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The text as riddle and Death's many ways:
Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Refuting the term of magic realism, this article explores how “trans-realism,” that Ben Okri defines as accounting for the African aesthetics presiding over the writing of the novel, works throughout *The Famished Road*. The “I” narrator, the *abiku*, the spirit child, allows access to different levels of consciousness and different territories; he also helps to think Time as the co-existence of past and future lives. Transformations and metamorphoses are the modalities of a mutable world where death is never what one thinks. Writing is placed under the sign of the love of the mother, less colorful a character than the father, closer to the everyday life. Boundaries are erased, the two worlds (of phenomenal reality and the supernatural) make one, stories are embedded, interspaces are both spaces in-between and access to the otherworld. Reading with Azaro means reading the riddle (of life, of death, of incompleteness), the form and the aesthetic model of a text that displays its conception of the unknown in paradoxes and contradictions. The unresolved and the infinite make do with the remainder; silence can be heard among the chaos of celebrations, battles and fights; dream, a modality of writing and being, dares to invent another world.

Récusant le terme de réalisme magique, cet article explore le « trans-réalisme » à l'œuvre dans The Famished Road, défini par Ben Okri comme rendant compte de l'esthétique africaine qui préside à l'écriture. Le « je » narrateur, l'abiku, l'enfant esprit, permet d'accéder à différents niveaux de conscience et différents territoires ainsi que de concevoir une temporalité qui fait coexister vies passées et à venir. Transformations et métamorphoses sont les modalités de ce monde mouvant dans lequel la mort n'est jamais ce que l'on pense. L'écriture est placée sous le signe de l'amour de la mère, personnage moins haut en couleur que le père, plus proche de la réalité de la vie quotidienne. Par ailleurs les frontières s'effacent, les deux mondes (de la réalité phénoménale et du surnaturel) ne font plus qu'un, les histoires s'imbriquent les unes dans les autres, les espaces interstitiels sont à la fois entre-deux et accès à l'autre monde. Lire avec Azaro revient à lire l'énigme (de la vie, de la mort, de l'incomplétude), forme et modèle esthétique d'un texte qui déploie dans le paradoxe et la contradiction sa conception de l'inconnu. L'irrésolu et l'infini se conjuguent avec le reste; le silence s'entend avec le chaos des fêtes, des batailles et des combats; le rêve, modalité de l'écriture et de l'être, ose inventer un monde autre.

The world is full of riddles that only the dead can answer. (39, 89)¹

Life is full of riddles that only the dead can answer. (48)

... the feeling of a kiss for ever imprinted, a mystery and a riddle that not even the dead can answer. (267)

There are many riddles of the dead that only the living can answer. (489)

Le signifiant fonctionne sur le fond d'une expérience de la mort. [...] Le sujet est amené à se comporter d'une façon essentiellement signifiante en *répétant quelque chose qui est à proprement parler mortel*. (Lacan 1994, 51, emphasis mine)

There are many ways to be dead. Besides, the dead are not what you think. (378)

What kind of reality is depicted in Ben Okri's Booker Prize winning novel, *The Famished Road* (1991), a disconcerting text told from the point of view of a spirit-child whose episodic adventures between the Unborn, the Living and the Dead the reader embarks upon? At the threshold of the text, the mother (Mum) is the main motive for Azaro's desire to stay among the Living: "But I sometimes think that it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to *make happy the bruised face* of the woman who would become my mother" (6, emphasis mine). The space of the novel is precisely the textual rendering of this interspace where the reader, *abiku*-like, directly partakes in the profound uncertainty of experience between the natural world and the supernatural. The driving force is the love of the mother, reparation for suffering. Reading with Azaro, oscillating between two realms that in effect make one, means making sense of a chaotic world, knowing well that the quest for meaning and knowledge, like the road of the title, hungers for an impossible completion. The format of the riddle with its repeated questioning of interpretation and epistemology could be said to serve metonymically as the deep structure of the production of the text (This proposition privileges one of the many genres that make up the novel in its complex and extreme intertextuality. Concurrent readings that would alternatively put forward mythic thinking, legend building, the structure of the folktale, or the epic mode may also be envisioned). Relying on language, it provides a conceptual and aesthetic frame which, to paraphrase Azaro, ascertains "the liberty of limitations" (557). This reading would take its cue from Ben Okri's own assertion:

1. I would like to thank Françoise Clary, Vanessa Guignery, Michel Naumann and Claire Omhovère for their generous help in collecting secondary sources on the novel.

