of nature, the object fashioned by the industry of man, acquire their reality, their identity, **only** to the extent of their participation in a transcendent reality' says Eliade (1989: 5). The life of the prince, by extension, parallels or acknowledges reciprocity between a 'real' or lived life and the precious stone carving. Thus his life acquires or is raised to a spiritual dimension, revealing an original ontology. Killam and Rowe (2000: 198) observe:

Okri translates his remarkable knowledge of African cultures into a rich array of images and symbols. His interest in the relationship between the natural and the supernatural worlds leads to a negotiation between the two paradigms that characterize his approach to the discussion of human existence. For example, the image of the *abiku*, the spirit child that dies soon after birth only to be reborn again and again, recurs in Okri's work . . . Although the *abiku* image has been used by Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark . . . [He] subverts its ordinary connotations to posit contemporary meanings and an extension of its semantic implications. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro is the *abiku* child who, continually aware of spirit companions demanding his return to the spirit world, shifts among worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn, a **trinity** that is unique in the African world.

Early in *Starbook*, the hidden prince poses **three** life questions to the maiden and her answers provide a comparable cosmogonist **trinity**:

"First," he said "where does the river end?"
 "In the wisdom of God," she replied humbly . . .
 "Second . . . where does all our suffering end?"
 "In the happiness that lies beyond all things," she replied, as if in a trance . . .
 "And finally, what are we all seeking?"

“The kingdom,” she replied, “which we are in already, which we have got, and which is our home.” (pp. 10--11)

And, in *Mental Fight*, in a poem Okri subtitles ‘an anti-spell for the 21st century’, the injunction in a section called ‘Turn on your light’ is to recapture the subliminally real:

We are greater than our despair.
The negative aspects of humanity
Are not the most real and authentic;
The most authentic thing about us
Is our capacity to create, to overcome,
To endure, to transform, to love,
And to be greater than our suffering.
We are best defined by the mystery
That we are still here, and can still rise
Upwards, still create better civilisations,
That we can face our raw **realities**,
And that we will survive
The greater despair
That the greater future might bring. (1999: 61)

Here, the gradation of infinitives – ‘to create, to overcome,/To endure, to transform, to love,/And to be greater than our suffering’ foreshadow the dialectic above – surely these testify to the innate optimism that Okri prefers to call ‘the full keyboard’ of African life. Okri’s valorization of human existence is thus metaphysical, subscribing to the notion that the cardinal problems of metaphysics could be ‘renewed through a knowledge of archaic ontology’ (Eliade 1989, viii), as in the Scandinavian *Edda* intertexts. Eliade explains:

For the man of the traditional and archaic societies, the models for his institutions are believed to have been “revealed” at the beginning of time, that, consequently, they are regarded as having a superhuman and “transcendental” origin. (1989, xii)

The contest of the individual to gain and enjoy integrity – an *axis mundi* – is celebrated in a kaleidoscope of spiritual colours and forms in the Okri *oeuvre*. At its first level this contest, in *Starbook*, seems to be a struggle to rise above the shadows of the governors general who tried to cow the bodies and minds of so many ‘primitive’ Africans through the slave trade. Higher up, this fight/flight for inner illumination takes us to a more universal level of existential truth: to the archaic ideology of ritual repetition which, as the opening extracts show, and as Okri⁹ himself confirms is, at once, cyclical and vertical. Unsought and without warning, the flight is

⁹ Interview with Ben Okri, 16 February 2011, London (Rosemary Gray).

ecstatic and consoling, accompanied by an inner sense of belonging to and participating in an abundant living reality of cosmic dimensions beyond *logos* as witnessed in the consummation of love, already discussed. In *Birds of Heaven* (1996, 5), Okri elucidates:

Yes, the highest things are beyond words.

That is probably why all art aspires to the condition of wordlessness. When literature works on you, it does so in silence, in your dreams, in your wordless moments. Good words enter you and become moods, become that quiet fabric of your being. Like music, like painting, literature too wants to transcend its primary condition and become something higher. Art wants to move into silence, into the emotional and spiritual conditions of the world. Statues become melodies, melodies become yearnings, yearning become actions.

