Recovering our true state of being in Ben Okri's fable, 'The Comic Destiny' from *Tales of Freedom* (2009)

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Ben Okri's 'The Comic Destiny' from *Tales of Freedom* (2009) is a sobering modern fable that represents a new form of dialogue within the context of dispossession, slavery (in its broadest terms) and fragmented human relationships. Okri confronts familiar history across borders. Profoundly affected by the Nigerian Civil War, Okri confesses to a preoccupation with justice, a key theme in the story. For Okri, a poet-seer, justice alludes to the existence of the ideal lying beyond reality, within a proto-rationalistic worldview.

This article briefly discusses the fable as fictional mode and the symbolism of the forest as setting. This is a contribution to clarifying Okri's gnomic fable with reference to the use of literary, historical and imaginative moral echoes. It suggests that the text contains allusive cross-references to his own *Starbook* (2007) and Beckett's *Play*, reproduced as a film called *Comédie*. There are feint echoes too of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, originally entitled *Comédie*. This reading is deduced from the meaning of *comédie* coupled with the title, thrust and setting of 'The Comic Destiny' with its largely unnamed, world-weary *dramatis personae* lost in an infernal clearing in the forest. Employing the stichomythic dialogic stance of Greek tragicomedy, this modern fable dramatizes the way in which personality tends to obstruct reception and communication. Beckett's thesis is that language perpetuates communicative impasse, while perception is marred by the observer's infecting the observed with his or her own mobility. Okri goes 'beyond' Beckett's separate dynamisms; he exposes the iniquities of slavery, broadly speaking, and the paradoxical resilience of the enslaved, and hints at a redemption of suffering, through an imaginative quest to regain our true state of being.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett's *Play;* communicative impasse; fable; forest symbolism; Ben Okri's 'The Comic Destiny' and *Starbook*

Introduction

Ben Okri sets his fable 'The Comic Destiny' within a series of stokus entitled *'Tales of Freedom* (2009). To read the fable, as such, the reader anticipates a moral pointer at its conclusion; fables are about teaching how to live sensibly. Perhaps we expect the moral to be about freedom, and in the last five brief sections, 'Beyond', we understand that moral – there is the potential to go back to a prelapsarian state at the 'source'. New Woman, one of the most sensible of the protagonists, says:

> 'Let's go back to the source,' said New Woman.
> 'Of rivers.'
> 'Of worlds.'
> 'Of dreams.'
> 'Of realities.'
> 'Of friendship.'
> 'Of fellowship.'
> 'Of what the heart feels.' ('The Comic Destiny' 2009:104).

The rhetoric of a punctuated list: *source, rivers, worlds, dreams, realities, friendship, fellowship, what the heart feels* is a typical call by Okri. The catalogue underpins the message in both 'The Comic Destiny' and *Starbook.* At the climax of the list the statement of impassioned belief that 'what the heart feels' can be a remedy against lack of fellowship and friendship (some of the causes of the multiple ills of the world) is familiar in other works by Okri. The fable creatively dramatizes the human condition. Humans are unable to communicate successfully; their relationships are characterised by that pitiful state; we ourselves have created the condition. The unequal power relations among humans, dispossession, cruelty, the ruin of nature and so on are contained in the phrase 'human condition'. Modern thinkers add the adjective 'biopolitical' to condition. Okri's fable is a dramatic representation of our condition with an Old Man, Old Woman, Pinprop or Mada, an escaped murderer, as well as a young woman and a young man in a forest clearing. The biopolitical condition in which human action happens is described by the slave Pinprop:

> 'Too much neurosis and disease and new diseases … And the shrinking of cages till we can no longer fly … And squabbles and lies and terror. Self-destruction and the willed destruction of other people. And sickness, sir, sickness in the throat and stomach and food and streets and faces and the air …' (2009:10)

Fables hark back to the earliest human stories in writing. The *Panchatatra*, 'Five principles' exists in a Sanskrit form but is only a copy of earlier versions of animal fables with moral pointers (Hertel, 1915). The apparent simplicity of the fable format, the use of satire, a limited number of actors with easily identifiable names, a straightforward plot, action confined to a stereotypical place and an outcome, which reveals the wisdom of one (this time two) at least of the characters, is belied by the wisdom of the moral pointer. Okri's use of rich and complicated echoes and allusions from his literary, historical and imaginative worlds is the give-away that a profound truth is hidden in the fable. This article is a contribution to clarifying Okri's gnomic fable with reference to the use of literary, historical and imaginative moral echoes.

