Unfathomable Depths: "Deep Into Sacred Terrain" in Sir Ben Okri's "The Secret Source" from *Tiger Work* (2023)

Rosemary Gray
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6583-4319
Department of English, University of Pretoria
prof.r.gray@gmail.com

Abstract

Tiger Work is a search for new horizons: at once a *cri de coeur* for Planet Earth and a call for existential creativity that equates to Ben Okri's third millennium "*Imaginatio creatix*." Premised on the urgency to address contemporary man-made disasters, this collection of *stokus* (an amalgam of short story and haiku), poems, and essays is underpinned by the mystical celebration of the wonderment of Nature that we also encounter in "The Tyger" from William Blake's *Songs of Experience*. This article focuses on the core story at the end of this collection entitled "The Secret Source," embedded in the pure vision, the pure song of the "immortal hand and eye" that "dare[d] frame thy perfect symmetry" in Blake's poem. This is the framework that informs Okri's new poetic aesthetic that obliges writers to confront the truth of Western civilisation's dung heap proactively. The approach attempts to map the inherent literary mysticism of the medieval symbolism of the Holy Grail as detailed in Rudolf Steiner's *Christ and the Spiritual World* and the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, where pure, uncontaminated water functions as simulacrum for that which sustains Life as we know it. The crucial message that informs the entire collection is one of hope: the onus is on humankind to take responsibility for our destabilised ecological equilibrium; to find the way forward; to go "deep into sacred terrain," plunging unfathomable depths. Evincing a transcendent post-colonial rather than reactionary decolonial thrust, the stoku advocates for a claiming of agency as it seeks the fresh horizons necessary for all human beings, if we are to persist at all.

Keywords: Ben Okri; existential creativity; Rudolf Steiner; stoku; the Holy Grail; "The Secret Source"; *Tiger Work*; William Blake

UNISA university of south africa PRESS | Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

Scrutiny2
www.tandfonline.co/rscr
Volume 28 | Number 2 | 2024 | pp. 26–38

https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2024.2389444
ISSN 1753-5409 (Online), ISSN 1812-5441 (Print)

Introduction

Existential Creativity, Critical Reception, and Transcendental New Horizons

Sir Ben Okri's *Tiger Work: Stories, Essays and Poems about Climate Change* (2023) is a remarkable book by any standards yet, to date, it has garnered scant critical attention except for Okri's essay on "existential creativity" that is oft mentioned but not critiqued. This is a legislative syllogism that calls on the global village to save our planet that is "under threat" (Okri 2011, 145). The collection is remarkable for its braiding together of the subgeneric categories of *stokus* (Okri's innovative amalgam of short story and Japanese *haiku*), poems, and essays but, more significantly, it is remarkable for its provocative call to arms, intellectual energy, and demonstration of the creative processes of "existential creativity," that is, "the creative ability to reshape our world" via "one planet thinking" (2011, 145).

Born of a world once again in "the throes of extreme crisis" (Okri 2021), accruing not from colonialism but from climate change, existential creativity is a new philosophy in which the onus is on humankind to take responsibility for our destabilised ecological equilibrium. The call is to find the way forward; to go "deep into sacred terrain," Okri's simulacra for Planet Earth in his *stoku* "The Gods Have Departed" (2023a, 63). This is why I use the notion of plunging into unfathomable depths. In the words of Sachin Kesiraju in 2020, "times of uncertainty and distress tend to correlate with a revival in aesthetics. Aesthetic in the biological sense is a reflection of genetic fitness—the same reason a visually striking flower is more likely to [be] pollinate[d]." He expatiates, citing the aesthetic revolution that took place in Archaic Greece to "overcome times of distress," adding that "In the broader sense, the aesthetics of a culture reflects the health and vitality of that culture." It follows, Kesiraju asserts, that "Cultural producers in downtimes have historically emphasized the depiction of idealized beauty to inspire a return to a state of good cultural fitness." And, as Okri intones a year later in *The Guardian*'s Opinion Page (Okri 2021), artists—be they painters of writers—have an obligation to confront the dangers of climate change. "The response to our most urgent threat requires new forms of creativity and human imagination," says Okri. Elaborating on its urgent ecocritical motivation to address our planetary crises, Okri reiterates his persistent concern, saying:

> Faced with the state of the world and the depth of denial, faced with the data that keeps falling on us, faced with the sense that we are on a ship heading towards an abyss while the party on board gets louder and louder, I have found it necessary to develop an attitude and a mode of writing that I refer to as existential creativity. This is the creativity at the end of time. (2023a, 187)

Responding to what he hyperbolically calls "Okri's current howl of existential angst," Aberjhani (2021, 3) somewhat paradoxically counters with a rebuttal, then an endorsement, saying:

> My brand of existential creativity cannot include the assertion that these days are humanity's last days. I have to hold my creative endeavour and my mindful intentions accountable for something more than standing on street corners screaming the end is near. That is where the visionary aspect of Okri's battle cry comes into play and where our philosophical approaches align best.

Okri is at pains to explain that his existentialism is visionary, not negative. Unlike that of Camus and Sartre, his brand of existentialism is driven by "a special kind of love for the world" (2023a, 189). Yet, not without coincidence, Jean-Paul Sartre's defence of existentialism against the communist charge of its being a "bourgeois philosophy" (2001, 1), possibly because its first principle is "that man turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself" ([1946]2001, 292–293), is entitled "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (Kaufman 1989). Contrary to expectations and because humanism implies a democratic rather than a socialist doctrine, it can be seen as a social ideology. As Walter Kaufman (1989, 1–2) notes, it "affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity," a brand of symbiosis—together with the *Imaginatio creatix*—that informs Okri's *Tiger Work.* "We say," says Okri (2023a, 95, 97) in "From a Sacred Place" that "there is a climate emergency. But it is truer to say that there is a humanity crisis."

A general tenet of existentialism is personal freedom and choice, whereas that of socialism is lack of choice and firm rules of restraint as witnessed in "The Secret Source," where the suspicion of chemically treated water is met with denial (193) and questioning is forbidden by the powers that be.

Okri (2023a) explains that "the depth of denial" about the status quo compelled him to engage in "creativity at the end of time," where creativity is that "wherein nothing should be wasted" (187–188). For writers "it means everything I write should be directed to the immediate end of drawing attention to the dire position we are in as a species" (ibid.). As long ago as 1959, J. P. Guilford claimed, in concert with Okri's view, that the interest in creativity was "an aspect of our *Zeitgeist*" and that "the most urgent reason is that we are in a mortal struggle for the survival of our way of life in the world" (cf. Vernon 1970, 167).

Addressing the catastrophic crises of the current era, Okri earlier explained his innovative utopian mode: "I propose existential creativity, to serve the unavoidable truth of our times, and a visionary existentialism, to serve the future that we must bring about from the brink of our environmental catastrophe" (Okri 2021). And his protest poem "Earth Cries" (Okri 2023b) advocates for environmental justice. As noted by Nelson Ratau (2023, personal communication), "The poem is overtured with the caption, 'In a new poem, the writer and author calls for bold action in this era of wildfires, overheated oceans and shrinking biodiversity'."

It can be argued that Okri's notion of environmental justice implies a non-colonial liberalism and that his global world-view is one mechanism by which Okri's existential

creativity can be seen as postcolonial, as he explicitly criticises contemporary metropolitan power structures (to borrow loosely from Cheryl Stobie [2018, 34]). Environmental justice goes hand-in-hand with an enlightened stewardship of nature implicit in the concept of the development of environmental laws, and the implementation and enforcement thereof. Okri's concept of environmental justice echoes Fetson Kalua's view of the elements of ontopoesis or heightened awareness in postcolonial theory:

> From the commencement of postcolonial theory, its adaptability makes it imbued with a remarkable level of self-reflexivity as an instrument for change, or transformation in society – the kind of transformation which is the theory's main vocation in our time. (Kalua 2019, 50)

In corroboration, Kalua goes on the cite Robert Young's (2012, 21) definition of postcoloniality that maintains that

> the postcolonial is . . . about . . . unfinished business, the continuing projection of past conflicts into the experience of the present, the insistent persistence of the afterimages of historical memory that drive the desire to transform the present.