As with Okri's earlier novels, *Starbook* is couched in mythopoeic tropes of art, sculpture, dreams, silence, and music. Consider, for example, the statue of a dying prince, mentioned earlier, and the maiden's people, whom the prince intuitively as 'a tribe of artists',

. . . an underground tribe, who lived and created invisibly, not disdaining others, but knowing that the only way they could serve the land was to live their own way, with their own freedom, following their own magical and fluid laws, guided by constant intuitions and directives of the spirit, in accordance with the needs of the times. (p. 41)

In a later synoptic passage illustrative of true living, Okri writes:

All things **came** from art and fed back into it, as far as the tribe was concerned. Art was their religion, science, **dream**, temptation, seduction, recreation. Art was their hell and their heaven. Every cataclysm or disaster, every crisis, came out of art or was absorbed into it. Plagues were seen as a failure of their art in some way, a failure to listen, to see, to **dream**, to interpret, to prophesy, to envision, to be silent at the oracles. (p. 94)

Thus dreams, too, are pregnant with meaning as in: 'It was a dream about a golden heron lost in its own dream' (p. 130); but 'Not all things glimpsed in a dream are clear. All dreams retain an enigma. Not all events glimpsed in the great book of life among the stars are clear. Only while dreaming does the dream make sense. When one awakes, that which made sense suddenly becomes strange, tinged with mystery' (p. 346). Then, on his deathbed, silently listening 'in the sublime fire of the centre of the golden circle' (p. 354), the suffering prince is accorded a revelation in a dream which, at once, illustrates the pivotal tropes collectively and

functions as an encapsulation of living the full keyboard of life, the reality of the mercurial unfoldment¹⁰ of the Spirit in this novel:

If he were to sum up the paradox of his being, in those moments in the forest, under the tree where he rested, and passed into the blue gaps, and saw distant revelations, he would say this: How do you survive the worst with the highest? What is the **music** of this paradox? What is its song? And can you show anyone its shadow, so that they can see the spirit of such a conjunction of the **sublime** and the **horror**? And yet, for all time, in the present and future story, the prince found within him the unquenchable mood of an immeasurable laughter. And all this was born on the night when, unknown to him, a father [the king] gazed with love on the form of his sleeping son. (p. 355)

Concomitant with the notion of sublimity, of the symbolism of ‘the centre of the golden circle’ as corollary to the horror of chaos (here symbolized by a grotesque masquerade, a disturbing sculpture, the suitor, Mambo’s, malicious rumours of the maiden’s coupling with a unicorn, and the ‘white wind’ of slavery) is the archaic belief in the celestial archetypes of geophysical structures. In response to the maiden’s answers to his three questions (quoted earlier), the prince

caught his breath. For the first time in his life he knew that deep inside **agony** there is a **sweetness** that is beyond compare. Only those who venture into such a dark find such a light. Deep in the pain is beauty from **the high mountains of the sublime**. (2007: 10)

Eliade (1989: 12) provides elaboration on the beauty of the sublime:

The architectonic symbolism of the Centre may be formulated as follows:

1. The Sacred Mountain – where heaven and earth meet – is situated at the center of the world.
2. Every temple or palace – and, by extension, every sacred city or royal residence – is a Sacred Mountain, thus becoming a Centre.
3. Being an *axis mundi*, the sacred city or temple is regarded as the meeting point of heaven, earth and hell.¹¹

There is a single setting in Okri’s *Starbook*, epitomizing such an *axis mundi*:

In the heart of the kingdom there was a place where the earth was dark and sweet to taste. Anything that was planted grew in rich profusion. The village was built in the shape of a magnificent circle. And in the centre of the circle stood the palace of the king. Four rivers met in the forest around the village. The shrinehouse was at the edge of the village and the path

¹⁰ Ernest Holmes (1919: 78), in the context of Heaven (the result of correct thinking) and Hell (the atmosphere of false thinking), defines ‘unfoldment’ as ‘the birth of ideas coming forth from Mind’.

