

Of magic: Ben Okri's *The Mystery Feast* (2015) and *The Magic Lamp* (2017)

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Abstract

Ben Okri does not seem to see African art in terms of 'magic', yet he constructs a magic/science/myth poetics in *The Mystery Feast* (2015) and *The Magic Lamp* (2017). In these two texts, intuitive creativity and the magic of being bring about a triangulated synthesis of rational, non-rational and supra-rational domains. In his discussion of magic, James Frazer conceives of two principles of magic: "like produces like" and things once in contact forever retain that influence. As a system of natural law, magic, science and religion form the triumvirate for Frazer. In its exploration of 'magic', this article adopts and adapts Frazer's views on the nature of magic in his acclaimed *The Golden Bough* ([1922]1991, 11–60). The approach braids the magic, science, and myth triad for a reading of select ekphrastic prose-poems or 'proems' from *The Magic Lamp*, each a microcosm reflecting a measured and orderly universe. The argument is supported by Okri's storytelling aesthetics in *The Mystery Feast*. Each *petit poème en prose* [little poem in prose] in *The Magic Lamp* is a codification of *naturalia* and *mirabilia* [the natural and the marvellous]. The broad framework upon which the discussion is premised, is the visible/invisible theory of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1928-1961).

Key words: magic; James Frazer; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Ben Okri; *The Golden Bough*; *The Magic Lamp*; *The Mystery Feast*

Introduction

In his discussion of magic, James Frazer conceives of two principles of magic: "like produces like" and things once in contact forever retain that influence. As a system of natural law, magic, science and religion form the triumvirate for Frazer. In its exploration of 'magic', this article adopts and adapts Frazer's views on the nature of magic in his acclaimed *The Golden Bough* ([1922]1991, 11–60). The approach braids the magic, science, and myth triad for a reading of select ekphrastic prose-poems or 'proems' from *The Magic Lamp*, each a microcosm reflecting a measured and orderly universe. In contradistinction to Sir James G. Frazer's 'magic, religion, and science' chronology, which he sees as distinct points of a triangle ([1922]1991, 711), Ben Okri constructs an interlaced magic/science/myth poetics in *The Magic Lamp* (2017). Here, as in *The Mystery Feast* (2015), intuitive creativity and the magic of being bring about a synthesis of rational, non-rational and supra-rational domains. This mythic conjunction is seen in lines from his epigraphic poem entitled, "All that we do" that introduces his discussion on storytelling in *The Mystery Feast*:

Like the spider we turn
All things into ourselves.
We bend the light
Of time into fables. (Stanza 3, p.2)

What this suggests, is that storytelling is both timeless and inherent in human nature, a reflection of natural law. Then, supra-rationally or paradoxically, personal agency is wrested from us by the enigma of ‘reality’:

Beyond our mind, reality moves
Unknowable like the darkness
Before creation. (Stanza 4, p.2)

The arachnid simile in Stanza 3 reveals the kind of natural magic Okri conceives of as governing a story-making beingness. An experiential scientific aphorism from the same book underlines this subconscious activity: “We incubate stories like maggots in rotting meat. We incubate stories like spores” (32, no.15). The micro-organisms – maggots and mushrooms – hidden from normal sight allude to the magic, the mystery behind the cosmos that, in turn, parallels the uncanny reciprocity implied in, “In every moment we are part of the infinite stories that the universe is telling us, and that we are telling the universe” (8). Okri’s aesthetic of magic thus seems to be an intriguing admixture of Western magical innovations and indigenous African Shamanistic realities as indicated in his response to the contemporary dominance of/ reverence for science and technology: “At the heart of all science – its experiments, the theories, its mathematics, its discoveries, its interpretations – is the story instinct” (ibid.). To reveal the truth of our times, Okri builds on a socially conscious objectivity, arguing that “The scientific mind would be impossible without the story DNA, without the story-seeing brain cells” (ibid.). Invoking an African philosophical truism, he states that, “Every human being immersed in the cyclorama of reality is implicated in the cosmic story-making quality of reality” (8). More tentatively, he suggests first that “Maybe this story-making quality of reality is what constitutes the heart of our existence” (8). Just as the delicate web woven by the spider is temporary in its fragility yet lethal, so too is the storytelling quality of being both temporal and potent. “Maybe this story-making quality of being,” Okri muses, “is the principle magic as well as the principle illusion of our lives” (9).