The forest as the dystopic setting of the fable about life and human relationships, although set in the anthropocene, the early 21st century, is a typical device of fable. It is not a particular place but one of the imagination. However, using the topos of *the forest* for the action of the fable Okri places his fable in a tradition in literature which began some ten thousand years ago in writing. The epic about Gilgamesh from the Land between the Rivers (part of modern Iraq) has a famous scene in a *locus horridus* when Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu fight Humbaba in the forest of the Cedars of Lebanon. As is consonant with myth and early literature the forest is a scene of battle. Dante's Divine Comedy opens in a 'selva oscura' (xxx) in Canto 1 of the Inferno. Where the order of things in the Mesopotamian story and the Italian medieval one is ruled by divine plans and the destiny of the characters is ordained and so redeemed; the same is not true of modernity's characters. The clearing in the forest cannot be read out of its context of African and European history in the 20th century. Forests are not Sherwood or Arden nowadays, but Rwanda, Biafra, Katyn, Piatichatki, Bykivnia, and Mednoye, the terrifying list of forests in which the massacres of thousands, ‘the willed destruction of other people’, have happened in the course of the 20th century, and are even closer to Okri's own experience is the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

In the context of human dispossession, slavery and destruction, Okri’s fable has all the characters ensnared in the double yoke of communicative impasse and dysfunctional human relationships, except for the slave Pinprop. In the clearing in the forest , a site of ‘exhaustion’, ‘fear’, ‘terror’ and ‘disorientation’, Mada Pinprop functions as the knowing sensible voice. Mada is clearly a palindrome for Adam or original man, who ate of the fruit of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. Analogously, Pinprop functions as the originating spokesman for those banished from Eden, entrapped by a colonization of the mind, to use Ngugi wa Thiong’s term, and the willed destruction of self and other. It is the slave, Pinprop, who catalogues the disconcerting terrors of contemporary life, speaking out against key moments in history of internecine strife, the slave trade/ slavery, colonization and destruction, as well as ‘boredom’ – a syndrome of modernity and a linear motif in ‘The Comic Destiny’.

Reminiscent of Omovo in *The Landscapes Within* (1981), Pinprop is 'broadly a figure for the people who are disenfranchised, powerless to stop the violence' (Coundouriotis 2015:1091). The pointers implied via this unlikely protagonist, Pinprop, foreshadow the possibility of an ultimate return to a prelapsarian state in the epilogue to 'The Comic Destiny', entitled 'Beyond'. Okri suggests that to follow *Niti*, the sensible way of being, we must live a just life. The fable is an appropriate vehicle to convey a profound message simply. This is the antidote for the spirit which is

> 'Beaten, crushed underfoot, prey to a thousand seasons of sickness. Tedium, neurosis, boredom.' (2009:94)

Okri interrogates injustice, past and present, and represents this fictively. His motive appears to be practical: to find out how human life and conduct can be improved, as WKC Guthrie ([1950]1978:17) notes in the context of Greek thought. Okri's project is a ceaseless dialogue with his own *imaginatio creatix* and his ancestors, on behalf of the dispossessed and disenfranchised, confronting what Ato Quayson (1999:66) terms 'a traumatic history of disability'.

In the hands of a poet-seer such as Okri, 'endowed with the power to see behind and beyond the objects of the real world to the *essences*, concealed in the ideal world' (Chadwick 1973:3; emphasis added), justice, as a remedy for socio-historical and contemporary ills, alludes to the existence of the ideal lying beyond reality. As in 19th century symbolist thought, true reality springs from a vision of paradise regained, where a **just** sensibility operates, as implicit in the appeal to behave appropriately, to take the 'right action' (Guthrie 1978:7).

In his 'Heraclitus' Golden River' (*Wild* 2012:94, ll. 82-83), Okri's reiterated injunction is to 'Spread illumination through this darkening world./ Spread illumination through this darkening world'. With its largely unnamed, world-weary *dramatis personae* lost in an infernal clearing in the forest, a complex symbol that embraces lack of enlightenment as well as terror, 'The Comic Destiny' has New Woman remind us that the way forward is, paradoxically, to go back: 'back to the source', to Nature, to appropriate behaviour [the ancient meaning of justice], to holism. The West African world view,

akin to that of Eastern proto-rationalism, considers the physical universe as being an infinite whole made up of infinite wholes (fractal objects) and governed by infinite synthetic principles.[2] For Okri, an avid Homeric reader, 'justice' is symbolic of ancient wisdom; it has its original non-moralistic meaning.[3] The dialogue and action in 'The Comic Destiny' presuppose the need for both *dike* [justice] and *arête* [virtue or excellence]. For the Greeks, language and thought were inextricably interwoven, and interacted upon one another (Guthrie 1978:4). As a concept, 'illumination' involves *theos,* a god, or a more than human power or force observed everlastingly 'at work in the world' (Guthrie 1978:11): transcendental symbolism at work in the text (cf. Chadwick [1971]1973). As in Dante's medieval epic poem, the term 'comic' is not that which is absurd; it derives from *commedia*, Dante's original title, meaning 'a poetic composition in the style intermediate between the sustained nobility of tragedy, and the popular tone of elegy'.[4]