¹¹ Eliade cites the examples of India’s Mount Meru, Siam’s Mount Zinnalo, Mesopotamia’s Mount of the Lands, Palestine’s Mount Tabor, and the Christian Golgotha, *inter alia*..

that ran past it led to the outside world. The forest was dense about the village, and it seemed that those in the heart of the kingdom lived in a magic **dream**, an oasis of huts and good harvests in the midst of an enveloping world of trees. (p.3)

The action shifts between the evanescent village, where the maiden lives, and the king's palace – 'at the centre of the circle'. In the former, in a style that has echoes of the Chivalric Romance,¹² the prince becomes an invisible apprentice to the maiden's father, the Master craftsman or 'magus of the tribe' (p. 82) and later duels with the maiden's most monstrous suitor [Mambo]; in the palace, he is confounded by 'the many slaves', the 'numerous servants', the 'many wives' (p. 11) of his father, the king, himself a benevolent despot, given to raucous laughter in his intuitive recognition of the paradoxes of life (of his corrupt and scheming councillors amid plenty). Okri, however, quickly disabuses the Western reader of life being an idyllic medieval romance. Reminiscent of Blake, Okri highlights the contraries of life embedded in my title and integral to his perception of reality in a meta-narratorial passage:

Chaos was a deep law, applied judiciously. Order was its obvious counterpart. Asymmetry was a great law, if used with a sense of great balance.

The tribe did not favour such simple things in its art as order, balance, harmony. These were easy, and had been fully explored for generations. The tribe had advanced to the higher harmony of broken cadences, discord as beauty, warring elements, violent storms flashing pure lightning of fleeting beauty that cracks the soul asunder till one glimpses illumination. It favoured tactical rawness, indirection, eyes where the navel should be, for the navel is a kind of eye, and the eye is a kind of navel linking us to the known world. It favoured disjointed metaphorical thinking; fusion of unthinkable elements. The greater the discord, the greater the artistry required to bring forth the highest beauty and, paradoxically, the greatest simplicity. (pp. 95--96)

The narrative of *Starbook* is suggestive of ritual repetition linking us to the world's navel. This is an ancient, yet paradoxically postmodernist story, which recites a legendary story; it is an old story within a new story. The novel opens unequivocally with these words: 'This is a story my mother began to tell me when I was a child. The rest I gleaned **from the book of life among the stars**, in which all things are known' (p. 3). Towards the end of the final part of

¹² M. H. Abrams ([1957] 1999, 35) notes: 'Its standard plot is that of a quest undertaken by a single knight in order to gain a lady's favor; frequently its central interest is *courtly love*, together with tournaments fought and dragons and monsters slain for the damsel's sake; it stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honor, mercifulness to an opponent, and elaborate manners, and it delights in wonders and marvels. Supernatural events in the epic had their causes in the will and actions of the gods; romance shifts the supernatural to this world, and makes much of the mysterious effect of magic, spells, and enchantments.'

the novel – Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen of this four-part novel, in a mock authorial intrusion, Okri poses the question: ‘How did this tale come down to my mother, this tale that she began to tell me when I was a child?’ (p. 415) He then invites the reader to participate in/experience ‘a new kind of drama’ (*ibid.*), composed by the maiden’s father, now on the verge of death, which coincides with ‘the swan song of the tribe in its elegiac stage’ (*ibid.*). The injunction raises the reader’s horizons of expectation: ‘Listen wisely with your souls, not with your eyes or ears . . . If you enter through the magic gate, if you walk through the encampment of the tribe . . . ’(p. 416).

The core story itself is as pithy as it is brief:¹³

You will find a place alive with art in every corner, art in the square, art all around the shrines. You will find a place alive with constant creativity. Such was the place the prince encountered as he entered the encampment of the tribe, disguised as a humble man, according to his principle of the heron, in quest of a maiden.’ (p. 417)

Embedded in the drama is the mythical story of eternal return. French philosopher, Michel de Certeau (1984: 186), states: ‘Our society has become a recited society, in three senses: it is defined by stories, by citations of stories, and by the interminable recitation of stories.’ Book Four, the last in *Starbook*, entitled ‘The Alchemy of all things’ concludes by reiterating the myth of eternal return and the notion of an *axis mundi*:

What more is there to tell? Just fragments in the book of life. All stories lead to infinity. There is no end to them, as there is no beginning. Just an epic sensed in the unheard laughter of things. Just fragments seen in the murky **mirror** of mortality, when bright things shine momentarily in the brief dream of living. (p. 422)

This, then, is an African tale that shows that freedom is not a destination, a stasis to be reached, but an ongoing cyclical and vertical journey. Gerald Larue (1975, 1 & 10--11) reveals the complexity inherent in the workings of embedded theophanic or revelation myths:

¹³ As if to explain the 422 pages of this novel, which some bloggers have found tedious, Serrao (p.2) hyperbolizes: ‘Every page, every paragraph and every sentence contains a separate metaphor, which can become tiresome to read. Simplicity is clearly not something Okri is trying to achieve – instead he jam-packs adjectives into every line, just like an epic poem, forming an absolutely beautiful piece of writing.’

