

Ben Okri's generational protest poem: "The Incandescence of the Wind" ([1992] 2018)

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Abstract

The central premise in this article is that Ben Okri's generational protest poem, "The Incandescence of the Wind" from *An African Elegy* (1992), republished in *Rise Like Lions* (2018), seeks to make sense of a profoundly disturbing encounter with contemporary reality through a revisioning of nationhood and poetic responsibility in worn-torn Nigeria in 1982. The argument draws on Wole Soyinka's 1996 *The Open Sore of a Continent* and aligns its poetic aesthetic with Percy Bysshe Shelley's belief that literature can change the world ("A Defence of Poetry"). The article explores the ways in which Okri intertwines the key threads of doomed nationhood and imaginative transmutation to suggest a road less travelled. As a native-born poet, he believes he has a responsibility to remonstrate to heal. His is a concern for the political pressures that impinge on a nation at war with itself. His ameliorative guiding vision informs this interpretation of the poem, the characteristic theme of which is imaginative redemption of suffering by re-visioning the imagi/Nation.

Key words: *An African Elegy*; Ben Okri; imagi/Nation; protest poetry; *Rise Like Lions*; Percy Bysshe Shelley; Wole Soyinka; "The Incandescence of the Wind"

The writer as barometer of the age: "The Incandescence of the Wind"

If life is understood as an organic whole, constituting a lived connective with its surroundings, lived experience is at once horizontal and vertical. The repetition of such experience(s), as of life itself, is – certainly for the poet, Ben Okri – as cyclical as the seasons. The poem "The Incandescence of the Wind", testifies to its cyclical relevance in the Okrian oeuvre of quotidian African reality. Written in August 1982, twelve years after the erasure of the Biafran nation in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), it was published in Okri's first anthology of poetry, *An African Elegy*, a decade later (1992) and was republished in his fourth collection, *Rise Like Lions*, in 2018.

In this poem, Okri successfully constructs an ontopoietic literature of the ‘imagi/Nation’, to borrow a coinage from Dieter Riemenschneider, the purpose of which is healing by rising above the unnatural boundaries that separate human beings from one another and from their eco-phenomenological environment. Riemenschneider coins the term “Glocal”, asserting that the New Literatures in English are “located at the interface of global and local concerns”; they create “a glocal literary discourse that establishes its very own imagi/Nation” (2005, 14). If one assumes with Riemenschneider that the “imagi/Nation” is to be found in a special type of spatial coexistence of our state of consciousness and our subconscious mind (15), then Okri’s poem is a simulacrum exploring the power of the imagination or intuitive creativity to unify states of consciousness, and to transcend not only artificial cartographic borders between one sector of the nation and another, but also the countless borders between us and them, time and space, centre and margin, poet and reader, Igbo and Hausa, and so on.

This discussion does not seek to redefine “nation” but rather to allude to its socio-cultural and technological impact on the growth of human consciousness and responsibility. There is a distinct dichotomy between scientific and imaginative consciousness as Edwin Muir usefully pointed out in an essay entitled “The Poetic Imagination”. Muir draws a distinction between technological and human progress, saying that

Applied science shows us a world of consistent, mechanical progress. Machines give birth to ever new generations of machines, and the new machines are always better and more efficient than the old, and begin where the old left off ... But in the world of human beings all is different ... Every human being has to begin at the beginning, as his forebears did, with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problems of good and evil, the same inclination to ask what life means. (*Essays on Literature and Society* 1949)

Such consciousness, in the hands of creative artists, would seem to eschew both the scientific and power impulse and invoke, instead, Bertrand Russell’s theory of education in which

education is purpose-driven (cf. Lenz 2017) – to train not just good citizens of the state, but also citizens of the imagin/Nation. These model individuals [Shelley’s elite poets] would be equipped to bring a cosmic perspective to the improvement of society through heightened consciousness, that is, through self-apprehension or onto-poiesis.