I'd like to propose that we should stop making so narrow what constitutes the African aesthetic. It is not something that is bound only to place, it's bound to a way of looking at the world. It's bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It's the aesthetics of possibilities, labyrinths, of riddles—we love riddles—of paradoxes. (Wilkinson 87-88)

Trans-realism

To account for the specific status of the “reality” depicted by the text, most critics of *The Famished Road* try to coin a term linking two apparently paradoxical textual regimes, that of the real (the physical, the phenomenal world) and that of the supernatural (the strange, the fantastic, the marvelous, the otherworldly; to understand the differences between these genres, see Todorov). In his review of the novel, Anthony Appiah states that Okri does not follow the tenets of Latin American magic realism:

My own sense is that there is a difference between the ways in which Latin American writers draw on the supernatural and the way that Okri does: For Okri, in a curious way, the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather, it is more real than the world of the everyday. (Appiah 147)

Similarly, Olatubosun Ogunsanwo goes so far as to refute the term of magic realism in his critique of Brenda Cooper's analysis (1998), calling it a “misnomer” (Warnes 2009, 135). The literary aesthetics of *The Famished Road* would then be resting on “spiritual realism” (Appiah 1992) or “animist realism” (Garuba 1993; Quayson 1997b) or “sacred realism” (Mathuray 2009) or “shamanic realism” (Oliva 1999). Douglas McCabe, in a controversy with Esther de Bruijn (2007), probes into “New Ageism” as a way out of the framing of the novel as a postmodern postcolonial text that destabilizes metadiscourses (2005). Christopher Warnes, for his part, engages in a chronological reading of Okri's oeuvre to locate *The Famished Road* in a trajectory that leads from an “African” perspective to the utopian and allegorical slant of the writer's later works (132). The critic retains the term magic realism elaborated by Cooper and Aizenberg but qualifies it. He offers to “allow a particular brand of magic realism to emerge from within the novel itself, and to avoid distorting comparisons with the strand of magical realism which favour metaphor and irreverence over myth and faith” (Warnes 135). Various analyses also rehearse the quarrel between postmodernism and postcolonialism, and their possible overlap (Hawley). Broadly speaking, they oppose an apolitical intervention—critical of politics and intent on creating a new aesthetics, the novel would not carry a decipherable political message—and a political statement on colonialism and corruption and violence in post-independence Nigeria. If such were the case, the question of agency and social change inherent in such a positioning would need to be settled in the text and the

novel is precisely a complex questioning of these possibilities. Others still move beyond the postcolonial to promote Okri's work as an example of "decolonized fiction" (Cezair-Thompson 34).

For his part, Okri believes that the power of resistance is located in what has remained "inviolable" in African consciousness:

There's been too much attribution of power to the effect of colonialism on our consciousness. . . . [A] true invasion takes place not when a society has been taken over by another society in terms of its infrastructure, but in terms of its mind and its dreams and its myths, and its perception of reality. . . . There are certain areas of the African consciousness that will remain inviolate. (Wilkinson 86)

Thus *The Famished Road* is an attempt to view the world through that prism, a perception of reality that is intrinsically African as the text rests on a system of beliefs, references to myths, rituals, the cult of the ancestors that inform its very nature, dictate its texture and command its hybrid narrative mode. It is concurrently embedded in an Africa that is resolutely contemporary and modern. Moreover, much of the innovative stylistic features of the novel stem from its closeness to poetry—Okri's *An African Elegy* finds its way in the prose of the novel (1992, 41)—and from the novel's integration of other forms belonging to the oral tradition: animal fables, folktales, myths, legends, stories, riddles, as well as brisk dialogues, puzzling exchanges or anonymous conversations inadvertently overheard (323). The mention, among other things, of Chinese medicine, the Greek and Roman classics, the Bible, the *Arabian Nights*, the life-stories of Shaka the Zulu and Sundiata the Great (468) and Homer's *The Odyssey* (489) alert the reader to a broader dialogic intertextuality with world literature, knowledge and science. Unlike Dad's dictionary, a book that "explains books" (469), *The Famished Road* is a book that has ingested many other books.