Given Okri's desire to transform the present, his "ardent plea for change" (Kirkus Reviews 2023), it is surprising that the critical reception of *Tiger Work* has, to date, been largely limited to brief if high praise for the author. An anonymous reviewer for a leading publisher (Penguin/Randomhouse, n.d.) invokes a historical perspective, noting with an oblique allusion to the *stoku* "The Last Solitude" (2023a, 43–47) in *Tiger Work* that "Twenty thousand years after a catastrophe wiped out the human race, visitors uncover their final messages scattered across the planet, in flooded cities and disintegrating books. These writings reveal the tragedies of people who continued to live as they always did—fearfully and selfishly—even as the end of the world loomed." By contrast, Marlon James (Other Press, n.d.) highlights the paradox in this collection of "a real horror" and the production of "a world of beauty, grace, and uncommon power" that is closer to the reading suggested in the thrust of this article's title that invokes the phrase "Deep into sacred terrain" from Okri's "And The Gods Departed" (2023a, 63). Fiona Surgess (2023) is more fulsomely scholarly in her review:

> Taking in science, politics and future fantasy, the book is a literary howl of frustration at human inaction in the face of existential threat. In A Vision I Once Saw , a re-imagining of the story of Noah's Ark, a man takes a potion that causes reality to bend before his eyes and during which he hallucinates "the last boat in the world" housing a few surviving animal species and "the last children left in a world gone wrong". In And Peace Shall Return a future civilisation stumbles upon tattered evidence of a "vanished species" who "altered nothing in their lives to try to avert the disaster that they saw coming and which was evident every day … They accepted, for centuries, that they were fundamentally unable to change."

In her review entitled "Tiger Work: Literature Meets Sustainability in This New Eclectic Collection by Ben Okri," Surya Ramkumar (2023) cites Okri's "Letter to the Earth" (2023a, 107–110) that asks for initiation through suffering, noting that, "The written word has long been a powerful medium for radical and transformative change." She adds, pertinently: "When you have someone skilled, talented and powerful like [B]ooker-prize winning author Ben Okri taking his pen up against climate change, then there is hope in the horizon."

In its quest for new horizons, *Tiger Work* follows in the footsteps of theorists such as Gadamer, Iser, and Jauss in its revitalising of aesthetic judgement by enfolding the reader and literary history in the creative process (see Jauss 2001, 1548). In this context, an important statement by Hans Jauss is that "The task of literary history is thus only completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as 'special history' in its own unique relationship to 'general history'" (Jauss 2001, 1564). It follows from this, says Jauss, "that the specific achievement of literature in social existence is to be sought exactly where literature is not absorbed into a *representational* art" (ibid.; original emphasis). An example of the diachronic/synchronic interface of *Tiger Work*'s multigeneric thrust is that it is underpinned by the mystical celebration of the wonderment of Nature in "The Tyger" from William Blake's (1757–1827) *Songs of Experience* that Okri uses as his epigraph.

Contrary to a decolonial reading which, as Kalua argues, "introduces oppositional, antagonistic and confrontational polices" (2019, 32), this article proposes a reading of the core story, "The Secret Source," through the prism of Rudolf Steiner's theory of anthroposophy, embedded as it is too in the pure vision, the pure song of the "immortal hand or eye" that "dare frame thy perfect symmetry" (Blake, "Tyger," Stanza 6, ll. 23–24). This is the framework that informs Okri's new poetic aesthetic that obliges writers "to ask unthinkable questions"; to address "our environmental catastrophe" (2023a, 190)—to confront the truth of Western civilisation's dung heap proactively. As with Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics that postulates that "truth cannot be limited to what is confirmable by method," for Okri, truth is likewise essentially "a statement of the unavoidable existence of a 'hermeneutic circle' … understanding is always a movement in such a circle" (Waugh 1992, 144). The implication is that we understand before we reflect, and full understanding is dependent on such reflection.