Okri's plea is thus to spread a beyond-the-norm conception of living – in an apt way [with justice]; having the knowledge and skill [virtue] to follow the sensible way of being. He has long been preoccupied with justice, as indicated in his discussion with Jowett in 1995. He makes this even clearer in *A Way of Being Free* (1997:108), asserting that,

> There are some things on earth that are stronger than death. One of these is the eternal human quest for justice.

Believing that 'fables are made of this [quest for justice]', he elucidates:

> … a people cannot live without it [justice], and in due course they will be prepared to die to make it possible for their children. (ibid.)

As in the entire Okrian corpus, 'The Comic Destiny' from his *Tales of Freedom* (2009) is a quest, in the form of a modern fable, for a just or apt way, behaviour that eschews evil. For Okri, sin or **evil** is devoid of religious connotations and is simply the obverse of **live**, a failure to live a just life, as he suggests in *The Age of Magic* (2014).[5] In his latest novel, Okri argues that living without evil is a palindrome [live] signifying how not 'to die in life' (2014:29) by 'living in the present moment' (2014:28).

A recent interview by Asis De (2015:246-251) in India sheds light on Okri's symbolist mode. Asked for his views on culture, Okri decodes his complex notion of living in the present/ in the heat of the moment:

> CULTURE is a secret ingredient in civilization. It is the frozen things we bring with us from the **past**, transformed by **the ever-living fire of the mystery of being.** (251; emphasis added)

This situates 'The Comic Destiny' in a mythic, non-temporal zone. His writing exemplifies what Homi Bhabha describes as a postcolonial aesthetic of cultural hybridity, exploring as it does the border between diverse cultural traditions, as Mark Mathuray (2015:1104) argues.

In 'The Comic Destiny's' utopian periphrastic thrust, already alluded to, New Man and New Woman, a naked pair, advocate a return to the first day 'when all love was ours' (2009:107). Okri's other unnamed characters, symbolizing a spectrum of the dispossessed, are all in search of a place to rest: 'A room to let' (95). This manifests as a 'white building' with a 'blue door' (96), an Eden from which New Man and New Women emerge at last, and to which Old Man, Old Woman and their slave are ultimately destined. The symbolism epitomizes a fusion of the phenomenal and mystical worlds, via an elegiac fable. We are in a comic position,' says Okri, aligning his view with that of Novalis. 'We are living not with a sense of absurdity, but with a sense of disjunction' (Guignery 2015:1060).

In 'The Comic Destiny', 'evil' is exemplified by Old Man and Old Woman's maltreatment of their slave ('Old Man kicked Pinprop beneath the table …'; 'Old Man and Old Woman … carried him off to the woods … dumped him on the ground with a thud … chained him' [2009:5, 12]). Another manifestation of eviling/not living appropriately is the couple's obsession with past reminiscences: 'each lost in their separate monologues' (2009:15). This is reminiscent of Beckettian characters, who likewise epitomize the way in which personality obstructs reception and communication. Old Woman, in search of a 'happy ending' (2009:17), struggles to gather the threads of her life that manifested as 'signs on the trees' (2009:14) that 'had been scattered all over the place' (2009:15) throughout the forest. Old Man's remembrances are more sinister and historical: of 'the skeletons that strange tribe built their houses with …' (2009:14). This alludes to the prequel to 'The Comic Destiny', Okri's slave

fable, *Starbook.* The argument draws upon a rich tapestry of allusive nuggets from literary and filmic sources; the principal of which is Okri's own slave fable, *Starbook.* Of necessity, the discussion is limited to two interrelated side references: the interrelationship between 'The Comic Destiny' and its prequel, *Starbook*, and Samuel Beckett's radio drama, *Play* (1964).

