

‘A lucid stream of everywhere-ness’ in Ben Okri’s *Wild* (2012): A postmodern perspective

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Abstract

The argument begins by claiming that the phrase, ‘a clear lucid stream of everywhere-ness,’ taken from Ben Okri’s *The landscapes within*, at once encapsulates the postmodern theories of complexity and relativity and evokes a cosmic dimension and a striving for *Dasein* [authentic human existence] that inform his poetic vision in his latest collection of poetry, *Wild* (2012). It proceeds to argue for the complexity inherent in the notion ‘postmodernism’; then discusses selected poems in terms of modernity’s curious dilemma of ‘just now’ negating the preceding ‘just now’, that the French philosopher Jean-François Leotard talks of, treating recurring motifs of change, transformation and continuing presence. This includes a discussion of the two poems, dedicated to the memory of Okri’s late mother and father respectively, that bookend the anthology, contextualising them within postmodernity. The article concludes by re-invoking its own abstract title in ‘Towards the Sublime’ in terms of Leotard’s definition, before briefly assessing the import of Okri’s latest collection of poems.

Keywords: Ben Okri; Chaos theory; *Dasein*; postmodernism; *The landscapes within*; Theories of Everything; *Wild*

Taken from Ben Okri's second novel, *The landscapes within* (1981), the phrase 'a clear lucid stream of everywhere-ness' serves to define a postmodern alignment with the theories of complexity and relativity, coupled as it is with the coalescence of time and space in: 'Past and present and future disappeared' (p. 55) and '[t]he whole universe rolled itself into a crystalline moment: and time vanished. Sea, night, sky: all hazed over and became one' (ibid.). The mixed metaphor and transferred epithet in 'everywhere-ness' and 'lucid stream' neatly encapsulate the cosmic dimension of heightened moments, of conscious awareness, of 'the awakening of consciousness from the dream of matter, form and separation. The end of time' (Tolle 2005, 55) or *ontopoeisis*¹ and a striving to achieve *Dasein* (authentic human existence) through consecrated production inform Okri's poetic vision in his latest collection of poetry, *Wild* (2012a).

Far from evoking a modernist grand narrative, 'everywhere-ness' is embedded in postmodern, non-dualistic complexity, as in Brian Arthur's (2012, 165–166) explication of the interrelationship of everything. This is an interrelationship between the complex approach and total Taoism in which there is, paradoxically, no inherent order. 'The world starts with one,' Arthur explains, 'and the one become [*sic*] two, and the two become [*sic*] many, and the many led to myriad things' (ibid., 65). In scientific terms, this is the mode of fractals or small, repeating, but distinct patterns of the natural world (the irregular regularity of the repeated five florets in a cross section of a cauliflower head, for instance). In postmodernity's Chaos theory that studies the order underlying apparent randomness (see Sardar and Abrams 2000, 82–83) [as in Taoism], so too in Okri's 'lucid stream of everywhere-ness' the universe is perceived as vast, forever mutable, yet kaleidoscopically self-similar ('self-similarity implies that any subsystem of a fractal is equivalent to the whole' [Swanepoel 2007, 445]).

The epigraph for this newest collection of poems is from Heraclitus, the early Greek philosopher (c. 500 BC) who maintained that all things in the universe are in a state of constant change and that the mind derives a false sense of permanence of the external world 'from passing impressions of experience' (*Oxford dictionary of allusions* 2001, 299). The closing stanzas of Okri's poetic rendering of the inexorability of mutability in the telling entitled 'Heraclitus' Golden River' reads:²

It is natural to want calm places
Where stillness grows,
It's natural to want
Virgil's spreading beeches.