Okri's aesthetic advances a newer, postcolonial articulation of human experience that calls for heightened consciousness and an active imagination. "African writers are," as Gerald Gaylard posits, "more concerned with the *jouissance* of linguistic play than with extralinguistic meaning" (Gaylard 2005, 80). Okri endorses this in his novel *In Arcadia* (2002, 21), acknowledging:

> And so I play the game of revolving meanings, the double and triple bluff, and leave you enraged at an enigma that does not speak the plain idiotic language that you are used

> to, the language by which politicians and admen con you, the language of so-called plain speaking that blinds you to the lies you are fed, the language that makes a sheep out of you.

Okri has been slated for having "jettisoned reality altogether" (Adil 1995, 23), as Gaylard (2005, 147) observes and for his reanimation of the mythic and symbolic in his attempt to convey deeper meaning. Okri's voyeuristic mode can be seen most overtly in his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Famished Road* (1991) and in *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), for instance. And, this appears to be precisely part of his "double and triple bluff," his ploy to tease meaning out of hegemonic chaos. The title of the *stoku* under discussion—"The Secret Source"—alludes to something hidden, to be searched for, and both his central characters, Fisher and Venus are seekers, which explains why I have chosen to invoke the legend of the Holy Grail to emphasise the need to search for "good water we can drink" (204), "the last real water left in the world" (206). The *stoku* is underpinned by the growing global water shortage, deliberately contaminated water to render the populous passive, and so the need to deal with such a situation proactively. My central argument is founded upon a fellow seeker, Rudolf Steiner, and his account of the Grail Cup, embedded in which is the quest for wisdom, for "rejuvenating renewal" (Steiner 2008, 116), that is, for wisdom and spiritual renewal.

Rudolf Steiner

In the epigraph to his prewar 1913–1914 lectures in *Christ and the Spiritual World and the Search for the Holy Grail*, the seer, Steiner defines what he terms "anthroposophy" as "wisdom of the human being," initiating a modern and universal "spirit of being" that resonates with Okri's "existential creativity" as it provides "suggestions for the renewal of many activities including education (both general and special), agriculture, medicine, economics, architecture, science, religion and the arts" (Steiner 2008, n.p.). This also prefigures Jauss's concept of the revitalisation of aesthetic judgement by enfolding the reader and encompassing the obligation of literary history in the process, already alluded to. Serendipitously, it also resonates with the interdisciplinary range in Okri's 2023 collection, *Tiger Work* and, more especially, it speaks to Okri's symbolist mode and the conundrums in "The Secret Source," with its clandestine search for "pure" (197) water "that hasn't been corrupted" (ibid.). The *stoku* features a small group of youngsters who "understood that they had all been more passive and less inclined to question anything for a while now" (197). Indicative of the "wisdom of the human being," Okri's protagonist, Fisher, realises that "We need water to live. Without it, we will surely die," while his carer girlfriend, Venus, suggests that they "Get the water tested" (197).

Quite apart from alluding to the mode of the *stoku* as a quest myth, this raises the question: What's in a name for an alchemical symbolist writer like Okri? Whether we choose to read the first as an allusion to the Nazarene Jesus's call to his disciples: "I will make you fishers of men if you follow me" (Matthew 4:19), or, as representative of the ancient, ailing Fisher-King, Amfortas, Guardian of the Grail in Arthurian legend and

the Parsifal saga, both evoke man's search for spiritual wisdom. In the Mystery of the Grail, by extension, Venus represents the "harmony" of the stellar region. In line with Steiner's teaching (70–77), together, Fisher and Venus reconcile the Graeco-Hebrew worldviews, a mythic conjunction of the heavens and the earth, of astrology and geology, and so a synthesis of the mythological and elemental spirit, as the close of the *stoku* reveals, as Fisher and Venus descend into the bowels of the earth, led by a young, unnamed boy child, who mysteriously appears as their guide, then disappears. I quote the final paragraphs at some length for clarity, for its dense symbolism, and for its subtle allusion to the Grail Cup:

> "I can't go on," he said, "just leave me here to die."
> Then the child gave Fisher something to drink in the darkness, and he felt stronger. The air became cool and reviving. He could faintly make out the steps in the catacomb darkness. He noticed that Venus's eyes were shining.
> They continued their descent. They could no longer hear their footfalls or the echo of their breathing. They became aware that the boy was no longer with them. There was only a faint white light ahead. Then they reached it.
> There was a clearing. An old man was seated on a stone chair. Behind him, something shone with an unnatural light.
> "What is that?" they asked the man.
> "That," he said, "is the last real water left in the world." (Okri 2023a, 206)

In the light of my evocation of Okri's phrase, "deep into sacred terrain" from his fragment "And The Gods Departed" (2023a, 63), plunging unfathomable depths, Steiner points to the primal character of geology in ancient Hebrew culture:

> We shall grasp the spirit of this ancient Hebrew Geology only if we realise that the whole of Hebrew antiquity tried with all its might to hold fast to the geological character of its revelations . . . the revelations must be looked for, and can everywhere be traced, in the activities and spiritual mobility of the Earth. (Steiner 2008, 117)

With regard to ambiguities, especially when dealing with symbolism, the back cover blurb to Steiner's book quotes his caution in Lecture 6 (2008, 133): "There is no way of approach to the Grail through words of any kind or through philosophical speculations. The only way is by changing all these words into feeling [read Okri's "special kind of love" (2023a, 189) and his penchant for linguistic enigmas], by becoming able to feel in the Grail the sum of all that is holy … "

The *Stoku*—"The Secret Source"

The Arthurian legend of the Grail invokes an incandescent symbolism, a meaning within meaning (cf. Rahv 1952, 16). It belongs, as does "existential creativity" to contemplative humanism or, in Sartre's view, to "a doctrine that renders human life possible" (1959, 1). "Existentialism generally begins *in medias res*, amidst our own situated first-person experience. The human condition is revealed through an

examination of the ways we concretely engage with the world in our everyday lives and struggle to make sense of and give meaning to our existence" (Aho 2023). "The Secret Source" is, at once, a narrative the seeks "to render human life possible" for the immediate future of humankind and it starts "*in medias res*." The opening gambit declares: "One morning, Fisher discovered that something had been done to the water" (2023a, 193): "a meaning within meaning."

The mode of the *stoku* illustrates a poetically rendered moment of insight, a vision or a paradox. As Okri (2009, 108) notes: "By means of the *stoku*, that which was unknown reveals, in the medium of words, a truncated existence." Through this innovative medium, akin to flash fiction, "worlds unknown can come into being in a lightning flash from the darkness of the mind" (ibid.). Put simply, this means to experience serendipity, interiority, or inner vision (cf. Gray 2016).

As intimated, this *stoku*, in particular, can be classified as a quest myth or a spiritually imbued humanist parable where, as argued by Rajendra Chetty (2023, 21), humanism is "an activity devoted to detecting and denouncing tendencies of inhumanity and is linked to critical theory's purpose of revealing and explaining inequalities and hypocrisy in society." The *stoku*'s omniscient narrator informs us that his protagonist discovers by happen-chance one morning that "something had been done to the water" (193), as quoted. Although there seemed to be general consensus about this, the claims were dismissed as "wild rumours"; and "the government carried on as if nothing unusual were happening." Yet the city had begun to sink, there were plagues of mice and rats infesting churches and graves, buildings had toppled and general chaos ensued. Reminiscent of the ostracising of Snowball in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the prime minister deflects concern with a sinister counter claim about "the enemy within," sowing fear and suspicion among the populous. This blatant lie catalyses the secret search for clean water and initiates the quest myth. This builds on Achile Mbembe's (2011, n.p.) assertion of the necessity for a democratic project to take the form of a conscious attempt to retrieve life and the human from a history of waste in his workshop on Theory and Criticism at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The history of waste is articulated in "The Secret Source" as the ugly truth of rivers and the seas choked with sewerage and waste, and poisoned/poisonous marine life, while the official untruth incites racial mistrust, vandalism and arson, and aggravates the ongoing strikes. Those in power capitalise on the worldwide water shortage—reality writ large! "What was previously an ordinary commodity, a thing that people regularly wasted in baths and decorative fountains in the squares, was now rationed to the point that it was as expensive as gold" (194). The consequence of the general austerity measures and social inertia, coupled with the racial distrust, explains the clandestine nature of the two-pronged courageous search by Fisher and his girlfriend, Venus, for a source of pure water, and that of his former classmates to get the water analysed—both hazardous undertakings. These then are the generating circumstances of this dramatic *stoku* that serves to conscientise, derived as the mode is from the ancient Japanese art