The Biafran war set the trend for internecine strife that has dogged and continues to dog Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular, for decades to come. The *double entendre* of both “incandescence” and “wind” in the title point to the poet’s attempt to make something incoherent coherent, a paradox suggestive of confronting the inchoate. Compatriot thinker and writer, Wole Soyinka, provides a sobering entrée into Okri’s poem. In his 1996 *The Open Sore of a Continent*, Soyinka points to the “dirty tricks” and “covert military operations” that “instigated an unceasing round of bloodletting” (5). In fact, massacres by military killer squads in post-Biafran Nigeria¹ simply exacerbated the protracted rapacity, lack of control and of accountability that were to guarantee what Soyinka terms “Nigeria’s yet unheralded membership card for the club of practitioners of ‘ethnic cleaning’” (1996: 6).

Rooted in the natural world to expose the unnatural in power politics and the kleptocracy of boom and bust petroleum industry in Nigeria, Okri’s “The Incandescence of the Wind” was written between the “patently rigged elections” (Soyinka, 7) of 1979 and 1983, when a military junta seized control, and after the decimation of oil rich Ogoniland that foreshadowed the capture, incarceration and death of his mentor, Ken Saro-Wiwa, on 10 November 1995. Coups and countercoups, displacements, expropriation of property, ruthless clampdowns, violence and

¹ The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) that saw the erasure of Biafra set the trend for internecine strife that dogged West Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular, for decades to come. See R Gray, 2019. Ben Okri’s “Laughter Beneath the Bridge”: Born (un)Free. *The International Journal of Literary Humanities* 17(1): 71-81.

rape became endemic, and climaxed in the “arbitrary annulment of the national election on 23 June 1993”² that “violently robbed the Nigerian people of their nationhood” (9).

Like Soyinka, Okri rails against the tyranny of the national power impulse. Here, “[at] night mothers scream/ of children lost in the city fires”, echoing the lines, “[c]rows in the fields/ scream in despair”, and even “[t]he yam-tubers bleed our sorrows” at wanton slaughter as “[the] masters conduct their/ plunderings/ with quiet murder” (Stanzas 4 & 2). But, whereas Soyinka’s “personal narrative of the Nigerian crisis” is a requiem for the Nigerian nation, Okri conceives of an imaginative redemption of the suffering or transformation of the Nigerian nation via *imagi/Nation*. Both writers acknowledge the complexity of contemporary nationhood. Nation status, Soyinka surmises, “has never been an absolute or a constant ... it has ever followed the politics of conflict, interest, alliances, power, and even accident” (1996: 14-15). Like the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, both Soyinka and Okri are compassionate truth-tellers; yet, neither living poet postures as an inimitable authority, although these conceptual artists do write with and within a personal experiential authority.

For instance, having been subjected to solitary confinement himself and an iconic survivor, Soyinka confesses his awe of fellow political prisoner, Nelson Mandela’s fortitude and visionary optimism in “Your logic frightens me, Mandela/ ... Those years/ Of dreams, of time accelerated in/ Visionary hopes, of savouring the task anew,/ The call, the tempo primed/ To burst in supernovae round a ‘brave new world’” (in Okri, 2018: 239, Stanza 1). And, in an interview with Claire Armistead on 6 September 2018, preceding the opening night on 14 September 2018 of Okri’s stage adaptation of Camus’ novel, *L’Étranger* [The Outsider], another

² Chinua Achebe cites this date as the effective death of Ken Saro-Wiwa, owing to his long and brutal incarceration without trial.