'The Comic Destiny' (2009) and *Starbook* (2007)

Eleni Coundouriotis (2015:1090) wisely cautions against reading Okri's fiction 'too literally, as factual'. She elucidates: 'Okri defamiliarizes the particular to prod us to reconsider familiar historical narratives' (ibid.). 'Stories,' Okri reminds us in *A Way of Being Free* (1997:112, n.17), 'are either dangerous or liberating because they are a kind of destiny'. Destiny, the 'mysteries of life' and 'justice' are the imponderables that Okri floats in his narrative of the prince and the maiden in *Starbook* (2007), and then explores in a second fable, "The Comic Destiny", that focalizes Old Man and Old Woman and their slave, Pinprop. The novel, *Starbook*, likewise a fable,[6] begins with a description of a pre-colonial Eden, complete with a palace and a shrine house:

> In the heart of the kingdom was a place where the earth was dark and sweet to taste. Everything that was planted grew in rich profusion. The village was built in the shape of a magnificent circle … The forest was dense about the village, and it seemed that those in the heart of the kingdom lived in a magic dream, an oasis of huts and good harvest in the midst of the enveloping world of trees. (2007:3)

By the end of the novel, white slavers and colonial forces have ruined this idyll:

> That night the white spirits fell on the tribe and carried away its strong and its young. They destroyed the village and scattered its inhabitants among the hills. Those who were caught were gagged and bound and sent across the seas; many of them perished in the crossing; those that made it over, in their suffering, spread an unconquerable spirit in the new land; because their spirit, from ancient times, has always been strong. (2007:410)

These two extracts from *Starbook* inform the content and elegiac tone of 'The Comic Destiny' while reversing the narrative trajectory. The sequel begins with a paradise lost:

> Old Man and Old Woman sat in the forest. Pinprop sat at their feet. They were in a clearing. They listened to footsteps running in their direction, and to a siren wailing in the distance. After a while the footsteps receded. (2009:5)

The once flourishing kingdom of Benin, raped and pillaged by imperial forces, is now a global 'clearing' in the forest, with a slave-owning elderly couple. And as intimated earlier, 'The Comic Destiny' ends with a vision of Paradise regained, with the three initial characters together 'in the white building' (2009:98). Endorsing their debilitating ennui expressed in: '"We are too old to chase ideals," said Old Woman' and "'We are too old to seek new beginnings," said Old Man' (61), the old couple remain in darkness, while their slave is sitting 'in the light' (98). That it is left to the new generation to see the light is reinforced by a sleight of hand: the transmutation of Young Man and Young Woman into New Man and New Woman, who appear to have regained their erstwhile love for each other.

> 'Let's be happy again,' said New Man.
> 'As on the first day.'
> 'When all love was ours.'
> 'As it still is.'
> 'And always will be,' the both said together, as one.' (2009:107)

And, in an echo of black Eden in *Starbook* and, coincidentally, of Okri's plea to 'spread illumination through this darkening world' ('Heraclitus' Golden River' 2012:94, ll. 82-83), the recovered pair 'spoke like children discovering light' (103). In this epiphanic moment, New Man had suggested a fresh start, involving going

> '… back to the earth.'
> 'To simple beginnings.'
> 'To what nourishes.'
> 'To what grows.'
> 'To sunlight.'
> 'And flowing water.'
> 'To inner light'. … (2009:103)

This other listing pre-empts that of New Woman, quoted at the outset. The anaphora, here, mimics the gnomic catalogue of what constitutes 'beginnings'. In *The Diversity of* Life, entomologist, Edward O Wilson (1992:211) coincidentally provides a useful scientific explanation of the seductive appeal of 'beginnings' and their mythological association with an Edenic Africa:

> The human species came into the world as a late product of the radiations that, 550 million years into the Phanerozoic, lifted global biodiversity to its all-time high. In a more than biblical sense, humanity was born in the Garden of Eden and Africa was its cradle.

It is testimony to Okri's skill as a word-weaver and the ways in which he evokes notions of Edenic bliss and new beginnings that the novel and its sequel are seldom recognized as chronicles of rampant evil: terror, dispossession and slavery, although their trajectories are marked so plainly from black Eden at the start of *Starbook* to white occupation at the end; and its inversion in 'The Comic Destiny' that repeatedly points to the evils of the slave trade and its legacy, but concludes with a more generalized search for 'inner light' or the sensible way of being [or Niti].

Yet, there are unmistakeable pointers to postcolonial writing back to the imperial centre; for instance, Old Man recalls that,

> 'The strange tribe had built an unhealthy routine round the skeletons. They didn't realize that the skeletons were alive and subversive. And so their routines became hellish and the people became afflicted with diseases that only a final destruction could cure.' (2009:15)

This is a clear intertextual flashback to Okri's fable on the looting of the Benin Bronzes and the iniquities of enslavement and the Third Passage in his *Starbook,* written two years prior to the less polarized Comic Destiny. The novel speaks of the 'White Wind', symbolizing the imperial and colonizing moment. In the sequel, Old Man, presumably a former neo-colonial big wig, muses:

> 'The tribe thought it had finally arrived and then one night in history the owners of the skeletons turned up and began to remove their bones and skulls. The buildings collapsed, and only the artefacts remained.' (2009:15)