Okri calls his writing "trans-realism," that is, a form of writing that is both "inside and outside realism" since "realism is too limited a mode to talk about reality. Realism is less than reality, much less." (Fulford 251). Indeed, the "realism" of the novel functions on multiple levels that are not mutually exclusive: "So many things that will seem puzzling in the book are actually in the possibility of a life lived simultaneously at different levels of consciousness and in different territories" (Wilkinson 83). The writer strenuously denied that he set out to produce strange or fantastical effects: "All I'm trying to do is write about the world from the worldview of that place so that it is true to the characters ... it's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions" (Wright 1997, 156). Echoing Soyinka's symbol of the Möbius strip (Soyinka 87), he further explains that "[t]he novel moves towards infinity basically. You're dealing with a consciousness ... which is already aware of other lives behind and in front and also of people actually living their futures in the present" (Wilkinson 83). This state-

ment is almost reproduced verbatim in Dad's last speech: "Many people reside in us ... many past lives, many future lives. If you listen carefully the air is full of laughter. Human beings are a great mystery" (573). The novel thus contains clues to its own import and make-up, a reflexivity that, however, falls short of being parodic, contrary to Ogunsanwo's assessment of its postmodern character (Ogunsanwo). That similar statements are found in interviews and in one of his characters' speech calls the reader's attention to the status of that character as the author's mouthpiece and consequently to the intrinsic generic hybridity of the novel's construction.

Okri's definition of African aesthetics as a way of looking at the world appears indeed in the text: "One world contains glimpses of others" (11). That glass (the photographer's glass cabinet), dark, yellow and blue sunglasses, window panes, mirrors (390), masks, photographs become symbolic objects testifies to this conception of a multilayered world with multiple levels of existence that are given equal value and whose order in the hierarchy of perceived reality is constantly unsettled. The point of view changes from one level to the other with extreme fluidity: things or plants or animals or people are never what they seem to be, or rather, what they are. The night forests where "all forms are mutable, and where all things exchange their identities" (523) epitomize what is at work in the text itself. Indeterminacy is located at the level of being. It is ontological. It reflects the instability of the *abiku*, which stands in for the metaphor of being in the world:

The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. . . . History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit child.

There are many who are of this condition and do not know it. There are many nations, civilizations, ideas, half-discoveries, revolutions, loves, art forms, experiments, and historical events that are of this condition and do not know it. There are many people too. They do not all have the mark of their recurrence. Often they seem normal. Often they are perceived of as new. Often they are serene with the familiarity of death's embrace. (558)

Nothing is fixed: metamorphoses and transformations are modalities of being in a mutable world where roads are rivers, children spirits and death paradoxically "too perfect" (378) since it annihilates striving. In *The Famished Road*, the *abiku* chooses to live, but is repeatedly called back into the realm of the spirits. Repetitions and recurrences at the narrative level and in language—the "doom of repetition" (Soyinka 88)—reflect the characters' comings and the goings, create the ebb and flow of the text.

“The bruised face of the woman...”

Unlike Soyinka’s *abiku* who ironically mocks his mother’s efforts to keep him in this world, the overarching gesture of Okri’s novel is a son’s answer to his mother’s love:

Night, and Abiku sucks the oil
From lamps. Mothers! I’ll be the
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep
Yours the killing cry.
(Soyinka 30, ll. 25-28)

As his shortened name indicates, Azaro is no Lazarus, arisen from the dead, although he at one point answers by this name (193). The comparison better suits his father: “When we went back into the room, Dad was sitting up on the bed like Lazarus” (554).

The text is devised as a narrative with a prologue (Book I, chapter 1) that depicts the world of the Unborn and the spirits, states the myth of origins and explains the text that follows as the “I” narrator’s troubled journey on earth. It posits this primeval world as timeless and gives clues to the reader who will then read through Azaro’s eyes. For instance, the black cat that recurs could be the king of the spirits who “takes on the form of a great cat (3) (cf. *inter alia* 46, 47, 58, 92, 134; “I saw a black cat at my feet and I fed it bean-cakes” [550]; “At the door, sitting on its tail, was a black cat” [554]). Azaro’s adventures out of the ghetto into the forest soon give way to his father’s feats, Dad’s fights against various opponents while Madame Koto’s progress from bartender to “madame,” as she supports the Party of the Rich, constructs another narrative thread. The belated apparition of Ade, an *abiku* friend of Azaro’s and Helen, the beggar girl, two characters with names, also introduces narrative progression and variation. Ade is a double of Azaro; Helen functions as his female counterpart and as a rival or a double of the mother. The last book is limited to one chapter: it contains a description of Dad’s dream—he is redreaming the world (564)—that goes back to the beginnings. Azaro joins him: “I followed Dad sometimes in his cyclical dreams. I followed him in his escape into the great realms and spaces, the landscapes of genius, the worlds before birth, the *worlds of pure dreams and signs*” (565, emphasis mine). The text thus metonymically rehearses at that point the whole length of the novel: the history of the world or rather the histories of the universe within one single consciousness inhabited by others in a dizzying *mise en abyme* of dreams