That the art of magic is virtually inseparable from human curiosity, is widely evident in cultural mores and religious beliefs throughout the world. Aligning himself with Shamanistic tendencies, Okri reminds us that “In ancient Africa, in Celtic lands, storytellers were magicians. They were initiates” (24). The opening gambit in Lewis Spence’s fascinating book, *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain* ([1945]1999), mirrors this view, “The tradition of the arcane and the mysterious cleaves to certain races so naturally as to make it seem an inherent and inalienable possession” (11).¹ The writers of antiquity, Okri explains, “understood the underlying nature of reality, its hidden forces” (2015, 24). H.A. Reyburn (1936, 135) argues for the ubiquity of the practice of magic despite “the derision cast upon it” by science, and “the condemnation it receives” from religion. The irony is, of course, that natural magic is inseparable from science, while religions everywhere are predicated upon belief in the magical. Echoing Gerardus van der Leeuw’s *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933, 349 ff.), Mircea Eliade (1954, 22) argues that world mythologies hold that “all religious acts have been founded by gods, civilizing heroes, or mythical ancestors”. And there exists a symbiosis of religious myth and natural scientific magic as a couple of random examples show. Consider Christ’s miracles; transubstantiation; immortality; belief in the divinity of kings, popes and other leaders,² on the one hand, and the natural magical transformation of chrysalis into butterfly; the tiny acorn becoming a giant oak tree; speciation;³ fractals; DNA; and cosmic reality, on the other. The adage, *quod ubique*,

semper, et ab omnibus creditus [what (is) everywhere, (what is) always, (is) believed by everyone], seems to pertain.

Although Okri does not seem to see African art in terms of ‘magic’, he constructs a magic/science/myth poetics in *The Mystery Feast* (2015) and *The Magic Lamp* (2017). It can be argued that all fields of human endeavour involve magic or aspects of magic, where the principles of thought upon which magic is based – to use James Frazer’s science-based classification – are those in which “like produces like”, or where “an effect resembles its causes”. And then there are those principles in which “things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed” (*The Golden Bough* 1991, 11). In accordance with mathematical processes of combinational analysis, Frazer calls this first principle the “Law of Similarity”, which is imitative or mimetic; the second principle is the “Law of Contact and Contagion”, reflected respectively as “homeopathic magic” and “contagious magic”. Copenhagen (2015, 10) reminds us not only that Frazer famously linked “magic, religion, and science” in *The Golden Bough*, but also that Frazer described his acclaimed study as “comparative mythology”, thus universalizing it.

In terms of religious festivals and cultural rituals, Eliade (1954, 22) proposes that their effectiveness accrues from acts exactly repeated in accordance with mythical models “performed at the beginning of time by a god, a hero, or an ancestor” – an instance of the Law of Similarity. If magic is interpreted in the context of that which the magician or medicine-man practices, and both the Laws of Similarity and Contact have universal application, that is, if they apply equally to human actions and inanimate nature, then ‘magic’, Frazer states, “is a spurious system of natural law”, if a “fallacious guide of conduct”. In other words, the notion of ‘magic’ – and, by extension, myth – is, at once, a “false science” and “an abortive art” (11).

If one’s interpretation of magic is limited to magicians or sorcerers as practitioners, as that of Reyburn and others seems to be, and little distinction is made between the conjurer or illusionist, and the necromancer or wizard, this begs the question: Where do the seekers after the power to *know* fit in? What of the lovers of truth such as the philosopher, the poet, the mystic, the scientist and followers of the world’s many religious mythologies? Frazer makes a useful distinction between “theoretical” magic based on a system of natural law that governs the sequence of events, practised by the scientist, and the “practical” magic of the magician, the illusionist or the primitive sorcerer that involves a set of precepts which human beings observe [and repeat] so as to “compass their ends” (11 ff.). As Frazer maintains, the latter is always an art and never a science.