surviving outsider, Okri, reiterates an incident that he fictionalized in “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” from *Incidents at the Shrine* ([1986]1993). Recalling his first-hand knowledge of the Nigerian Civil War and his terrified recollection of the only Urhoba word he could recall, that for ‘shit’, which saved his life, Okri states chillingly that at six: “I was nearly shot because I could not speak my dad’s language” ([1986]2018). This insider experience and the consequent starvation into submission of his mother’s Igbo Biafrans erupt into his call to arms in “The Incandescence of the Wind” with “Break the bread/ of initiation into/ revolt:/ We shall celebrate with our/ emaciated chests./ We shall clench and raise our fists/ in the wonder of incandescence” (p. 91, Stanza 7 ll. 80-81). Okri’s progressive strain resonates with Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1821 *Defence of Poetry* in which Shelley argues that, “although social [and political] institutions impede humans from reaching their greatest potential, literature has always understood what we are capable of” (Bates, 2015: n.p.). Shelley believes that literature enables us to encounter our best selves. “All high poetry is infinite,” he asserts and, in illustration, adds, “it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentiality” (ibid.). In corroboration of literature’s liberating role, Shelley invokes writings that, historically, aided the end of slavery and the liberation of women. Put simply by Robin Bates, “Literature has subtly sent out its message to the world, ultimately making possible the great breakthroughs in civilization” (2015: n.p.)

Regarding national justice, that which he believes ought to be “the law that governs the rise and fall of nations”, Okri is moved to assert:

What does not grow, dies; what does not face its truth, perishes; those without vision deserve the destruction that will fall upon them; those that believe that they can suppress freedom and yet live in freedom are hopelessly deluded. (*A Way of Being Free* 1997: 108)

These are clearly the sentiments of a narrating experiencing visionary. Underlining his carrion call to action, he warns: “Either a nation faces its uncomfortable truths, or it is overwhelmed by them; for there is a prophetic consequence in the perpetuation of lies, just as there is an

unavoidable fate for all those who refuse to see” (ibid.). Elaborating on Shelley’s view that “a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed ...” (Leitch 2001: 699), Okri sees truth-telling, however unpalatable, as a moral obligation; invoking nationhood, he cautions:

Beware of storytellers who are not fully conscious of the importance of their gifts, and who are irresponsible in their application of their art: they could unwittingly help along the psychic destruction of their people. (1997: 109)

The above fragment from “The Joys of Storytelling” in *A Way of Being Free* (1997: 109), seemingly provides a mandate for Okri’s poem, “The Incandescence of the Wind”, and informs his tribute to Ken Saro-Wiwa. Appalled by the execution of this mentoring activist, the illegally silenced voice of a nation exploited for commercial gain by a petroleum company, aided and abetted by those in power, Okri rages: “If you want to know what is happening for an age or in a nation, find out what is happening to its writers, the town-criers: for they are the seismographs that calibrate impending earthquakes in the spirit of the times” (1997: 104).

Embedded in the neologism, “imagi/Nation” to suggest Okri’s Mandela-like vision of a brave new world in, “I hear a light/ bursting through/ the bright blue roots/ and yellow skeletons./ We have breathed/ our self-love in those bones./ We have breathed incantations/ at those worms/ that ravage our serenity” (91-92 Stanza 8), are ideological connotations that encompass regional and national topographies as well as aesthetic, ethical and psychological domains. At the early age of 23, Okri demonstrates his heightened social consciousness. His poetic aesthetic is encapsulated in a subsection in *A Way of Being Free* entitled, “The Human Race is not yet Free”, “In a world like ours, where death is increasingly drained of meaning, individual authenticity lies in what we can find that is worth living for” (1997: 56 no. 26). He asserts his belief that, “... the only thing worth living for is love” (ibid.). Prioritizing the biblical maxim, “Love thy neighbour as thyself”, thus articulating the essential meaning of love with, “Love for one another. Love for

ourselves”, he proceeds to elaborate on the meaning of freedom with a guiding catechism on love:

Love of our work. Love of our destiny, whatever it may be. Love for our difficulties. Love of life. The love that could free us from the mysterious cycles of suffering. The love that releases us from our self-imprisonment, from our bitterness, our greed, our madness-engendering competitiveness. The love that can make us breathe again. Love of a great and beautiful cause, a wonderful vision. A great love for another, or for the future. The love that reconciles us to ourselves, to our simple joys, and to our undiscovered repletion. A creative love. A love touched with the sublime. (56-57)