For the most part, the mythic antecedents of what we inherit are lost in complex patterns of the past. We cannot always know what persons or groups become catalysts of change or stabilizing influences. Historical lines are broken; the lacunae are enormous . . . people [in ancient times] . . . did not consider the world from the point view of “I/it” relationships. But rather on “I--thou” terms . . . All life was seen in terms of relationships. Seasons came and went because ancient mythic patterns were repeated in a cyclic rhythm. As seasonal gods had risen and fallen in power and influence “in the beginning” that rise and fall was cyclically and seasonally reflected.

Here, as elsewhere in Okri’s works, silence and love are the keys to enlightenment. Ben Brown (2007: 2) sagely observes:

This is a vision of a paradise both found and lost.

...

Starbook is a novel at “the mercy of ultimate mysteries”. Okri does not wish to solve these mysteries, he reveres them too much for that, and instead seduces the reader with a rapt recounting of the infinite within the particular.¹⁴

And, as Okri notes in *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 7):

At best our cry for meaning, for serenity, is answered by a greater silence, the silence that makes us seek higher reconciliation.

I think we need more of the wordless in our lives. We need more stillness, ore of a sense of wonder, a feeling of the mystery of life. We need more love, more silence, more deep listening, more deep giving.

When the angels of the Bible spoke to human beings, did they speak in words? I think the angels said nothing, but they were heard in the purest silence of the human spirit, and were understood beyond words.

Jan Carew’s (1985: 180) tribute to fellow African voyeur, the late Alex La Guma, seems apposite to this starbook of life:

For you, art and literature were the lightning rods catching the incandescent glare of truth and transmitting it not only to your own people but to people all over the world who are struggling to make the world a better place to live in.

Anita Sethi’s review in *The Independent* (Sunday 26 August 2007) perceptively points to the thrust of this novel: ‘Okri deliberates on how one **ought** best to read and interpret life.’

To conclude, in contrast to socialist realist novels that ask the reader to **think** more clearly, Okri aims to educate both the mind **and** the spirit. He prompts us to look at ourselves honestly

¹⁴ See also Gray, R. 2007. ‘Domesticating infinity’ in Ben Okri’s *Mental Fight* and *Astonishing the Gods*. *The English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*. 24 (1): 71-84.

and critically, to examine our inner motives, to be self-reflective, to go beyond. As with an Austen novel, ‘the “text” initiates and controls – but partially, never wholly – the response in the “reader”; and the “reader”, in responding to the “text”, produces an “interaction” that is more than the “text”, or at least in some respects different from it’ (Williams 1986: 3).

Okri notes that ‘reality depends on our cultural perception of the keyboard of life’. From a philosophical perspective, his use of the notion of reality is elusive, mercurial – especially as he links it to ‘perception’, thus giving an idealist twist to his position (cf. Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* or ‘to be is to be perceived’). Okri adopts a cultural relativist view, so that understandings of ‘reality’ which are available to traditional African thought were not available to a Jane Austen or to early nineteenth-century British hermeneutic modalities.¹⁵ Yet this account implies that the reverse would pertain equally; in other words, Okri is not dismissing Western paradigms so much as seeking to recuperate neglected African cosmogonies. Although he disclaims the possibility of universal experience, his articulation of African mind, heart and soul is so trenchant that he does in fact allow a greater degree of universality. He allows more Westerners to hear the music of the full keyboard, with its major and minor keys.

¹⁵ Hayden White (1973: 550 & 551) observes: The multiple realisms of European literature over the millennia were possible because ‘so much clearly formulable and recognized community of thought and feeling remained . . . that a writer engaged in representing reality had reliable criteria at hand by which to organize it’. Only in the early twentieth century, ‘in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster’, did writers adopt ‘a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness’. In 2011, Jerry Fodor rejects Robert Kurzban’s (*London Review of Books* 2011: 24) assertion that ‘Our psychological phenotype [roughly catalogue of our innate mental traits] is pretty much what you would expect it to be if it was selected for adaptivity to the environment that it evolved in. Therefore our psychological phenotypes are “massively modular”; therefore there is no such thing as the mind or the self; and . . . we are all self-deluding hypocrites’.

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