The impulse behind the quest of the mythmaker – whether creative artist, philosopher or theologian – is contemplative knowledge, inspired by love, the laudable purpose of which, as Bertrand Russell attests, is “delight or joy or ecstasy” (Lenz 2017, 9). In this context, Susan Greenwood (2009) proffers a theory of magical consciousness; and this pertains to writers like Ben Okri. For Okri and Greenwood, magic has to do with the workings of the human mind in terms of an expanded awareness or what the late Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka calls ‘ontopoiesis’ rather than with socio-cultural explanations, such as ‘magical realism’⁴ (a term often used by critics of the Okrian *oeuvre*). Expanded consciousness or ontopoiesis embraces the self-creative

activity of consciousness. This resonates with the brand of magic encountered in Ben Okri's works in general and in his *The Magic Lamp* (2017) in particular. This Nigerian-born Londoner reveals himself to belong to the class of seekers after a higher order: the ecstasy of contemplative knowledge transmuted into ekphrastic proems, that is, image and prose poems. Akin to the Augustan concept of *curiositas* [quality of being careful, scrupulous or fastidious], each *petit poème en prose* [poem in prose] is a codification of *naturalia* and *mirabilia* [the natural and the marvellous]. Each suggests ways in which we might recover the primordial *substantia vitae* [substance of life], to appropriate William Eamon's terminology. Each prose poem or 'proem' is a subtle philosophical statement on natural magic that Eamon defines as "the science that attempt[s] to give rational, naturalistic explanations of the occult forces of nature" ("Natural Magic and the Secrets of Nature" 1994 Chapter 6, 9). For Eamon, as for Okri, "the basic assumption of natural magic [is] that nature teem[s] with hidden forces and powers that could be imitated, improved upon, and exploited for human gain". One could claim then that "the quintessence, separated off from the dross ... through distillation" (ibid.) functions as a metaphor for the reformation of clamorous postmodern society. Okri's alchemical 'proems', fused with Rosemary Clunie's images, help to redefine 'magic' and portend the possibility of a palliative to restore human vitality.

The thrust of this discussion, therefore, is not so much on the black arts of wizards and witches, or the Ovidian metamorphoses that herbal and other concoctions and incantations are believed to bring about, although the latter does feature; it concerns the magical interrelationship among [natural] magic, experiential science and myth, be it religious or socio-cultural. For instances abound; we perpetuate the magical myth of the sun rising and setting, yet the scientific fact is that the earth rotates on its axis, while the sun remains static. The transformation of chrysalis into butterfly and snakes shedding their skins are overt examples of natural magic, observable by scientific methods and leading to myths of transcendental symbolism across cultures and belief systems. Okri describes the butterfly as "A living testament/ To the sublime within" ("Towards the Sublime" 2012, 56).⁵ He cites this as an example of "true/ Transformation" that is "higher, richer, *magical*" (ibid.; emphasis added). In contrast to Reyburn who focuses on the "pretended art" which "seeks to control the course of events" (136), and who states that science and religion are "competitors" of magic, this article takes its cue from Okri's intuitive creativity, seeing magic, science and myth as a triad, as braided together, or as akin to a Pythagorean triangle. Transformation, Okri asserts, is itself at once "magical" and "Divine"; as he observes, the birthing of the butterfly transcends "all the laws" of its "previous condition" (56). This magical science, in turn, lends credence to the religious myths of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast and of the promise of eternal life. The focus now turns to the ways in which this theoretical argument can be used as a lens to interpret selected proems from *The Magic Lamp* (2017).

Select Proems from *The Magic Lamp*⁶

In the proems illustrative of the nature of magic, selected for discussion in this article, Okri resuscitates the Italian renaissance's attitude to curiosity that affirmed the value of inquisitiveness about nature. This is an attitude that is perhaps more familiar in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins that seeks to reveal the inner essence or inscape,⁷ that is, the medieval cultural ideal of virtuosity [*virtuositas*] of nature. It is also reflected in Post-Expressionism/ Magical Realism of art critic, Franz Roh (1925).

“L’Époque Magique”