But the river flows, and so must we.
Change is the happy god Heraclitus
Glimpsed in the golden river.
Spread illumination through this darkening world,
Spread illumination through this darkening world.
No change is good; dancing
Gracefully with change is better. (p. 94)

Postmodern concerns with process, participation, surface, idiolect and interpretation are at play here. The apparent tension between the intertexts, Virgil's bucolic *Eclogues*

and Heraclitus's *Fragments*, is reconciled in the latter's philosophy of 'universal flux' on the one hand, and 'unity of opposites' on the other, both timelessly foreshadowing postmodernity, and effectively 'spread[ing] illumination through this darkening world' (ibid.). The repetition of this line mimics or repeats the ecosystem of fractals already discussed and referred to in poetics as *metagage* (repetition that rings the signification of particular words). There is, too, a symbiosis between Arthur's (2012, 166) concept of complexity: 'We are part of nature ourselves, we're in the middle of it. There is no division between *doer* and *done to* because we are all part of this interlocking network' and the postmodern tropes that permeate Okri's selection. Consider, for example, the complex metaphors: 'the safari of dreams', 'the wings of death', 'the great abyss', and 'the colour of dawn' from the poem 'Begin with a leap' (Okri 2012a, 11–12); or the startling personification in 'The Fifth Circle' where 'screams in the air sizzle my flesh'; 'History tramps on my nerves' and 'The kettle yells' (op. cit., 65). In an interview with Sophie Elmhirst (2012b *New Statesman*), Okri describes the creative – and by extension, analytical – process: 'The poem is never complete in the mind. It emerges and then it's like an act of unveiling. The unveiling is the longest and most difficult part of it.'

These multiple concerns point to the complexity inherent in the term 'postmodern' itself, which seeks to defy demarcation as does Okri's anti-cartographical neologism 'everywhereness'. Both concepts require but resist unveiling! 'Postmodernism means working without rules in order to find out the rules of what you have done' (Appignanesi and Garratt [1995]2007, 50). Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garratt (op. cit., 4) explain:

Postmodernism is a confusion of meanings stemming from two riddles ...

It resists and obscures the sense of modernism.

It implies a complete knowledge of the modern which has been surpassed by a *new age*.

One of its principal characteristics is thus indeterminacy, which typifies Okri's: 'There was an extended hissing that heightened and became a primeval sound in the mind. The transport was beyond words or colours' in *The landscapes within* (p. 55). A comparable indeterminacy or deferred meaning inheres in the title *Wild*, explained on the dust jacket as 'an alternative to the familiar, where energy meets freedom, where art meets the elemental, where chaos is honed. The wild,' says Okri, 'is our link to the stars' (cf. Gray 2013: When chaos is the god of an era: Rediscovering an *axis mundi* in Ben Okri's *Starbook* [2007]).

Such a link to the stars is articulated in 'The Golden House of Sand', a praise chant to Martin Luther King that culminates in a plea for the sublime:

They want to taste the fruits

Of the earth, in music, art, science

And dreams. They want to calibrate

The depth and height of man's spirit. (Stanza 3, p. 39)

In this quatrain, the subliminal or 'what we can conceive of – the infinitely great, for instance – but is not within our power to represent exactly' (Appignanesi and Garratt

2007, 22) is attained through an esemplastic imagination conjoining the senses and sacred geometry. The beginning of stanza 3 is more prosaic, but no less profound:

They do not want to be defined.
They don't want to be limited.
And they want fire refined.
And they want to love who they want,
And for it not to be an affront,
They do not want to beg for their humanity,
Or for the right to be
Creative, different, or surprising,
Or *wild*, or defying
Of boundaries. (ibid. emphasis added)

'The Golden House of Sand' becomes a symbol of the rhetorical ambivalence that is Africa: crisis and opportunity, deprivation and abundance, threat and mystery, alienation and identification. As the poem suggests, it is a continent of intense loss coupled with the comforting knowledge of belonging (Gray 2007, 194). And, just as participation is a key to postmodernity, so too is the poet, a native-born Nigerian domiciled in London for the greater part of his life, a participant. The antithetical play of what [black] people do and do not want is, not surprisingly, subverted in the erasure of boundaries. The subtext refuses to endorse notions of race in terms of artificial divisions by colour. The poet's stance is unbounded as in the key term 'everywhereness', which implies a temporal and spatial remove from the specific; we all belong to the human race.