of *haiku* (17 syllable nature poems), also known as *waku* and displaying the poet's *Imaginatio creatix* or imaginative wit (itself etymologically derived from the Anglo-Saxon *witan* [to know] (Gray 2016).

As expected, the rising action entails rejection and scorn from their former chemistry professor, for team one, and the cloak and dagger adventures of Fisher and Venus, for the other. Hounded by the police, they too ultimately resort to those who purportedly have authority, to Venus's old chemistry professor, to healers and to a philosopher. However, they are met, in turn, with flattery, theft of her cellular phone, and scorn; so their efforts are to no avail. Later, after near collapse through lack of water,[1] the pair begin hallucinating. Fisher sees mirages: "He saw pools of pure water in the road"; Venus "saw fountains spouting out of concrete" (204).

Significantly, in terms of biblical mythology and in an astute fictive manoeuvre, the climax is reached on the seventh day without water. As the pair collapse, "shut their eyes and succumbed to oblivion," an all-knowing child "came to them," volunteering to take them to his grandfather, who "has the best water in the world" (204–205). In a Jules Verne-type denouement, but one that also alludes to the magical blue gaps in Okri's own *Starbook* and *The Last Gift of the Master Artists*,

> The boy led them to an opening in the earth and down stone steps into the dark depths. They went down for a long time. Sometimes the steps became winding and they descended in a spiral. It was very dark and hot. The child had no light …
> They could not see the steps now. (205)

To enhance the dramatic tension, the pair is apprised of four intriguing statements: first, that the pure water "was always there"; second, that "'It wasn't an accident that I found you,' the child said"; thirdly, "You are the only ones who have sought this water in a long time. You would not have found it yourselves" (205); leading most perplexingly—unless we read this in terms of the Parsifal saga and the quest for the Holy Grail—to "The water has to find you" (206).

The literary allusion seems justified when first Venus faints as she feels her way down but is revived when the child gives her "something to drink"—"the loveliest water" she has "tasted in her life" (206). Likewise, when Fisher collapses, declaring, "I can't go on. … Just leave me here to die" (206), he too is given "something to drink" by the child. Moreover, the narrator describes him as "gasping for air, like a beached fish" (206), recalling the pertinence of his name, suggested at the outset.

Recalling the signification of "eyes burning bright / In the forests of the night" (Stanza 1, ll.1-2) in Blake's "The Tyger," the resolution follows swiftly with Fisher noticing

1 Cf. Bill Bryson (2009, 34, 49; 238–239): "For an object of pure wonder, the human brain is extraordinarily unprepossessing. It is, for one thing, 75–80 per cent water." Just as too much water causes hyponatraemia so, scientifically, too little causes hallucination within four days.