In an implied echo of Shelley’s maxim that “The great secret of morals is Love: or a going out of our own nature ...” (Leitch 700), love is, as in Judeo-Christian mythology, the primary life force; it symbolizes the divine as in “God is Love”. Such is the ethos that enables the poet to conclude his angry protest against the Nigerian socio-political situation with lines illustrating a subliminal turn of the wheel of transformation, prefigured by pivotal rhetorical questions in Stanzas 6 and 7 that ask: “Should we join them” in “the short-sightedness of power” (Stanza 6, ll. 71 & 74), that is, should we capitulate like the rapacious living dead, or should we “Break the bread/ of initiation into/ revolt” (Stanza 7, ll. 75-77), already cited. The concluding stanza reads:

The graveyards heave
The riverbeds sigh.
And I wake surprised:
- the incandescence has become
our own
- the skeletons have reclaimed
the lands
- a new spirit breathing phosphorous
has grown
into the blue roots of the times. (Stanza 9, ll. 91–101)

The omission of conjunctions [asyndeton] here simultaneously checks and urges the utterance on. The ideogram and oratorical thrust in this final stanza are indicative that the poet speaker has mastered his rage; the incandescence of the wind that “bothers” him in the opening lines of the poem is transmuted into amazement; he “wakes surprised” as the incandescence now signifies only that which emits light.

As with his short story, “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” (1986) and as already intimated, “The Incandescence of the Wind” with its theme of an imaginative redemption of suffering is thus, at once, protest and promise. Regenerative change is suggested by the image of growth: an emergent cyclical rebirth of “the blue roots”, a reclaiming by the living dead of their imagi/Nation. In African cosmogony, blue signifies death (Okri, pers.comm.). Blue is also, as Anthony Stevens explains, “the colour of the sky and the sea; it therefore shares in their symbolism, their translucency, their vastness, their infinity, and their coolness” (1998: 149). Coupled with the image of phosphorous, a chemical element that bursts into spontaneous yellow light when exposed to air, the closing lines may allude to that which exceeds the national human condition; the four elements in the poem – riverbeds (water); roots (earth); phosphorous (the alchemy of air and fire) conjoin to imply the potential for renewed nationhood. Okri challenges us to open the envelope of two-dimensional near-bestial existence and stand in awe at the replete universe of 3- and 4-dimensional life – human and transhuman – of which we are an intimate part.

In addition to its depiction of the fires of civil strife that Okri witnessed first-hand as a small child (already mentionaed), the poem is also arguably informed by personal happenstance: an initial set-back in Okri’s academic career. A Nigerian government scholarship awarded in 1980 was curtailed in 1982, forcing a promising student to abandon his Bachelor of Arts degree in Comparative Literatures at the University of Essex in England,³ and to live on his wits. One can surmise that this disappointment informs the reflective mood in “The Incandescence of the Wind”. This talented young writer was saved only by his creative ability that had already seen

³ See Robert Fraser, 2002. *Ben Okri: Towards the Invisible City*. Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House.

the publication of his first two novels: *Flowers and Shadows* in 1979 and *The Landscapes Within* in 1981.

The poem, a prelude to his famed *The Famished Road* (1991),⁴ *Rise Like Lions* (2018) and *The Freedom Artist* (2019), is both angry and enigmatic as deduced by the *double entendre* of the words ‘incandescence’ and ‘wind’ already alluded to. In its noun form, ‘incandescence’ means that which sheds light; used adjectivally, incandescent means ‘very angry’ (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* 2010); ‘wind’ is, of course, literally ‘air that moves quickly as a result of natural forces’ (ibid.). ‘Wind’ is also a metaphor, *inter alia*, for natural cleansing and is used politically – as in ‘the winds of change’ – to signify an alteration in nation status. The poem captures the prevailing winds, with its creator as both headwind and tailwind. The complexity of diction frames the poem, yet it is evident that it is an ill wind that “bothers” the poet speaker in the opening verse lines: “The incandescence of the wind/ bothers me/ in this vineyard” (Stanza 1, ll. 1–3). Following Shelley’s maxim of poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world, Okri avers that poetry is not innocent but political, because it posits “an alternative reality to the one that we know” (2018: 129).