Pivotal concepts throughout this anthology are lack of limitations, a breaking of boundaries, recognition of a common humanity. 'The interplay between perception (or perspective) and reality,' says Van Niekerk (2012, 16), 'is a central concern of postmodernism (the difference between modernism and postmodernism lies in how each *perceives* things – they are different worldviews.'

A comparable postmodern reconfiguration of the human condition occurs in stanzas 1 to 3 of 'The Soul of Nations':

The soul of nations do not change;
They merely stretch their hidden range.
Just as rivers do not sleep,
The mind of empire still runs deep.

Into the river many waters flow
The merging and conquest – history's glow

...

Classes overflow their rigid boundaries
Slowly stirring dreary quandaries
Accents diverse ring from its soul,
A richer music revealing the whole. (Okri 2012a, 28)

Here, the sublime is systematised in Claude Lévi-Strauss's semiology of culture. In his theory of Structural Anthropology, Lévi-Strauss (Aggignanesi and Garratt [1995] 2007, 67) argues that language is the system that permits thinking: 'Thinking is the "system output" that occurs in the interaction between human subjects (situated within culture) and the environment (nature) which is the object of thinking.' However, the interplay between historical conquest and naturalistic tropes defies the kind of binarism Lévi-Strauss conceives of between nature (non-human) and culture (human). In the closing couplet, Okri suggests that the demise of imperialism will be brought about by a coalition of the physical and metaphysical:

History moves and the surface quivers
But the gods are steadfast in the depth of rivers.

Our perceptions are shaped by, and in turn shape, our histories (Van Niekerk 2012, 17). Language is the medium through which this shaping of perception is possible; it is through language that we materialise our ideas. 'At its strongest,' assert Appignanesi and Garratt (2007, 110), 'the anthropic principle suggests that human consciousness is somehow "fitted" to the universe, not only as a component but as an observation necessary to give the universe meaning.' The utopian vision, here, is not a destination but a mystical, yet crucial, horizon, an observation point from which to re-imagine the African Diaspora and to contest history. Just as it is in 'Lines *In Potentis*', a poem that invokes an *axis mundi* to facilitate transformation:

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,
The harmonisation of different
Histories, cultures, geniuses, and dreams. (Stanza 1, p. 26)

...
Tomorrow's music sleeps
In our fingers, in our awakening
Souls, the blossom of our spirit,
The suggestive buds of our heart. (Stanza 3, p. 27)

This poem resonates with subtle allusions to Mircea Eliade's *The myth of the eternal return* (1989) in these two stanzas, and to Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' and John Keats's odes 'To Autumn' and 'To a Nightingale', shot through with a Keatsian negative capability³ in the final stanza:

And while Autumn dallies
With the West wind
And the weeping nightingales,
And Winter clears its sonorous throat
At the Antipodean banquets, preparing
For the speech of hoarfrost

And icicles conjured from living breath,
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, p. 27)

And, as in Keats's 'Hyperion': 'One moon with alteration slow, had shed/ Her silver seasons four upon the night', in 'Lines', the affect is 'flow', reinforced by the cycle of all four seasons: 'Spring waits', 'Summer lingers', 'Autumn dallies' and 'Winter clears its sonorous throat'. The implied shift is 'away from *ideas* in the mind to the *language* in which thinking is expressed' (Appignanesi and Garratt 2007, 56).⁴ In this context, one can argue that the Latin *in potentis* in the title has flowed into English, which itself flowed into a global *lingua franca*, the language of travel, the airways and space, like the music of 'undiscovered'/ 'undefined future orchestras' that transcends borders (cf. Gray 2001: The music under the stone: Alex La Guma's *A stone country*). In an evocation of William Blake's aphorism: 'without contraries, there is no progress', nightmares are juxtaposed with illumination; boredom with brilliance; slave trading with a dance of souls; division with unity; and chaos with fiestas. By implying that each of the initial concepts is a contrary to be transcended, Okri achieves a dialectic of release. An overarching cosmic dimension, evoked in the omnipresence rather than omnipotence of the all-seeing eye of Ra/Sol/the sun and, by implication, this son of the earth and the skies, informs transfiguration in this poem.