"that Venus's eyes were shining" (indubitably shorthand for enlightenment), the boy guide vanishing and "there was only a faint light ahead" (206). As they emerge from "the catacomb blackness" they see in a clearing "An old man … seated on a stone chair. Behind him, something shone with an unnatural light. That was what had lit up the dark" (206). Upon enquiry, the old man informs them "That … is the last real water left in the world," already quoted

Of course, there are multiple possible readings, but in terms of Steiner's anthroposophy aesthetic, the old man symbolises "the wisdom of the human being," that is, the Earthly wisdom of Father Time, which is what Okri is appealing for. The celestial aspect of the Holy Grail manifests in the divine light of the world reflecting the Mysteries of Golgotha (Steiner 2008, 137). In this context, and given the fact that, in the Grail saga, Parsifal reaches the Grail Castle on Good Friday to succeed the ailing Amfortas, the Fisher-King, as Grail King, Fisher and Venus can be seen as seekers of the truth.

Okri's existential creativity and Steiner's anthroposophy are, by definition, "deeply grounded in the evolution of humanity," itself "inwardly connected with the admonition which resounds to us from the Holy Grail" (Steiner 2008, 137). Steiner closes his sixth lecture by pondering whether "the East could be assuaged by the outflowings of the true Christ Impulse, as was meant to happen, in accordance with the Parsifal revelation, in the West?" And he muses, "Was the sunlight of the Grail called upon to shine above all other gods on Earth, as is symbolically indicated by the fact that when the maiden carried the gold-gleaming vessel, with the secret of the Grail within it, the radiance of the Grail outshone the other lights?" (Steiner 2008, 139–140) By extension, one could argue that Okri's "unnatural light … that lit up the dark" (Okri 2023a,106) implies a desire for "the whole world [to be] ensouled, and thus great harmony [can be] brought about, not only on earth but between the earth and the constellations" (Steiner 2008, 136).

Conclusion

The article discusses current human-caused planetary crises, drawing attention to the climate emergency and the worldwide water shortage. This reading has attempted to map the inherent literary mysticism of the medieval symbolism of the Holy Grail as detailed in Rudolf Steiner's *Christ and the Spiritual World and the Quest for the Holy Grail* ([1962]2008), where the search by Fisher and Venus for pure, uncontaminated water functions as simulacrum for that which sustains Life as we know it. Given the mysterious life-giving drink that the child gives both Fisher and Venus, before vanishing as quickly as he had materialised, when they collapse through dehydration on their way into the bowels of the earth, the argument concludes that this *stoku* is a modern parable in which the unadulterated subterranean water alchemises as "gangada greida" or the spiritual food contained in the Grail cup for those who have the courage to take the initiative to seek solutions rather than passively blaming the gods, nature, or those in power over us. Rahv (1957, 220) explains that "There are certain problems and attitudes

in art, not open to the direct 'intrinsic' approach, which become accessible through the detour of the approach from without." This invokes the aesthetic of "art for art's sake," of art at risk "of being swallowed up by industrialized and mechanical life":

> It signifies, on the one hand, the rationalization, disenchantment and contraction of art, but simultaneously the attempt to preserve its individual quality and spontaneity, in spite of the universal mechanization of life, [on the other]. (Rahv 1957, 220)

"We can only make a future," says Okri in closing his essay on existential creativity, "from the depths of the truth we face now" (2023a, 190). The crucial message that informs the entire collection in *Tiger Work* is one of hope: the onus is on humankind to take responsibility for our destabilised ecological equilibrium; to find the way forward with "a special kind of love' (ibid.); to go "deep into sacred terrain" ("And The Gods Departed," Okri 2023a, 63), plunging unfathomable depths.

References

Aberjhani. 2021. "Conversations with the World 108: Ben Okri's Call to Creative Arms." Visionary Vibes [Blog], 1 December 2021. Accessed 4 February 2024. https://www.author-poet-aberjhani.info/blog-visionary-vibes/conversations-with-the-world-108-ben-okris-existential-call-to-creative-arms

Aho, Kevin. 2023. "Existentialism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/existentialism/

Blake, William. [1910]1924. "The Tyger." In *Century Readings in English Literature*, edited by W. Cunliffe and J. F A. Pyre, 488. The Century Co.

Bryson, Bill. 2009. *The Body.* Doubleday and Random House.