“There are poets,” Okri acknowledges in *Rise Like Lions* (2018: 78), “who believe that poetry should not get mixed up with the sordid stuff of politics and society ... But poetry is language and language is part of the fabric of power, of the laws, of the making and unmaking of society”. Okri aligns his point of view with that of Shelley’s belief in literature’s power to

⁴ A comparable affect of the incandescence of the wind is seen in a passage where the Abiku child protagonist, Azaro, trying to find shelter from the wind, finds himself under the eaves of the blind old man’s house: “The wind rose again and hurled a fine spray of rain at us. After a while, I felt myself moving. Something in me moved, I resisted. But the wind was stronger. The blind old man laughed as I struggled. I discovered that the wind had divided me, had separated me from myself. I felt an inner self floating towards the blind old man. Or was it that the blind old man was floating into me, invading my consciousness? I wasn’t sure.” (313)

change the world; he believes that poets can and should protest when things are unacceptable, to effect change, to shift thoughts, because it is they who are able to “use the finest instrument they have and they sing with delicacy and with power of the ills of society” (2018: 77). “The highest things,” he insists, “are beyond words” (89), because literature affects one silently, in dreams, like music and painting. Its aim is to “enchant”, “transform”, “make life more meaningful or bearable in its own small and mysterious way” (1997: 89). In like vein, Shelley proclaims that “[a] great Poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight” (Leitch, 2001: 710).

The setting of “Incandescence ...”, with its tension between biblical and typically African imagery – vineyard and riverbed – is evocatively Shelley-like. Yet, a Nigerian landscape that once yielded nature’s bounty has become a dry riverbed. It is in this scorched-earth space – “from this riverbed we call our own” – that the persona asks rhetorically, “Is there a searing clarity/ about the noises/ rising daily ...?” (Stanza 1, ll. 4–7) The epithet “searing” denotes intense burning, shooting pain; linked to “clarity”, it calls for responsiveness to the status quo. In his preface to his collected protest poems in *Rise Like Lions*, Okri elucidates:

Sometimes poetry, roused by something intolerable in society, awoken by some injustice, rises to the condition of protest. Sometimes the poet is so choked by the foulness of the world, or some unacceptable condition of society, that they abandon briefly the woods and flowers and love ditties to sound a powerful note. (2018: 77)

The use of polyptoton [interchange of singular and plural] – “the poet” ... “they” – could function either as a powerful auxiliary in the production of emotional effect or simply be a non-gendered binary pronoun as deployed in the shifts in personal pronouns from “I”/ “me” to “we” throughout “The Incandescence ...”. This serves to endorse Okri’s avowal that “[b]y the very

nature of language the poet, whether they choose to accept it or not, is part of the order of things” (*Rise Like Lions* 2018: 78).

That the poem captures lived-life, becomes clear in the shift in mood, tone and number in Stanzas 2 to 8 where nature and the citizenry are recollected as victims of Nigerian power politics and even the staple foodstuff (yams) and scavenging birds (crows) are subjected to the tyranny as already intimated, because “Machetes pollute our food/ With rust” (Stanza 2, ll. 10–12). Nonetheless, mainstream political figures paint “a political culture of impunity” (Soyinka-Airewele, 1999: 44). “The crisis of memory – construction, distortion, exploitation, and suppression – is evident in the Nigerian ‘transmutation’ process – the perpetuation in power, through civilianization, of a military regime” (Durotoye and Griffiths, 1997: 133). In this erstwhile nation, while “[t]he masters conduct their/ plunderings/ with quiet murders:/ The victims perform maypole dances/ around the village shrines” (Stanza 2, ll. 13–17). It seems that poetry can barely contain the horrors of wholesale slaughter of any in opposition, as implied in the “quiet murders” (l. 15), a euphemism for swift and secret killing sprees, as underlined in the “maypole dances” (l. 16) of those caught in the fray.