After his father wakes up, delivers a resounding speech, asks him to respect animals and the mystery of human beings, stresses the mystery of human beings, but also, more prosaically, sends him to buy cigarettes, Azaro embraces Time (and death?): “I was not afraid of Time” (574). The last sentence could be uttered by an omniscient narrator who

conflates the identities of Azaro as “I” narrator and Dad’s as speaker of impassioned tirades: “A dream can be the highest point of a life” (574). Who is speaking? Dad’s earlier exhortation about “mak[ing] the dream real” (571) gives the option of replacing this last utterance within his or Azaro’s own “lifespan,” folding back the novel on to the realm of the real. The preterite that governs the narrative is abandoned for the modality of a general assertion, an aphorism. It could also be a final intrusion of the author. However, self-enclosed, it has no attributable speaker and cannot provide an apt ending to the text that is left “hanging.” (Derek Wright comments on this closing sentence as follows: “... appropriately ambiguous, leaving unclear whether the dream is a heightened form, and the highest form, of perception, or, ironically, the best that we can hope for and all that we are very likely to have. For Okri, redemptive energy is finally not a political but a purely visionary, imaginative quality...” [160]). *The Famished Road* is indeed part of a trilogy, with *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998) constituting sequels to this novel.

Although most critics focus on Madame Koto, the other significant female character of the novel is Mum. Unlike the former, Mum is more often than not part of the realm of the living. As a character, she is no counterpart to Dad with whose heroism, grandiloquence and quixotic behavior she constantly tampers. As Warnes states: “Mum, significantly is the character in the novel who least obviously carries within her a supernatural aspect Mum’s sorties into the supernatural, whether they take the form of journeys, prayers or cautionary folktales, are always intended ... to bring [Azaro or Dad] back to the domain of the living” (137). Mum is the one who gives birth to Azaro. The whole novel can thus be viewed as a celebration of motherhood, a way of atoning for the mischievousness of the *abiku*, who dies and leaves his mother mourning his death. The goddess with the magnificent pregnancy who tries to seduce Azaro into being born again to her (15) is a vision of mothering that has the appeal of death. It is echoed at the end of the text by Madame Koto’s monstrous *abiku* trinity (530) and her swollen foot that looks “as if the road had impregnated it” (567; this image is a variation on “the god’s swollen foot” in Soyinka’s poem [29, l. 16] with which it interacts. For a reading of this metaphor, see McCabe 2002, 62). These mirroring pregnancies enter a metaphoric network with the notion of postponement as “an undefined expectancy” (341) comes in correspondence with the core motif of gestation (this motif seems to be more prevalent in the novel than that of the ruptured hymen that Quayson develops [1997a, 147]). Both Irigaray and Derrida could be summoned for further insights into Okri’s writing of the female body).

Mum is the incarnation of motherly love; she works constantly and worries about money; she fights the landlord and the creditors; she nearly dies (66); she is beaten by her husband and by thugs. She fights

the father in his dream to bring him back to life. One can assume that it is her human status that makes Mum closer to earth: “This life! No rest. None. A woman suffers. A woman sweats, with no rest, no happiness. My husband, in three fights. God knows what all this is doing to his brain. This life is too much for me. I am going to hang myself one of these days” (546). In this oneiric novel, she represents the reality principle: “Mum prayed for simple things that made me weep while the darkness flowered in our room. She prayed for food. She prayed for Dad to get well. She prayed for a good place to live” (566). The beginning of the novel recounts Azaro’s separation from her in the riot (12) and his longing to be reunited with her: “That night in the dark, with my eyes pressed tight, and with all the fury of my empty stomach, I summoned up the image of my mother. When I saw her clearly, I spoke to her, begging her to come and help me” (29). Mother and son look for each other. After his being kidnapped by the police officer and his wife, Mum comes back to get Azaro:

There was a woman standing in the doorway, her hair bedraggled and wet, her eyes distracted, her neck strung, her feet bare. The rain poured down on her mercilessly. There were dead cockroaches about her feet. I saw a rope round her neck, connecting her to the sky. The rope transformed into a thread of lightning. For a moment I thought I had known her in another life or in the world of the spirits. I pushed past the officer. I stood on the threshold. Then, with light in my head, and hunger in my voice, I cried: ‘Mother!’ (32-33)

This scene of recognition is typical of the novel where the parents, first depicted following the tenets of naturalism, are estranged from the “I-narrator” precisely because of the extreme realism of the depiction (this device is used in the passage where the photographs are said not to reflect the reality of the ghetto dwellers precisely because they are too crude [107]). They are first misrecognized to be eventually recognized (cf. *inter alia* 233, 247; “It was Dad” [340]). The next sentence about the rope that connects Mum to the sky belongs to the genre of the fantastic. Yet the vision (“I saw”) is then immediately and without any transition linked to the phenomenal world in the following image of the flash of lightning seen as a thread. Lightning is associated to Sango, the god of lightning and of electricity in Yoruba mythology (Soyinka 61, l. 21). In the reading sequence, the metaphor of the rope—the recurrence of an earlier mention (“the great cycles of time had finally tightened around my [Azaro’s] neck” [7]) and the image of hanging (“I saw Mum dangling from the branches of a blue tree” [8])—precedes the more common image of the thread (after her near-death experience, the mother tells that a white rope linking Azaro to the sky jumped on her [69]; she also threatens that she will go and hang herself [546]. The picture that Azaro singles out among the photographs is that of a black man who has been lynched [304]). In other words, the textual transformation of the rope into a thread (one of its components) follows

the reverse order of a gradual metaphorical process that would first see the flash of lightning as a thread, then as a hangman's noose. The referent (lightning) is absent in the first mention. The narration subsequently proceeds with Azaro's confiding his passing uncertainty as to which world or whose life the "creature" belongs to. Since the speaker's own doubt contaminates the narration, the "threshold" of the officer's house assumes in turn metaphorical status. Metonymically grounded metaphors precede comparisons, producing a hiatus, creating the effect of a vision. Okri has owned to having written *The Famished Road* in poetry, metrically (Deandrea 70). The poetics of the text, its disconnection from the referent, partakes in the process of estrangement suddenly negated by the child's cry.

In the market place, Azaro sees Mum everywhere as she has become all the poor market women: "I went about the market confused by many voices that could have been Mum's, many faces that could have been hers, and I saw that her tiredness and sacrifice were not hers alone but were suffered by all women, all women of the marketplace" (190). Mum is also the consummate storyteller and as such her character facilitates the embedding in the novel of the oral tradition: "Mum told me stories of aquamarine beginnings" (214). Her stories are as comforting as they are educative. The family unit that she forms with Dad and Azaro often closes brief sequences on a peaceful note of harmony as the couple overcomes domestic feuds and their child's disconcerting behavior.

Interspaces

As Ato Quayson has demonstrated, Azaro is a liminal figure situated halfway between the world of the spirits and the world of the living (1997b). Like his *abiku* companions, Azaro is "in-between": "We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world" (5). Located in that interspace, the novel translates the particular quality of that oscillating consciousness. It is an attempt to produce an effect of liminality to make it function as an echo of Azaro's own condition: "But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay" (5). Even the spirit warns the child that "[t] here are many spirit-eaters and monsters in the interspaces. Keep to the solid ground" (376). Azaro crosses the gateway between the two realms extremely frequently and abruptly, even arbitrarily, since the world of the spirits at times overwhelms him and he has no power to choose at will where he would like to be. The co-presence of both worlds and the disappearance of the gateway is stressed throughout the text, as parents of a dead child kidnap Azaro to have him take the place of their dead son; as spirits haunt the market place: "That was the first time I realized it wasn't just humans who came to the market places of the world. Spirits and other beings came there too" (19); or, alternatively, when

the spirits and the ghosts are curious about the new “magical” object as the photographer brings out his camera (56). Azaro can see the dead (211). Characters, such as Madame Koto, assume supernatural dimensions while maintaining a link with the reality of the changing politics of the country and the advancement of technology. At the end of the text, pregnant with three unborn *abikus*, she is initiated into a secret society “famous for its manufacturing of reality” (567). The text makes it plain that one is never sure as to the human or non-human status of the beings that people it. It is as if the conditions of the beginnings of time contaminate the whole novel: “We [Azaro and his companions] could assume different forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries” (3).