In his “L’Époque Magique”, a republication of the poem, “The Age of Magic”, from his third anthology, *Wild* (2012, 72–73), Okri raises the cultivation of “virtue”⁸ to a high art. Set beside the river Thames that intersects the city of London, the piece enumerates a multitude of wondrous occurrences in a time zone that brings to an end “the dark age of iron” (31), presumably symbolizing the contemporary era of mechanistic materialism. Mysteriously transported across “a magic line in time”, the third person narrative voice is able to see beyond the veil, where the stars in the firmament appear “brighter”; colours have “fragrance”; and, as morning breaks, the children of the poor see “blinding flashes of a yellow angel’s wings”. In this higher order thinking or HOT consciousness with the sensibilities of the narrator and his companion at their peak, nature is stylized into hyper-reality: feet tingle, a mermaid sings, a beggar levitates, and, satirically evoking Dante’s mode in his *Divine Comedy*, a dead poet recites “forgotten terza rimas in reverse”. Invoking the myths of the river Styx and the philosopher’s stone, we witness an alchemist “on a barge”, whose incantations and “black powder” (31) turn a dead pigeon into gold in a parodic allusion to Ovidian metamorphosis. Predicated on origination, ingenuity and a magical consciousness, the poem concludes the following afternoon with an amazed Romany child’s vision of a woman “laced with blues and reds” sprouting “beautiful wings” (33). This, we are told, brings the seemingly interminable “dark age of iron” to an end and ushers in the “age of magic”. The closing exhortation of an intrusive authorial voice is to “Unveil your eyes” (33), an evocation of ontopoiesis – the magic revealed via an expanded awareness.

The concept of unveiling one’s eyes or concern with occlusion and exclusion – be it physical, social or symbolic – is one given wide credence; the idea is captured by Okri in one of his many aphorisms. “All our creativity, our innovations, our discovery, come from being able first to see what is there, and not there; to hear what is said, and not said. Above all to think clearly; to be nourished by silence. And – beyond that – the art of intuition” (*A Time for New Dreams* 2011, 27). By extension, this recalls the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived that was of particular concern to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), as Robert Fraser (2005, 88) points out in his study of Okri’s works. In *Le Visible et l’invisible* (1968), published posthumously, the French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty articulates his realization that data received via our [five] senses cannot ordinarily account for everything our brains register. By implication and as illustrated in the poem just discussed, to “unveil” our eyes signifies Greenwood’s magical consciousness, in other words, the heightened awareness of our sixth sense. Merleau-Ponty observes that there are unseen attributes that are included in the way in which we construct reality: “Meaning,” he asserts, “is *invisible*, but the *invisible* is not the contradictory of the *visible*: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework [*membrure*], and the invisible is the hidden counterpart of the visible, it appears within it ...”. Thus, his proposition is that the invisible appears within the visible; “one cannot see it and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line of* the visible, it is its virtual focus”. Merleau-Ponty deduces therefore that the invisible “is inscribed within” the visible, “[in filigree]” (1968, 215).

With the sixth sense alert after crossing the “magic line in time” (31), a rite that has suspended profane time and duration, the narrator, somewhat paradoxically, enumerates the five-stage time line in this poem – evening, dawn, morning, dusk, afternoon – that seemingly mimics that of world beliefs in the five days of cosmic creation.⁹ Globally humankind, as Eliade states, “only

repeats the act of the Creation” (22) in year-long religious calendars that commemorate, by re-enactment, “all the cosmogonic phases which took place *ab origine*”. Even more significantly, via this sacred repetition, human beings exist *ex tempore* or are transported beyond time and are “contemporary with the cosmogony and with the anthropogony because ritual projects him [or her] into the mythical epoch of the beginning” (ibid.), into the age of magic that the narrating magus captures in “*L’Époque Magique*”.

“Dimensions of a Storm”

The operation of natural magic is even more patent in “Dimensions of a Storm”. As Eamon observes, “Natural magic does not work against nature but is a minister of magic, supplying by artificial means what nature wants” (16). Marriage rites, for example, like those in the annual calendar, are a re-enactment of natural magic and likewise have a divine model. Human marriage, as in the proem, “Betrothal”, discussed elsewhere,¹⁰ reproduces the archetypal hierogamy symbolizing the marriage of heaven and earth, an archetype that forms the undercurrent to “Dimensions of a Storm” and can be found in Indian and Roman mythology. In the Hindu procreation ritual, “the generative act becomes a hierogamy of cosmic proportions, mobilizing a whole group of gods” (Eliade 1954, 24). In Virgil’s *Aeneid* (VI, 160), Dido celebrates her nuptials with Aeneas “in the midst of a violent storm”; their union, as Eliade notes, “coincides with that of the elements; heaven embraces its bride, dispensing fertilizing rain” (ibid.). This then appears to be the primordial myth that underpins and interpenetrates Okri’s proem, “Dimensions of a Storm”. Here, the cosmic union of the elements is manifest in the omniscient narrator’s vibrant and all-encompassing depiction of a violent thunder storm:

It’s all there: the swelling and the heaving, the magnificent roll of the *invisible*, heaving and pushing out against the air as if beyond the membrane of the world. Great hulking *invisible* beings blowing a sustaining storm above the trees. (2017, 23; emphasis added)

This excerpt replicates Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the visible and invisible. It is pregnant with allusion and meaning; and the modernist preoccupation¹¹ with the seen and the unseen is clearly integral to Okri’s aesthetics in *The Magic Lamp*, where true meaning is secret and hidden. Evocative of the myth of Olympian gods, whose “infinite breathing” is not only the impetus or the prevailing spirit of the wind behind the storm, “blowing a sustaining storm above the trees”, but is also the cause of the *hieros gamos* that unites the heavens with the earth, as intimated in “The blue was dense up there above the green” (23). Colours are characteristically significant for Okri. Serendipitously, there is the natural magic of primary colours: a red bird; yellow lightning and blue sky; and yellow mixed with blue magically makes green.

In “Dimensions of a Storm”, a streak of lightning, depicted obliquely as “a point of yellow”, is the prelude to the downpour. Then, in a painterly simile, the lightning is likened to “a [red] bird inscribing a spiral” (23). Abruptly, the storm itself is metaphorized into a huge bird, “swell[ing] in the air and falling like the beating of giant hurricane wings”, the sound of which is described as “Music on the wings of a soaring bird” (ibid.) ingeniously expressive of the science of cosmic rhythms.

The proem is characterized by verbal alchemy and Keatsian negative capability. The *invisible* is transmuted into “a blue world *barely seen*”; while the ominous “breathing” behind this planetary storm “*obscures*” all. And yet, the omniscient teller ‘senses’ that the tree tops “house” or

embrace the storm with exuberant songs of praise (“shrieking hallelujahs”) as if in celebration of this re-enactment of the archetypal ritual union that bears fruit so to speak as a stunted tree growing in a stone wall, illustrative of the tantalizing tenacity of nature. Suggestive of alchemical magic, the vivid depiction of the storm (the deployment of the rhetorical device of diatyposis) unifies the four basic elements – earth, air, fire and water – adding the oriental fifth element, wood. Little wonder then that human beingness is portrayed as a microcosmic cypher, “a walking line on the landscape”, the meaning of which, in an echo of the Merleau-Ponty extract quoted above, “only those hidden eyes know” (ibid.). This notion of privileged sight is prefigured here by a typical Okrian neo-Platonic maxim: “To see is not to see.” (25) This cryptic oxymoron elevates the reader’s consciousness in its evocation of the ‘real’ and the ‘really real’ of Plato’s cave, a notion that infuses the next poem to be discussed, “The Blue Crusade”.

“The Blue Crusade”

Inspired by the spirit of inventiveness, “The Blue Crusade” serves as a metonymic antidote to the potent unease and (dis)ease of contemporary politics. In terms of sympathetic magic, Okri sees “our unease with the world” as the impetus behind “our hidden desire to change it” (*Rise Like Lions* 2018, 37). Lord Byron’s couplet, quoted as the epigraph to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to Liberty”, provides a mythic conjunction between “Dimensions of a Storm” and “The Blue Crusade”:

Yet, Freedom, yet, they banner, torn but flying,
Streams like a thunder-storm against the wind. (Okri 2018, 147)

In this context, the ekphrastic poem is itself an ode to freedom. If one looks and listens carefully, one can almost hear and envision a St John’s band marching to “Onward Christian Soldiers” evoked by both the poem’s title and Clunie’s artwork, with its large blue cross embedded above the text. Redolent of the “torn but flying” flag is the narrator’s paradoxical summation of progress in our postmodern age: “We acquired more knowledge of the world and less knowledge of ourselves. We knew more, but somehow we knew less” (2017, 69).