Stanzas 3 and 4 pile on the agony in tortuous imagery that transmits a *danse macabre* and where a heightened auditory sense draws the reader into an experiential hell-on-earth. The persona “hears” a cold fire “consume the groins/ of heroes/ and shrivel the guts/ of martyrs” (Stanza 3, ll. 20–23). The sustained oxymoron in “a cold fire in the air” (l. 18) that the poet “hears” is indicative of mystical auditory sense, while “consume” and “shrivel” evoke the cold panic of being burnt alive. The alliteration in “groins”, “guts” and “grave stones” (ll. 20, 22 & 25) quickens the pace heralding the “collective cowardice” (l. 27) of those complicit in the destruction of life and limb, “names squeezed from tubers of life” (l. 26) arguably through being

unable to withstand torture. No-one can escape the mayhem: helpless mothers, unable to protect their offspring, whether from the dangers of the “city fires” or “neon signs” and “cellars of madness”, “scream” (ll. 28–31) in Stanza 4, have been alluded to; the menfolk are even more vulnerable: their identities are purportedly “lost in files” (l. 33) as they are caught in the cross-fire or, worse still, doused with petrol and “barbecued” (l. 40) as new rigid elections, riots and coups become endemic.

A mid-poem climax is reached in Stanza 5 for “[t]he incandescence in the air/ burns inward” (ll. 45–46). The self-devouring rot prompts profound questions regarding fear of the demise of the nation itself: “Is there a name for this fear?/ Is there a fearful country/ in these fields/ where such realities are/ manufactured whole?” (ll. 47–51) Before the distraught call to arms in Stanzas 7 and 8, the poet speaker elaborates on the devastating effects of the “the short-sightedness of power” (Stanza 6, l. 74) worldwide. The imagery in Stanza 6 becomes more horrifyingly graphic: There are whispers in the wind (“I heard a secret” [l. 58]) of the tragic impact on both the animal and human kingdoms with the production of sterile “eggs of blood” (l. 61) and riverbeds and junkyards choked with “multiple deaths ... polluting our world/ with the irascible sense/ of failure” (65 & 68–70). The trajectory of the poem becomes clear. What “bothers” the poet speaker in the opening stanza, is described with mounting exactitude in Stanzas 2 to 5 in relation to the Nigerian crisis, to become a global problem of what is euphemistically termed “the short-sightedness of power” in Stanza 6 (l. 74) – the understatement making the indictment even stronger, leading to a poetic rendering of implied prosaic questions: Do we accept our fate? Do we capitulate? or Do we take action in the corridors of power? in “Shall we join them/ or shall we celebrate/ the vision of empty offices” (Stanza 6, ll. 72–73). Soyinka evidently concurs with Okri’s *imagi/Nation: A preference for continuing as one nation:*

... We must not neglect to decide the exact nature of the *problématique*: That is, are we trying to keep Nigeria a nation? Or are we trying to make it one? The difference is crucial. It outlines the magnitude of the task and qualifies the methodology to be adopted. It returns us again and again to our commencing question: When *is* a nation? (1996: 35)