This foreshadowing of the collapse of colonialism and the optimistic cargo cult of neo-colonialism in 'The Comic Destiny' are illustrated by linear motifs of light, birds, water, dreams, on the one hand, and a search for a room to let[6] framed by the intermittent screech of a siren, on the other.[7] Pinprop satirizes the colonial endeavour as a quest 'in search of violence', 'Looking for a place to die?' (2009:9) The slave expounds on the early Christianizing mission as '"Ugliness … and the cruelty of myth"' (ibid.); and indicts the slave trade in graphic terms:

> 'The excessive stench of putrefying bodies. Too much blood and tiredness, and iron in the throat. Small places turning septic, and large spaces tumbling into confusion. And people becoming hell. And hunger bloating too many bellies.' (ibid.)

This cascade of negative images can be associated with the existential angst of Beckett. It provides a counter-narrative to the prosaic verse listings of New Man and New Woman that point to a recovery of our true state of being.

'The Comic Destiny' (2009) and Samuel Beckett's *Play* (1964)

The allusive network is masterfully interwoven to present a composite portrait of human ennui and Okri's perception of how to counter the Brechtian alienation effect, central to Beckett's plays. In his monograph, *Proust* (1931), Samuel Beckett evidently perceives of alienation as endemic to the human condition, stating that 'Man is the creature that cannot come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies' (1931:66). Paul Lawley's interpretation of the truth of this credo in the context of Beckett's short radio drama entitled, *Play*, is a more obvious literary allusion, focusing as it does on failed relationships due to an inability to communicate, is usefully insightful. *Play* is, I believe, more pertinent than *Waiting for Godot*, often cited by other critics as a primary Okrian intertext.[8] Lawley accepts Beckett's belief about self-delusion but reinterprets it as akin to classical 'virtue', discussed earlier, saying that it is

> The desiderated 'truth' not a moral truth the opposite of which is a lie (the word is significantly absent from the *Play*) but an ontological truth, a 'truth' of being the opposite of which is the parody of being we are witnessing.[9]

Okri's 'The Comic Destiny' goes beyond communicative impasse to re-enact just such a 'parody of being' before culminating in an opposing ontological truth; what Lawley has called, 'a truth of being' and what this article sees as a sensible [just] state of being.

Axiomatic to Beckett is the belief that 'The Observer infects the observed with his own mobility' (1931:17). Both Beckett's characters in *Play* [M, W1 and W2] and most of Okri's in 'The Comic Destiny' [Old Man and Old Woman; Man, Young Man and Young Woman, Man] are portrayed as having exhausted their capacity for what Lawley (8) terms 'inventing': they 'say the same things over and over' (ibid.). Both sets of characters are imprisoned within language as they are imprisoned within the parody of presence. As Lawley observes: 'As we watch the *Play* [or, in Okri's case by

extension, read this new fable] we realize that the one kind of imprisonment determines the other' (op. cit.). Okri's appeal is ultimately against communicative impasse brought about by being imprisoned in the past and so living past one another: what he indicts as the

> ritual of remembrance again, speaking without hearing the other, interrupting, overlapping, in their inward speech outwardly spoken. (2009:61)

The indictment is against dehumanized interpersonal relationships implied in the inability of the characters to engage in a meaningful exchange of ideas. As argued, Old Man and Old Woman reminisce endlessly about totally separate past experiences yet, parodically, they communicate enthusiastically on ways in which to 'enslave' their slave. Young Man and Young Woman neither appear to be aware of the presence of the elderly couple, nor do they interact physically. The young married couple, with a baby out of sight but not out of earshot, lie on the ground in the forest clearing with fingers barely touching and even when standing up to look for a place to recall their 'unity and love' (70) 'they still kept the distance between them' (ibid.). This is indicative of the constant argument that represents the primary form of communication in a lost relationship. The situational irony is that, while purportedly looking for 'a place to learn how to dream again' (65), they believe, in a Beckett *Endgame* aside that a place to live is 'Any old dustbin is fine …' (66). They thrive on arguing to mask the boredom of a love that once incited jealousy (49-51). The young wife even rejects her husband's recollection of the miracle of the birth of their child, focussing instead on the recollection of pain. This suggests that the narrative technique is one of verbal interrogation via exposure. Invoking Christian mythology and the perception of being initiates in search of 'the light', the young couple stand by the paradox that 'a tolerable hell is better than an impossible heaven' (48). Okri here hints at a possible redemption of suffering, through a striving to regain their true state of being. This manifests in the artistic representation of their figurative emergence from the forest, enlightenment and transformed roles as New Man and New Woman, already discussed.