For Okri, Heaven, Earth and Mars constitute a single indivisible unity, which is governed by cosmic law. Okri (2012b, s.p.) elucidates:

... the 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, already gives you a metaphysical view of life, even if you are an atheist.

Boundaries between the supernatural world (the domain of Nature) and that of man do not exist. Like George Gamadmer, Okri considers a person's horizon (his/her historicity and linguistically constituted context) to be 'the production ground of all understanding rather than a negative factor or impediment to be overcome' (Linge 1997, xiv).

Postmodernism in Okri can perhaps be best understood in Jan Szymyd's (2011, 29) synopsis of Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka's phenomenology, involving

a permanent search for new cognitive possibilities for especially metaphysical and anthropological problems, effective avoidance of being locked up in one unchanging intellectual horizon and paradigm, complete openness to new options and cognitive prospects, scientific and philosophical discoveries, far-reaching tolerance for different ideas and intellectual tendencies.

Okri's third anthology begins and ends with poems dedicated to the memory of his late mother and father respectively, a bookending (to use Okri's own terminology) or sequencing that reflects the postmodern notion of 'being-towards-death'. Martin Heidegger deploys this term in his discussion of understanding and meaning. 'Being-towards-death', Heidegger claims, is pivotal in achieving *Dasein*. In the opening poem, 'My Mother Sleeps', for example, Okri recalls both the deprivation of childhood ('sleeping in dark corners', 'Or on wooden chairs in the green/ Darkness', or on 'cement platforms near the gutter') and the blessedness of his mother's 'kindly eyes' and 'parted lips' that soothed his 'anxious soul', sitting in a chair, 'watching our/ Future become our past' (2012a, 9–10). Then, evocative of the adage 'The child is father to the man', the eulogy closes with 'Now that she sleeps/ In my battered armchair/ ... / I am watching over her./ My turn has come round at last' (op. cit., 10). This is a poem 'not about her passing away; it's about her presence,' Okri insists, a presence that is continuous, that is indicative of a transcendent awareness of the eternal Now, as in his 'clear lucid stream of everywhere-ness', with which this article began. The implication of the philosophical hermeneutics is that happiness can only be attained if one is attuned to the finitude of existence, aware of one's own historicity, interconnected.

Similarly informed by the nostalgic imperative, but imbued with greater complexity, the penultimate stanza of 'O, Lion, Roam No More', dedicated to his often estranged, late father, appeals to the lawyer Silver Okri for guidance: 'Into my blood/ Plant the secrets of the way/ That I may live/ More wisely every day./ Imbue me with your myth,/ Solid, silvery one,/ That I be attuned/ With the magic of the sun' (op. cit., 96). The heartfelt injunctions, here, reflect postmodernism's cultural relativism (with its measure of permanent uncertainty) and complexity in which a host of independent memories act in consort with one another to produce spontaneous self-organisation as in the closing lines to stanza 1: 'Be the invisible warrior/ In my life's upward fight/ As I strive for more love/ And for more light' (ibid., 95).