Nature is itself teeming with animals and plants that take on spiritual dimensions: the felled trees of the forest bleed (20), the rats that throb through the house are never simple rodents. Lizards can be spirits and the boxers’ names—Black Tyger, Green Leopard, Yellow Jaguar—spell their link to the animal kingdom. When Azaro follows his father in his cyclical dreams, he indeed goes back to his father’s totem: “I followed him sometimes in his brief reunion with his own primeval spirit and totem” (565). As Mum says, repeating the words of the tortoise: “All things are linked” (553). This relatedness explains much of the difficulty of reading a text which functions at several levels at once, without the usual markers of time frame or spatial precision. The city is unnamed. Madame Koto’s bar is a liminal place. The road is generic, so is the compound, the forest, the river, the marketplace, the house. The repeated gestures of domesticity (like lighting the mosquito coil and the candle or preparing the soup) and the comings and goings of the parents are both explainable since the parents go out to work and at the same time bound with mystery. Azaro only discovers what his parents do after the initial shock of their absence. The constant and coherent double or multiple readings go together with reversals and chiasmic structures as the supposedly “real” level (the physical world) collapses into the fantastic. Conversely, the fantastic accrues a higher level of reality than the physical world that is alternatively and randomly debunked as a world of deceiving appearances or enchanted into an otherworldly dimension.

Mum’s story of the white man with the blue sunglasses at the end of the novel is made up of three narrative fragments. Its very structure is reflexive of the status of narration in the novel, of the modality of storytelling—“Then he told me his story” is repeated twice—and of the status of narrators and narratees—the children interrupt to ask: “Then what happened?” (Cooper offers a thorough analysis of this section [72-74]). Mum tells the story at Azaro’s request. He had asked her about her blue sunglasses earlier in the text (528) that made her look slightly mad (531). She did not comply. Mum is now sitting in Dad’s chair and Dad’s spirit enters her (552). Mum speaks, but one

must assume that it is Dad's spirit speaking through her. The first fragment is the story of the encounter with the tortoise, which had already been mentioned in the epileptic fit that Azaro shares with Ade. Both children had reached the Village of the Night where "the tortoise was a wandering griot who warned [Azaro] at the roadside that no story could ever be finished" (550). Mum does not tell what the tortoise told her: she delays the answer that will then be given in another section. It is a *mise en abyme* of suspension. The second fragment is that of a white government man who wants to leave the country when Independence breaks out. He tells Mum his story and closes his tale with the following chiasmic structure: "The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you." The same man comes back to her under the guise of a black man two weeks later. The moral is now different since the man has understood that "the only way to get out of Africa was to become an African" (554). The story he now tells is that he died in England and has been reborn as a Yoruba man.

At the end of the story, for there is an end to Mum's story, Azaro exclaims: "Strange story" and the mother rejoins: "It's true." The reader, like Azaro's mother, had been given the following clue: "Time is not what you think it is" (554). This marketplace tale where a white man is reborn as a Yoruba man, where time is computed concurrently in spans of five hundred years and two weeks, where a bus bearing a motto cryptically answers the question asked a few paragraphs earlier reflects the novel's texture: a puzzling relatedness that upsets hierarchies, blurs categories, reverses orders of being, an embedding of African animal tales (the tortoise, a symbol of wisdom) in the history of the Nation (the white man as colonizer and the Yoruba man as business man) in the everyday life of an African family for Mum is, after all, at the market place selling her wares. The blue sunglasses given by the white man in exchange for the "knowledge" buried in the Mum's story stand in for a way of looking at the world that could be a screen rather than a heuristic device. Making one see the world through blue-tinted spectacles, they symbolize the white man's gaze and his technology. They make Mum look mad. They also protect Mum's eyes from the sun and the dust (Cooper 72). The story is significant because of the status of that object as a synecdoche for the exchange of stories. It also reflects on the status of meaning: it is not a given (neither is it a gift). It is to be found in the unhinged fragments of embedded riddles.