Chetty, Rajendra. 2023. "Critical Humanism and Academic Activism in *Fatima Meer: Choosing to be Defiant* (2022)." *English Academy Review* 40 (2): 17–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2023.2264575

Gaylard, Gerald. 2005. *After Colonialism.* Wits University Press.

Gray, R. 2016. "Promoting the Poetic Cause in Ben Okri's *Stokus* from *Tales of Freedom* (2009)." *Literator* 37 (1): 18–27. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v37i1.1233

Guilford, J. P. [1959]1970. "Traits of Creativity." In *Creativity*, edited by P. E. Vernon, 176–188. Penguin.

Jauss, Hans Robert. 2001. "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 1547–1564. W. W. Norton and Company.

Kaufman, Walter, ed. 1989. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre.* Meridian.

Kesiraju, Sachin. 2020. "Aesthetic Revival." 7 April. Accessed 12 May 2024. www.sachinc.substack.com/p/aesthetic-revival

Kalua, Fetson. 2019. "The Resonant Asset: Exploring the Productive Investments of Postcolonial Theory in the Face of Decolonial Turns." *English Academy Review* 36 (2): 40–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2019.1665256

Kirkus Reviews. 2023. "An Artist's Ardent Plea for Change." 3 April 2023. https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ben-okri/tiger-work/

Mbembe, Achile. 2011. "Democracy as Community Life." Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism. https://doi.org/10.18820/9781920338633/3-1

Okri, Ben. 1991. *The Famished Road.* Jonathan Cape.

Okri, Ben. 1995. *Astonishing the Gods*. Phoenix.

Okri, Ben. 2002. *In Arcadia.* Weidenfeld & Nicholson.

Okri, Ben. 2007. *Starbook.* Random House.

Okri, Ben. 2009. *Tales of Freedom.* Random House.

Okri, Ben. 2011. *A Time for New Dreams*. Rider.

Okri, Ben. 2021. "Conversations with the World 108: Ben Okri's Existential Call to Creative Arms." *The Guardian,* November 12, 2021.

Okri, Ben. 2022. *The Last Gift of the Master Artists.* Bloomsbury.

Okri, Ben. 2023a. *Tiger Work.* Head of Zeus.

Okri, Ben. 2023b. "Earth Cries." *The Guardian*, 5 August 2023. Accessed 6 August 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/05/earth-cries-ben-okri

Orwell, George. 1945. *Animal Farm.* Warburg.

Other Press. n.d. "The Age of Magic: A Novel by Ben Okri." Other Press. https://otherpress.com/product/the-age-of-magic-9781635422689/reviews/

Penguin/Random House. n.d. "Tiger Work: Stories, Essays and Poems About Climate Change By Ben Okri." https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/723216/tiger-work-by-ben-okri/

Rahv, Philip. [1949]1957. *Image and Idea.* Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Ramkumar, Surya. 2023. “Tiger Work: When Literature Meets Sustainability in This New Eclectic Collection by Ben Okri.” Surya Ramkumar [Blog]. https://suryanamkumar.com/tiger-work-book-review

Sartre, Jean-Paul. [1946]2001. “Existentialism Is a Humanism.” Translated by B. Frechman. In *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, edited by C. Guignon and D. Pereboom. Hackett Press.

Steiner, Rudolf. [1963]2008. *Christ and the Spiritual World and the Quest for the Holy Grail.* Translated by C. Davy and D. Osmond. Rudolf Steiner Press.

Surgess, Fiona. 2023. “*Tiger Work* by Ben Okri Audiobook Review – Dispatches on a Post-Apocalyptic World.” *The Guardian* 22 September 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/sep/22/tiger-work-by-ben-okri-audiobook-review-dispatches-on-a-post-apocalyptic-world

Vernon, P. E. 1970. *Creativity.* Penguin.

Waugh, Patricia. 1992. *Reading Modernism, Practising Postmodernism*. Edward Arnold.

Young, Robert. 2012. “Postcolonial Remains.” *New Literary History* 43 (1): 19–42. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0009