So, far from degenerating into dirges or psychodynamic crises of memory and karma, these two poems are full of presences that permeate the volume, seemingly allowing the poet to participate in life: to live his own life more fully or, as West (1996, 101–102) expresses it, 'Living while one is alive'. 'We don't have a clearly demarcated sense of death in Africa,' Okri explains. 'We have a graded sense of the passing away of people' (2012b *New Statesman*). Both poems reflect the postmodern condition of stepping out of time, of experiencing 'a moment ... / In timelessness' (*Mental fight* 1999, 3). 'The splendour of the moment,' Russell Dicarolo (1999, xv) muses, 'so dazzles us, our compulsive chattering minds give pause, so as not to mentally whisk us away to a place other than the here-and-now. Bathed in luminescence, a door seems to open to another reality, always present, yet rarely witnessed.' Dicarolo (ibid.) reminds us that Abraham Maslow called these 'peak experiences'.

It seems apposite to complete the hermeneutic circle by returning to the notion of *Dasein* or authentic human experience such as the sublime. This article therefore closes with a poem in which Okri invites us to participate in such a 'peak experience', or is that a 'peep experience'? Stanzas 1 to 3 of 'Towards the Sublime' are particularly pertinent:

Have you noticed that in all true
Transformations what emerges
Is stranger than before,
And higher, richer, magical?

It is as if mass yields
Light, or pure
Vision given upward
Form beyond form –
Transcending all the laws
Of its previous condition.

And so chrysalis into butterfly,
Water into wine, death
Into life, weight into
Flight, burden into illumination,
Enchantment into the freedom

Divine: (p. 56)

Embedded in notions of holism, interconnections, order out of chaos (where chaos signifies a kind of order without periodicity), and the idea of an autonomous, self-governing nature, this complex poem encapsulates Eckart Tolle's proem to *The Power of Now* (2005) in which he declares: 'You are here to enable the divine/ purpose of the universe to unfold.' In Okri's perception of the sublime, the successive transformations – both physical and metaphysical – invoke an expansiveness when we sneak a peek into the eternal realm of Being itself, if only for an ephiphanic moment, 'a moment/ In timelessness' already mentioned, when we come home to our True Self: 'To the sublime within,/ Given new being./ Beyond measure. /A joy to the ages' ('Towards the Sublime' p. 56).

In what, then, does the complexity of Okri's art inhere? It is perhaps his recognition that 'the lucid stream of everywhere' is the intaglio of intangibles that embody the hopes and longings of a people adumbrating a national culture. It is the spirit of the incommensurable that determines the basic issue of cultural experience (Gray 2007). Thus, as in Paul Ricoeur's 'no place', the paradoxical connotation of 'everywhere' is that it is the only place through which the utopian imagination can contest the past and reshape the future – to 'rewrite the space in which [we] slept' (1998, *Infinite riches*). Okri closes *A time for new dreams* (2011, 146) with the following:

All great cultures renew themselves by accepting the challenges of their times, and, like the Biblical David, forge their vision and courage in the secret laboratory of the *wild*, wrestling with their demons and perfecting their character. We must transform ourselves or perish. (emphasis added)

And, as Homi Bhabha (1990, 4) puts it, albeit in a different context:

The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating new sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation.

Notes

- 1 Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka’s doctrine of *ontopoeisis* is, essentially, conscious heightened awareness. It is the path of consecrated action enabling the management of one’s life through spirituality, and making it possible to make responsible human choices and to find one’s way within the axiological complexity of contemporary existence.
- 2 Heraclitus was born in Ephesus, Ionia, Greece in 534 BC and died in 474 BC. A Greek philosopher of Ephesus (near modern Kuşadası, Turkey) who was active around 500 BCE, Heraclitus propounded a distinctive theory which he expressed in oracular language. He is best known for his doctrines that things are constantly changing (universal flux), that opposites coincide (unity of opposites), and that fire is the basic material of the world. The exact interpretation of these doctrines is controversial, as is the inference often drawn from this theory that in the world as Heraclitus conceives it contradictory propositions must be true. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/> [accessed 7 July 2013]).
- 3 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.’
- 4 Twentieth-century philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, following Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) endorsed this semiological focus on the structure of language as in the formal school of Structuralism, making a distinction between *la langue* (language – the synchronic system) and *la parole* (the word and its usage – diachronic).

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