In addition to being suggestive of Dante's journey through Hell, the forest is thus a synecdoche for Okri's lost and dysfunctional human ciphers, and a simulacra for Beckett's communicative impasse. But, it is also the site of the lost black Eden of *Starbook.*

Pinprop's description of colonialism:

> 'Too much neurosis and disease and new diseases … And the shrinking of cages till we can no longer fly … And squabbles and lies and terror. Self-destruction and the willed destruction of other people. And sickness, sir, sickness in the throat and stomach and food and streets and faces and the air …' (2009:10)

is an elliptical way for Okri's to find a way of sublimating the horrors of colonialism, neo-colonialism and slavery, of countering injustice. His deft incorporation of related allusive references by Pinprop to the play-within-a-play, 'The Mouse Trap' from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as well as to Aesop's fable of the goose that laid the golden eggs, support this interpretation. Echoing the legendary founder of fable, Aesop, it is the worldly-wise and verbally acute slave who cites these exempla: conventionally read as fables of murderous greed and self-betrayal.[10] Both exempla function as cameos of the whole, where meaning dawns slowly and cumulatively through analogy. Both function as rhetorical instruction on the need for illumination to counter 'evil'.[11]

The phrase 'recovering our true state of being' is central to both the thrust of this article and Okri's understanding and depiction of the power of the creative imagination: 'Life is a masterpiece of the imagination', says his Young Man (72); and of the power of a fruitful dream to counter the barrenness of a finite analytic paradigm expressing the way our finite senses [our finite brains] function. In the concluding section of 'The Comic Destiny', New Man in conversation with New Woman advocates a counter paradigm, an infinite synthetic paradigm of a proto-reality, symbolizing holism, common to both African and Eastern cosmogony, as already discussed, and through the agency of new beginnings:

> 'Let's dream again,' said New Man.
> 'Like we used to as kids.'
> 'Of Eden when it was new.' (105)

This serves to highlight what Okri calls 'the dream logic of his work' (Guignery 2015:1058). As is customary, Okri is specific. He avers: 'Imagination dreams that which knowledge makes real. It could be said that imagination is the protoreality' (*The Mystery Feast* 2015:15). This returning movement to a holistic or synthetic approach to reality can, as New Man suggests, 'restore' an earthly paradise. His advocacy of 'love', 'courage', 'patience' and 'wisdom' (2009:105), coupled with New Woman's desire to go 'back to the source' (2009:104) – quoted earlier – and of 'learning to play again/ As on the first day' (2009:106) in the garden, is invoked as a counter agent to the ennui of postmodernity encapsulating the fable's moral.

Jeremy Lefkowitz reminds us that, in antiquity, the Graeco-Latin fable was 'linked to the lower classes and affiliated with slaves' (2014:1). He (2014:13) notes: '*The Life of Aesop* also stages the emergence of fable from the world of slavery … [It] also emphasizes a number of thematic connections between Aesop's status as a slave and animal fables for which he became famous.' Okri's protagonist and the only named character in 'The Comic Destiny' is an Aesopic slave, known to his keepers, the new, neo-colonial 'corruptors' of the land, Old Man and Old Woman, as Pinprop. Not only is he intelligent and knowledgeable, as suggested in the earlier discussion, but he informs Man, an escaped lunatic, that he is called Mada. Naming is important in this fable.[12] This reference to the power of language could, it seems, allude to the biblical *logos* in Genesis; and the legend of Eve's role in the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and the couple's subsequent hiding from the wrath of God, newly aware of their nakedness. Okri transposes the legend and New Man and New Woman seemingly get a second chance, while Pinprop ultimately basks in the 'light'.

'The Comic Destiny' has been performed, as a staged drama. The appellation Pinprop can therefore also be adduced to evoke notions of a propsman of modern, realistic theatre, a pivotal stage prop or theatrical device, a pinpoint or focal point that brings the separate points of view together. In the fourth or penultimate section of 'The Comic Destiny', we read:

> Old Man and Old Woman sat in the white building. Pinprop sat at their feet. Everywhere else was in darkness, except Pinprop. He sat in light. (98)

Pinprop symbolizes the light of enightenment. Both Old Man and Old Woman are slavishly dependent on him for he alone can create. Pinprop can be seen as the correlative of the light in Beckett's *Play*, the light [whether of God or Satan] that obliges M, W1 or W2 to speak. Lawley (op.cit.:10) explains: 'It is the inquisitor-light which confirms and reveals, indeed in a sense *creates*, so that release from the light would mean from this state'. He cites the following punning interchange from *Play* in illustration: 'When you go out – and I go out. Some day you will tire of me and go out … for good'. For Beckett's W1, speech or the use of language is dependent on the stage light shining on her. By extension, she is portrayed as evidently believing that it must be something in language which is required by the light. Okri's usage parallels this. Pinprop mocks his keepers and presumably a religious ethos that permits humankind's inhumanity, by laughing, singing then shouting, 'into the silence':