Whereas “Dimensions of a Storm” unifies the basic elements of earth, air, fire and water, the linear progression in “The Blue Crusade” traces the three mythical stages, archetypally reflecting the triad: heaven, earth, and hell. It begins in a paradisaic state with many discoveries “in the unseen realm”, the most important of which “was the colour blue” (67). This is followed by the loss of paradise; over time in “this blue wisdom was lost”. Finally, the “silent ones” and the “listening ones” seek out “the forgotten mages” (69) and take up the banner of the “underground [blue] crusade” to regain paradise. In an astute use of the rhetorical figure of hyperbaton or inversion, it is suggested that perhaps “the forgotten beauty of blue ... took us up as a crusade” so that “the cause could well be the effect, and the effect the cause” (71). This implies a conflation of Frazer’s homeopathic and contagious magic, so that “The Blue Crusade” becomes a blue print for the recovery of paradise, for an end to the interminable darkness of the “age of iron” mooted in “*L’Époque Magique*” and here mutated into “the age of realism” (69). The ‘cause’ of realism is humankind’s mastery “of the forces of nature and the power of the machine” (69) with an attendant loss of self-knowledge, already discussed.

The colour blue dominates the poem. “The capacity of the brain and eye to perceive the different colours of the spectrum,” says Anthony Stevens in his *Ariadne’s Clue*, “is

phylogenetically very ancient, and each colour is linked to a web of cognitive and affective association” (1998, 146). Blue is of course the perceived colour of both the sky and the sea. Even though this is not technically true for the sky is more black than blue and the sea is more green-and-white than blue, the colour blue shares the symbolism of sky and sea – “their translucency, their vastness, their infinity, and their coolness” (149). Stevens elucidates: “Because their extent so far exceeds the human condition, their colour represents both the ultimate and the eternal, the Beyond and Fate” (ibid.). In his contemplation of blue, Okri features “this mystic colour” as a magical “potion” used by sages to create “protective spells” that can destroy evil, perhaps alluding to Ovid’s famed *Metamorphoses*. Not only can we “travel in this colour” – a scientific fact owing to advancements in air transport and space travel, but we could also “pass through a certain *tone* of blue into the world beyond thought” (67; emphasis added). Stevens lends scientific credence to this seemingly hyperbolic notion by explaining the workings of synaesthesia: it “lends a certain *felt* meaning to each colour or can give different days of the week, different musical tones, etc. a different hue in the minds of susceptible individuals” (146; emphasis added).

Underlining the title of the book, *The Magic Lamp: Dreams of Our Age*, the teller of the tale expands on the mysterious possibilities of blue: it is a cure-all for the blues, be these mental, subconscious, or wish-fulfilment in nature – “no darkness of mind but can be soothed and dissolved by its ministrations”; “We dreamed in blue”; and some “made magic carpets of blue on which we visited our friends in remote constellations” (67). Melding the advanced science of intergalactic travel and religious myth, blue becomes a portal into “the immeasurable world where the gods dwell” (69) and, in an intimation of druglike-induced ritual renewal, “In our ecstasies we went through portals of blue to the source of our highest joys” (67).

Given such powerful potentialities of blue, its loss¹² is keenly felt and a catalogue of esoteric loss is listed: loss of the art of “wonder-working”, the art of “the magic of the beyond”, the art of “blue”, “the paths of the lost tradition” and “the lost dream” (69). The mission of “the blue crusade” is thus, not surprisingly, “to awaken it in all those who secretly quivered to the music of the spheres” (71) through the alchemy of magic, that is, through symbols and rituals, guided “through death into life” (69),¹³ recalling the natural magic of chrysalis into butterfly discussed at the outset, but here wrought by the wisdom of the mages. Ultimately, blue, like the gods in the heavens, illuminates with *visible* life, first itself, then all the *invisible* celestial and mundane bodies (to borrow loosely from Merleau-Ponty). This new enlightenment sets the scene for a discussion of the final poem chosen for this essay, which is also the last poem in the collection.

“Prophecy”

Illustrative of the powerful force of the imagination and myth, the opening lines in “Prophecy” bring us face-to-face with the anthropomorphized godhead of Judeo-Christian pictorial mythology: “Once, when I was gazing into the air, a man with a crown, who was seated on a throne of gold, summoned me. He whispered things in my ear which became a green fire in my head” (113). Although one could be forgiven for imagining that this is to be a child’s fairy tale, given the conjunction, “Once” as in ‘once upon a time’, the final sentence in this paragraph – “Sometimes out of this fire images take form” – seems to me to acknowledge with childlike wonder (deduced by the verdant “green fire”) that creativity is divinely inspired. This points to the inner or *invisible* meaning of “prophecy”. Prophecy for Okri is not Yeats’s Rosicrucian