Reading with Azaro, or beholding "the Sphinx, with its original black face" (527)

In what can be construed as the prologue of the novel the king of the spirits says: "The life of yours will be full of riddles" (6). Azaro further mentions that his hunger for knowledge will not be assuaged: "I was answered by paradoxes" (7). The narrator indeed underlines

various processes of de-familiarization or estrangement through paradoxes: “I realized with a shock that it was the strangeness which was so familiar” (21), a literalization of Freud’s conception of the Uncanny. Repeatedly, the strange is familiar, the familiar strange. If we remain on a purely realistic plane, the focalization through the child narrator who suffers from hunger and illness, faints, hallucinates, accounts for the departure from the real. He could be construed as an unreliable narrator because of his in-betweenness. Warnes explains that “this unreliability is a key part of the narrative strategy, which is to render uncertain the reality-esoteric axis that a reader may try to implement to make sense of his or her reading” (139). At the same time, Azaro’s powers to see beyond seeing, attributable to his spirit status, make the reader follow him in his hallucinations and travel into the world of the spirits as a given of his liminal status: “As I kept watch I perceived, *in the crack of a moment*, the recurrence of things, unsolved—histories, dreams, a vanished world of great old spirits, wild jungles, tigers with eyes of diamond roaming the dense foliage” (207). In the cracks, the gashes (20), the interstices lies the answer. Their bodily equivalents, the wounds, open and reopen, bleed. The numerous lists constructed as accumulations of perceptions replete with zeugmas and peopled by marvelous creatures or impossible beings emerge from these “gaps” that fill in the text (Quayson’s interdisciplinary practice that links literary analysis, anthropology and history leads him to locate “interstitial realities. Or ... realities perceived in relatedness to other things” [Quayson 1998, 318]. The critic’s method mirrors the text).

The perception that events are both past and future and that the present contains these two temporal dimensions is transposed onto the narrative mode. The reader is at pains to know when events are taking place and the succession of the chapters loosely corresponds to a succession of days and nights. Azaro sleeps and wakes up, passes for dead and is brought back to life; his Dad often sleeps “like a giant” for three days—he is recuperating from his fight—or for a whole season (356). Seasonal rains might also be a marker of time, but they are soon elevated to the level of a deluge of apocalyptic proportions. Of the construction of the novel, Okri himself owned that he had conceived it as moments in tidal waves: “The book is really intended to be a flow of life. So the divisions would be akin to moments in tidal waves, sea patterns, the way rollers race towards the shore, the way water beats and then there are lappings and then it retreats. So that within each beginning there is an ending, and within each ending a beginning” (Deandrea 69).

The presence in the text of the thugs of the Party of the Rich soon followed by a repetition of their irruption by the Party of the Poor who promise the people of the compound similar things belongs to the pattern of repetition that slows down the text, envelops it in circularity and recurrence, a reiteration of the same that cannot amount to

change. It is metonymically present at the end of the text in “the endlessly postponed political rally” (564). Dad dreams, on the other hand, “in advance” (564), prophesying the world to be. Azaro also foresees impending danger and saves his family from fire at the beginning of the novel. The “present” is postponement and anticipation, pregnant as it is with the past and the future. The reader soon perceives the narrative device of the telling in the past tense of Azaro’s story by a narrator that goes back over his adventures as a simulacrum, an ungainly device, a “reality effect” that does not hold water and collapses in the past tense characteristic of the telling of a folktale, in the present of proverbs and general statements. A certain amount of reflexivity on Azaro’s part cannot be attributed to a child’s consciousness, but to a mature narrator, aware of the stakes of this untenable position:

Given the fact of the immortality of spirits, could these be the reason why I wanted to be born—these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of living while one is alive, the mystery of being, the birth within births, death within births, births with dying, the challenge of giving birth to one’s true self, to one’s new spirit, till the conditions are right for the immutable star within one’s universe to come into existence; the challenge to grow and learn and love, to master one’s self; (559)

The text points to what cannot be explained, remains unresolved, enigmas and riddles. The following exchange with the spirit stresses incompleteness as a modality of being and knowing but also gives a clue about the changing points of view that are a hallmark of the narrative mode. The child refuses to eat and is gradually drawn into the world of the spirit who tells him:

‘From a certain point of view the universe seems to be composed of paradoxes. But everything resolves. That is the function of contradiction.’
 ‘I don’t understand’
 ‘When you can see everything from every imaginable point of view you might begin to understand.’
 ‘Can you?’
 ‘No’ (376)

The reader is both told that contradictions resolve and that the spirit’s understanding of the universe is limited, which is a further contradiction since his nature could lead him to think that he, of all beings, does see the world from various points of view and understands it. He could also be lying. In a way, he says that is like Azaro, unable to pierce the secret of the universe. Like Ade, the spirit is “free in the captivity of freedom” (557) whereas Azaro chooses “the liberty of limitations” (557). Both conditions are oxymoronic: infinite freedom holds captive and limits define liberty. Azaro ponders that the latter option may be easier than to “be free in infinity” (557). The timelessness of the beginnings is ultimately devoid of attraction.

The presence of the unresolved (the mystery, the enigma) is always underlined; so is incompleteness (nothing is ever finished). The production of the textual matter of the novel, its very exuberance, its ebullience, its unfolding in a multitude of short chapters, the possibility that it may never end (like the road of the title), contribute to assessing and reassessing what exceeds understanding and extends beyond the finite. This remainder is symbolized at the beginning by Azaro's burying his "objects of identity": "I had buried my magic stones, my mirror, my special promises, my golden threads, objects of identity that connected me to the world of the spirits. I buried them all in a secret place, which I promptly forgot" (10). Forgetfulness allows for new beginnings (61; the function of memory is stressed throughout the text, both at the narrative level and in the construction of a magical world where the links with Freudian psychoanalysis are obvious). Azaro's knowledge, a knowledge that is unattainable ("you *might* begin to understand"), is precisely these secrets that the text cannot unveil and cultivates through oxymoronic formulae, contradictory statements, abrupt shifts, stubborn paradoxes. As a mirror to Azaro's perception of the world that language cannot exhaust, the text assumes the quality of a riddle: "Anything is possible one way or another. There are many riddles amongst us that neither the living nor the dead can answer" (559). This statement contradicts an earlier declaration that the world is full of riddles that only the dead can answer (89). It contains something that is unfinished and that will remain unsaid because unsayable. It signals the place of the unknown in Okri's aesthetics (as Sarah Fulford notes in her thorough analysis of Okri's aesthetics in relation to both Heidegger and a Yoruba worldview: "Dwelling on ... dark unknowable things, Okri's aesthetic deliberately evades an Enlightenment rationale of being able to chart, to categorize, to know" [Fulford 244]. See also Okri's own formulation: "the quickening of the unknown" [Okri 1997, 8-9]).

At one point Azaro says: "I planted my secrets in my silence" (200). Numerous silences punctuate the text and are clearly noted: "There was a long silence as we swam around in the strange current of Dad's words" (573); "A long time passed in the silence that followed" (573). These silences that harbor secrets are the necessary textual counterpart of the riots, the feasts, the parties, the noisy ceremonies and the awesome fights related in a carnivalesque, grotesque or dramatic mode. These purple patches are themselves the correlatives of the utter poverty, the dispossession of life in the ghetto with the occasional but very "real" relief of sleep, succor, family love and friendly support. One must posit Sisyphus' happiness.

Can the nation be born again and break out of the cycle of repetitions? If the answer is in the dream, Okri points to creative energy, to art as a medium akin to dream-work that will help get to truth at an onto-

logical level. The mode induced by the method is puzzling, yet it is only so for a reader who does not want to suspend his/her disbelief. It is my contention that Okri has found a narrative mode that helps the reader access the multiple levels of reality that are part and parcel of Azaro's worldview: the narrative threads are "fractured paths" (78), the textual inclusion of worlds within worlds a version of the infinite of consciousness. The very excess and the repetitiveness decried by critics mimic the exhaustion of the central character who himself faints and dies to wake up lying in a coffin. It also follows a different aesthetic paradigm than that of a progression ending in closure. Maintaining the reality of the concurrence of a world of the Unborn with the world of the Living and the Dead means believing in the potentiality of dreaming a new world into existence: "It was as I followed Dad that I learnt that other spheres of higher energies have their justice beyond our understanding. And our sphere too" (566). Fighting "*our refusal to be*" (559, emphasis mine), such knowledge "beyond our understanding" confronts and confounds the riddle of the world.

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