> 'Slave, slave, let there be light.'
> Silence.
> 'Let there be light, slave,' he shouted. (98)

Then in a *volte face* and a subtle allusive cross-reference to Beckett's *Play*, the narrating voice quips: 'The light that was on Pinprop turned instantly to darkness' (99). Pinprop's retort is: '"Ah, … the word made manifest. Now for some peace."'(ibid.) and in a second unscripted stage direction, beyond solipsistic communicative impasse, we are told that silence follows. Okri thus 'defamiliarizes the particular to prod us to reconsider historical narratives' (Coundouriotis 2015:1090).

Conclusion

Like Okri's 'The Comic Destiny', Beckett's *Play* is full of obvious Christian echoes, but it contains fewer marked historical and anthropological allusions. All three fables discussed treat conventional social behaviour through satire to mask the central question: What are we doing here? There is a marked tension between subject and form: the farcical proceedings of life and fractured communication keep the reader/audience's attention off the despair of life.

The importance of the double version of Okri's 'The Comic Destiny' (text and staged play) and Beckett's *Play* (staged play and film) is that of visual media, a preferred mode for contemporary dissemination of knowledge where reading often takes a back seat. In addition to the topicality of subject matter, the appeal accrues from the intense theatricality, although nothing much happens in either writers' plots. Bamber Gascoigne ([1962]1970:184-185] pertinently observes that 'the endless cross-talk … is always funny and at the same time sad'. He elaborates: 'good cross-talk acts are very funny, and sad because their main reason for talking at all is just to pass away the time, to fill the void' ibid.). As Verna Brown asserts in her article on communicative impasse: 'When the pact is not renewed between past and present, or between people, there is a fragmentation into separate dynamisms that cannot cohere.' (2009:70) Gascoigne concludes: 'Under the farcical ripple of dialogue lies a serious concern' (ibid). The question arises: Is a fable a subtle way of talking about the politics of control – which inscribes and prescribes life? Okri seems to wish not only to foreground socio-political malaise but also to suggest possible remedies besides Danté's eternal providence. To do so, he has devised fables in which the questing imagination follows the movement suggested by the subtitle to Tolkien's germinal work, *The Hobbit* ([1937]1995):'there and back again' (to borrow from Irwin [1961:578] although in a different context).

In a topsy-turvy world, Okri's project in this fable is idealistic, to 'Spread illumination/ Through this Darkening world' ('Heraclitus' Golden River' 2012:83), following the legacy of Romanticism as, for instance, in Keats's yearning for renewal in 'On sitting down to read *King Lear* once again':

> When through the old oak forest I am gone,
> Let me not wander in a barren dream,
> But when I am consumed in the fire
> Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire. (ll.11-14)

'The Comic Destiny' re-dreams of 'new Phoenix wings' for, as Okri states, 'All the high road stories have been told, but not the hidden roads stories that lead to the true centre' (2015: 29). In an early poem, 'An African Elegy' (1992:41) – a meditation on death – Okri concludes with the affirmation that 'The Sky is not an enemy/ Destiny is our friend'. Elsewhere, he intimates a rationale for his new

fable: ‘The greatest stories are those that resonate our beginnings and intuit our endings, (our mysterious origins and our numinous destinies), and dissolve them both into one’ (*A Way of Being Free* 1997:114, n.26).

Without wishing to appear trite, as Okri is never prescriptive, ‘The Comic Destiny’ is a story that – in its quest for justice – resonates ’our beginnings and intuit[s] our endings, (our mysterious origins and our numinous destinies)’ (ibid.). The closing scene, in particular, with Pinprop. Old Man and Old Woman together in the white house with the blue door, coupled with the appeals by New Woman and New Man for new beginnings, is illustrative of dissolving both our beginnings and endings ‘into one’. It is, as this fable suggests, our true state of being to reconcile hierarchical social constructs, to strive to dissolve erstwhile disabilities such as fear, dispossession and slavery by getting ‘back to the source’ (2009, 104), to Nature, to seemly behaviour [the ancient meaning of justice], to holism. Such is Okri’s imaginative quest for unity.

Notes

1 Okri acknowledges that he was profoundly affected by first-hand experiences of the Nigerian Civil War and its wanton slaughter of innocent bystanders. See, for example ‘Laughter beneath the Bridge’ (1986) and ‘In the Shadows of War’ (1988). He explains to Jowett (1995:28) that, ‘[t]hese people who were killed left a huge impression on me. In a way that’s the core of almost everything I do and think about; the mysteries of life, justice’. These are key themes in ‘The Comic Destiny’.