spectral or occult seeing, but a Blakean impetus for change, where “change is a making visible, a making real” (*Rise Like Lions* 2018, 129), born not by “seeing into the future but seeing into higher states of being *in the world*” (op.cit., 37; emphasis added) or what Wole Soyinka terms “self-apprehension” ([1976]1995). In his collection of poetry, *Rise Like Lions*, Okri confesses that poetic vision seeks to “alter the world” (129). It is therefore, he acknowledges, not innocent but political because “it posits an alternative reality to the one we know”. This, he believes, is “one of the most mysterious functions of poetry”. It is transformative and, in envisioning the possibility of another, different reality; “it already begins to put the reality we know in doubt” (ibid.). Prophecy is thus true vision as opposed to voyeurism; it partially equates with “intensity”. Citing the biblical adage that for want of vision a people perish, Okri laments the dearth of “far-seers” and “clear seers” (37).

This poem is not about the mythical imaginary of belief or leaps of faith. The cascade of exempla that follows the first person narrator’s tacit realization that “I had always been gazing into realms of prophecy right in front of me and not known it” (113) are not flights of fancy but examples of an ability to *see* “what is there and not there” (*A Time for New Dreams* 2011, 27) already quoted; this equates with an ontopoietic perception of a composite reality of cosmic dimensions that encompasses the past, present and future of historical time, but goes beyond profane time and duration to sacred time, to what lies *au dehors de la réalité historique*. The “glimpses” for example of “lost wars, future births, the fall of empires, the changing fields, the dwindling river” (113) hint at a lunar consciousness. The moon, as Stevens notes, is “our primordial clock” (1998, 136). It symbolizes cyclic time: “it governs tides, rains, floods, and the menstrual cycle”. The light of the moon illuminates “the darkness of night, and thus represents the consciousness that comes to us in dreams” (ibid.) as made apparent in Okri’s subtitle to *The Magic Lamp*, “*Dreams of Our Age*”.

Cautioning against the black arts, the speaker says, “I have witnessed lands devastated because the people brought to the surface that which have been left in the deep” (113). In illustration, nightmare visions of the elders, as boys and girls undergoing initiation rites “in the dark blue forest” (115) are alluded to. The antidote is to be detected in the closing image of a heron, an archetypal symbol of freedom as well as a traditional symbol of the natural magic of bird talk, considering “the world with a question in the shape of its beak” (115). It is not therefore coincidental that this collection is book-ended by a blue jay in conversation with the narrator, in “Bird Talk” and a bird of the same genus, a philosophical heron contemplating existence in “Prophecy”. This suggests that Okri conceives of natural magic as an empirical, even experimental science and inseparable from myth. The ultimate goal of natural magic is to reveal the hidden or *invisible* enigmas of nature, and to render them *visible* for those of us who cannot ‘see’.

An intrusive authorial voice shares with us his intuition that “It is as if everything is here, if we know how to see it”. As the closing sentence attests – “By gazing and not gazing into the infinite present, it seems all worlds are here” – the poem, as a meditation on the “infinite present” is a climactic synopsis of the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s *Le Visible et l’invisible*. “There is a seeing so intense,” says Okri, in *Rise Like Lions* (2018, 37), “that it reveals unseen aspects of the world”. This is, in essence, what constitutes natural magic, be it homeopathic or contagious.

Conclusion

Reminiscent of the Merleau-Ponty's proposal that the elusive invisible lies within the visible; "one cannot see it and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line of the visible*, it is its virtual focus" and that the invisible "is inscribed within" the visible, "[in filigree]" (1968: 215), Okri coincidentally articulates his visionary aesthetic of ontopoiesis in the ekphrastic poems or *les petits poèmes en prose* discussed in this article with

Poetry is susceptible to vision. And vision in poetry is both seeing clearly what is there and seeing what will be, what might be, a deeper seeing into the reality of things. (*Rise Like Lions* 2018, 37)

The implication is that the *Imaginatio Creatrix* in the stillness of time is akin to the lunar consciousness or inner *gnosis*. This is the knowledge "revealed by the reflected light of the divine sun mirrored in the soul" (Stevens 1998, 136–137), and what we refer to as the waxing and waning of the moon or the rising and setting of the sun – an illusion of magic – "links us inevitably with archetypal notions of death, rebirth, and eternity" (ibid.)