The first-person plural “we” in both excerpts foregrounds the collective responsibility. As the poem moves swiftly to its wind-induced awakening – “And I wake surprised” in the closing stanza (l. 94; see also Note 4) – the onomatopoeia of two alliterative plosives in “Break the bread/ of initiation into/ revolt” (Stanza 7, ll. 75–77) suggest that it is up to us to stop the rot. The idea of relief in a collective determination to take action is implicit in the ironic reiteration of the word “celebration” in Stanza 6 and Stanza 7 that also picks up the word “incandescence” in the cited lines: “We shall celebrate with our/ emaciated chests./ We shall clench and raise our fists/ in the wonder of incandescence” (ll.78–81) against those who feed off the living dead: “Those worms/ that ravage our serenity” (Stanza 8, ll. 90–91). Given that Nigeria, as metonymic of African leadership, has remained a travesty of mismanagement, the underlying questions remain: What does it mean to be responsible as a citizen? What are the responsibilities of the artist? What does it mean to be a human being? (cf. Fraser 2002: 24). This brings the discussion back to the transformative realization of collective responsibility in the final stanza: “– the incandescence has become/ our own” (Stanza 8, ll. 99-100), thus closing the hermeneutic circle. “When we have said no,” says Okri, “it is easier to say yes. It is only after protest, after saying no, that we can say yes” (2018: 129).

Conclusion

The argument has suggested that this protest poem is not innocent but political, because it theorizes “an alternative reality” (2018: 129). It is transformative in the sense that puts the reality we know into doubt, envisioning an imagi/Nation. “The ultimate purpose of protest is change” (ibid.) says Okri. “Poets are set against the world because they cannot accept that what there

seems to be is all there is” (1997: 3), the syntax here demanding slow reading and enhancing the emotive affect, while coincidentally endorsing Shelley’s famous maxim about poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Leitch, 717), because they confront the world as “a given” (1997: 4). Okri confesses to a poetic vision that seeks to “alter the world”. He acknowledges that poets “come with no tablets of stone, and they do not speak with God” (3). Signifying that it is, instead, the dissenting imagination that inspires poets to “remake the world in words”, he states that it is their heightened sensibility to “human suffering” that raises poetic consciousness. Perhaps more importantly as he posits in *Rise Like Lions* (2018: 77), a poet says no, when he finds things unacceptable; essentially, he believes that “something can be changed, that the world can be altered”. Change for the better is not wrought by politicians but by the poet who “suffers our agonies ... and combines them with all the forgotten waves of childhood” (1997: 3-4). In a reworking of the adage, “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings” into “Out of the mouths of poets speak the yearnings of our lives” (4), Okri intimates that it is not the innocence of childhood but rather childlike optimism allied with justice⁵ that enables one to *imagine* the possibilities of transformation. A fragment from *A Time for New Dreams* (2011: 121 no. 25) encapsulates the mood of “The Incandescence of the Wind”:

All our myths: they should be reunited in the knowledge that unless we return to the unfragmented truth of the family of humanity, unless we return love back to the centre of our ways, unless the colours return home to light, we will be trapped in our myths, which will then become our prisons. Then eventually will follow our doom, and the twilight of all our stories.

⁵ “It is when we begin to protest that we begin to rise to our human potential to shake the foundations of the world, so that justice may prevail. Poetry is most human when it allies itself with justice” (2018: 79).

This fictive liberation is an enactment of the human agency that Okri appeals for in his elegiac protest poem. A coincidental assertion of autonomy and of the self subtly shifts our thoughts and feelings about the world, showing “by indirection, that the world’s visage is not fixed” as he opines in *Rise Like Lions* (2018: 79). The horror and terror of killing in this elegiac protest poem point to the resurgence of transhuman consciousness and the possibility of change. The “unfragmented truth of the family of humanity” and deep wisdom of living without anger or resentment [*sine ira aut studio*] provide an alchemical guideline which places Okri ahead of his time. In this poem, Okri’s imagi/Nation speaks of an unfolding of a supranational soul, communal identity and phase of national being. Yet, this begs the question: Can protest poetry lead to a regenerated nation; will it enable us to become better aware of the society and national culture in which we live through “a making visible, a making real” (2018: 129)? The poem not only creates a hybrid portrait of the atrocities of a civil war sparked by petro-economics, but also suggests that a sharing of the horror can connect the human family in empathy.

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