2 As the Ionian philosopher, Ion Soteropoulos (pers. com.), and the Nigerian symbolist, Ben Okri, believe. Symbolism can be defined as ‘the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them directly, nor by defining them through overt comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by re-creating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols’ (Chadwick [1971]1973:2-3).

3 It denotes *dike* – in Greek literature, literally ‘the way or path’, as in the way the various classes customarily behaved. Compare the modern phrase ‘as one would expect’, rather than the right way. ‘Virtue’ from the Greek *arête* was vocational, and as Guthrie (1978:9) 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.’

4 Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). *The Divine Comedy*. Introductory Note (The Harvard Classics, 1909-14) http://www.bartleby.com/20/1001.html> (accessed 18 September 2016) p.1.

5 See R Gray, ‘An Interval in the Enchantment of Living: Ben Okri’s *The Age of Magic* (2014)’, *Analecta Husserliana,* forthcoming.

6 The Biblical allusion is arguably to the biblical Mary and Joseph finding ‘no room at the inn’ prior to the birth of the Christ child.

7 There is an escaped murderer and a young argumentative couple who have forgotten how to love and who end up in leg irons, whereas the mad murderer ultimately runs towards his recapture – so the

siren signifies literal policing but also alludes, figuratively, to the cacophony of the living dead [read exhausted] and the leitmotif of slavery.
8 Jay Panini's observation in *The Guardian* (25 April 2009:1) is that Pinprop 'combines elements of Lucky and Pozzo from *Waiting for Godot'* but, although wisely suggesting that the setting could be Africa, he damns 'The Comic Destiny' with, 'But this is Beckett on hallucinogens'. In contrast to my reading, Nisha Obana (n.d.) states categorically that, '"The Comic Destiny" employs a series of absurd dialogues and dramatic situations that are reminiscent of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*'. Missing the mode too, both critics read the novella as a *stoku*.
9 http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num09/Num9Lawley.htm (accessed 14 September 2016).
10 Aesop was a legendary Greek composer of moralistic animal fables of the 6th century BC. The most well known of these in English literature was the Cock and the Fox in Chaucer's medieval 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales* (C. Gillie. 1972. *Longman Companion to English Literature*. London: Longman, p. 379. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* ([1959]1970, 14) notes that Aesop was a deformed Phrygian slave (c. 620-560 B.C.)

The Goose that laid the Golden Egg is common to many cultures and appears in many variations. Its Eastern analogue features in Buddhism as a dead husband reincarnated as a swan with golden feathers. The impoverished family are invited to pluck a single feather from time to time to support themselves. The greedy widow plucks all the feathers which revert to ordinary feathers (*Savannahamsa Jakata*. http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/The_Goose_ That_Laid_the_Golden_Eggs p. 2 [accessed 14 September 2016]).

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Claudius's reaction to the play within a play can be seen as exposing his guilt for having murdered his brother, King Hamlet, usurped his throne and married Gertrude, the widow. The story was believed to be a widespread legend in Northern Europe.
11 This is encapsulated in Okri's neologism, **eviling**, where 'evil' is a palindrome for 'live' (already discussed). The slave, Pinprop, who delights in obfuscation rather than revelation, typifying his social status, suggests this interpretation by asserting that 'The final destination of the goose is when it can become an egg; and with the trap it is when it ends up as a mouse' (6-7). The role reversal or word play here points to the need for a careful re-reading of both legendary examples and, coincidentally, of Okri's fable and its novel prequel.

In *The Mystery Feast* (2015:18), Okri reveals his own re-reading of another well known but oft misread story, that of *Cinderella*: "The truth is that because of her hard work, her obedience, her humility, her goodness of spirit, her kindliness, her toughness, her quiet initiating, because of all these things and more, which the tale only hints at, Cinderella is the most deserving of the sisters. She earned her glory by her toil and her spirit, and not by the appropriate size of her feet." Okri clinches his reading by stating that "In this story her feet are merely a symbol of having walked *the right path* (ibid.; emphasis added).
12 It is of interest that Vladimir Propp (Nøigaard 1964) is a prominent 20th century theorist, who influenced the study of the formal features or conventional narrative elements and content of fable (Lefkowitz 2014:4), while the genre is attributed to the legendary Aesop, trickster-slave fabulist in the 5th century BC (Herodotus *Histories* 2.134). In response to verbal repartee involving Pinprop's taunting of Old Man and Old Woman with 'Fear, fear, fear', followed by 'Terror, terror, terror' (79), and his claim that 'They are just words', Old Woman cautions: 'Words can be made manifest.' (ibid.)

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