These ekphrastic poems reveal an impulse to reject concrete, historical time and return to the mythological time at the beginning of time itself, *ab origine*, reinstating the magic of traditional and archaic mythology *in illo tempore*. As native Africans, nurtured in the cradle of mankind, the link between ourselves, the cosmos and cosmic rhythms is the unsevered umbilical cord of the motherland. This, of course, runs counter to modernity's creation of and insistence upon historical time, a notion itself disproven by scientific evidence of space travel. Encapsulating Wole Soyinka's explanation of the origin of myth, "For let it always be recalled that myths arise from man's attempt to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions" ([1976]1995, 3), Mircea Eliade (1964, 18) avers that an account is mythic in so far as "it reveals something as having been fully manifested and this manifestation is at the same time creative and exemplary since it is a foundation ... of a kind of behaviour". Okri ponders (2011, 27), "How to make those intuitive leaps that can transform humanity, how to make this mysterious faculty available to all – this will be the true turning point in the future history of civilisation".

Notes

1 Lewis Spence (1999, 11) observes that the writers of antiquity acknowledged the "native superiority" of the Celtic mind in the science of magic, citing the wisdom corpus of Pliny, Siculus, Timagenes, Hippolytus and Clement of Alexander as revealing the belief that Pythagoras was schooled in his mystical philosophy by the Celtic priests in Gaul. Okri states that the bards of old "could breathe life into a dying civilization with the magic of a story ... they could bring transformation with the potency of a myth" (2015, 24)."

2 Frazer (1991, 89) notes that in Homeric times, Greek heads of state "were spoken of as sacred or divine"; this included their dwelling places and their "chariots". It was also believed that good kings could influence the fructification of grain crops and fruit trees and even the seas' catch. Amazingly, the notion has been widely perpetuated in both political and religious circles throughout the ages.

3 Speciation is the word given to Darwin's concept of natural selection in his much misunderstood and oft misquoted *The Origin of Species*. Wilson ([1992]1993, 405) explains speciation as: "the process of species formation: the full sequence of events leading to the splitting of one population of organisms into two or more populations reproductively isolated

from one another.” “The origin of species is therefore simply the evolution of some difference – any difference at all – that prevents the production of fertile hybrids between populations under natural conditions” (op.cit., 55).

4 See *Wild* (2012, 56), “Towards the Sublime”: “Have you ever 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 power, 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 freedom/ Divine.”

5 Evolving from German art critic, Franz Roh’s notion of what constitutes the artistic movement of Post-Expressionism, magical realism is given as a descriptive synonym for the diachronic ‘post’ and is defined as offering us “the miracle of *existence in its imperturbable duration*: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating modules” (1925, in Lamora and Faris 2005, 22). As he explains (what we now know as Quantum Physics): “This miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of general becoming, of universal dissolution: this is what Post-Expressionism admires and highlights” (ibid.).

6 See also Rosemary Gray. 2019. Conscious Reveries in *The Magic Lamp*. In *The Tough Alchemy of Ben Okri: The Writer and Conceptual Artist*. London: Bloomsbury (forthcoming).

7 For example, in “The Wreck of the *Deutschland*”, Hopkins captures the inner essence of *caritas* as: “Our hearts charity’s hearth’s fire, our thoughts chivalry’s throng’s Lord.”

8 ‘Virtue’ from the Greek *arête* was vocational, and as Guthrie affirms: “*Arête* then meant first of all skill or efficiency at a particular job, and ... such efficiency depends on a proper understanding or knowledge of the job in hand” ([1950] 1978: 9).

9 Eliade provides two exempla: the Egyptian god Thoth, who created the world “by force of his word”; and Iranian tradition in which Ormazd instituted the commemoration of cosmic creation – sky, the waters, the earth, plants, animals, and man – after which he rested for five days (1955, 22).

10 See Note 6.

11 Cf. for example, H.G. Wells *The Invisible Man* (1901); Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man* (1953); Italo Calvino *Invisible Cities* (1972); and Ben Okri *Astonishing the Gods* (2002)

12 Loss is a characteristic theme in Okri’s *oeuvre*. See Rosemary Gray Ben Okri’s *The Landscapes Within* (1981): *The Imaginatio Creatix. English Academy Review*. 30(2): 21-31, 2013.

13 The literary intertexts are patent: Virgil’s *Aeneid*; and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

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