

Ben Okri's Inscription *In Arcadia*: An Epiphany of Life and Art

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“Those who forget death forget how to live”¹
Ben Okri, 1993.

Ben Okri is one of Nigeria's finest contemporary poets and novelists. He lives in London ever since 1978 where he went as he could not get a place to enrol the science degree course in Nigeria. He was carrying among his possessions his first manuscript *Flowers and Shadows* which was accepted by Longman a year later. In 1980 he got a scholarship from the Nigerian government to read for a BA of Comparative Literature at the University of Essex. In December of 1981 *The Landscapes Within* was published by Longman. In 1982 Okri experienced a very hard and homeless year and had to go back to London, since his scholarship had been drastically reduced by the Nigerian government.

In the following years he was appointed poetry editor for the magazine *West Africa* and employed as a freelance by the BBC African Service to introduce the programme *Network Africa*. As a committed writer, Okri published political and social essays in the weekly *New Statesman*. In 1987 his book of short stories *Incidents at the Shrine*, published the previous year by Heinemann, won the Commonwealth Prize and the Paris Review Aga Khan Prize for fiction. This was when he started earning his living as a writer.

In the years to come he published: his second volume of short fiction in 1988, *The Famished Road* that earned him the Booker Prize in 1991, *An African Elegy* a volume of poetry in 1992, followed by the second and the third volumes consecutively of the *Famished Road* titled *Songs of Enchantment* in 1993 and *Infinite Riches* in 1998. In 1995 he was actively engaged in the protest against the injustices committed to the MOSOP officials known as the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa. This same year he published his allegory *Astonishing the Gods*, and his short compilation of essays and speeches under the title of *Birds of Heaven*. He was also awarded by the World Economic Forum with the Crystal Award for contributions to the Arts and to cross-cultural understanding. In 1996 *Dangerous Love* was published and Okri presented “London to Arcadia”, his participation in the BBC television series *Great Railway Journeys*, where he travels from London to the Peloponnese through Europe in quest of the mythical Arcadia.

In 1997 he was made Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* by the University of Westminster, and elected the vice-president of PEN (English Centre of the writer's association). This same year he saw his speeches, essays and reviews published by Phoenix under the title *A Way of Being Free*. The following year he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1999 his poem *Mental Flight* partly appeared in *The Times*, and was later published entirely by Phoenix. In 2001 Okri was awarded an

¹ Quoted from Ben Okri , “Amongst The Silent Stones”(1993),(p.99) in *A Way of Being Free*. (1997), 2002.

O.B.E.² in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. Finally, his latest novel, *In Arcadia*, which is the object of our study, appeared in 2002.³

Since the story in the book is about the people who have been selected to make a TV film that deals with a trip in search of Virgil's mythic paradise called Arcadia, we will study the novel having in perspective his participation in the BBC TV series *Great Railway Journeys* with a film titled "*London to Arcadia*". In both works his search is focused on the notion of Arcadia. Taking as a point of departure Virgil's Eclogues from the fourth century B.C. and moved by the powerful capacity of survival of the notion of Arcadia, his inquiring spirit will guide him to redefine the concept for the people of his era.

After watching the television presentation "*London to Arcadia*", the reader of *In Arcadia* cannot but consider the film to be the blue print or, at least, one of the main sources of inspiration for the novel. Okri's first thoughts when he was playing the narrator of this mysterious real trip are mostly reflected in the novel. The first images of the passengers on the rail platform in the film are translated, with great mastery, into words in the book exactly as they appear on the screen. The journey starting in London and ending in Greece will fulfil as every journey does, the expected magical effect of an exercise for the mind and a lesson for the spirit. However, although the images of the film projected on the screen stood for a thousand words, Okri still needed to inseminate his enlightening philosophical and spiritual lessons through a different media. In the film he confesses as a poet and a novelist to be worried about the concepts and ideas behind a journey. Even though he wanted to simulate being objective he did not hesitate to guide the interviews in the show. He could not resist the temptation of slightly inducing his ideas, in a very subtle way, into the interviewees' answers. Nevertheless, the film was not enough to register all the flow of sublime thoughts and emotions that this trip provoked in him so he wrote the novel since literature seems to be the ideal vehicle to spread his baggage of wisdom into eternity by virtue of the immortality of the written word.

The presentation of the trip on the screen is produced by means of the images of the train leaving London and advancing to Arkadia⁴ in the Peloponnesus along the railway through different places leaving behind at a high speed many details of life unseen to the common eye. The interviews guide the spectators to a kind of a desired final result without allowing much thought concerning the inner state of each voyager who participated in the final product. Whereas in the book, though it is also a record of the journey through the same route as the film, the readers have access to what I will call the back stage thoughts as a result of the voices of the different characters and narrators. The spectators pay more attention to the landscapes without, that is the sceneries and the people interviewed; whereas the readers will learn more about the landscapes within, the emotional mood and the mental state of the interviewer, the technicians, the people behind the screen and, maybe even, the person behind the book, that is, Okri himself. I do not mean to say that the film and the book are complementary products, but I affirm that my reading is different because I had seen the film before reading the book and many fragments sometimes did overlap and produced intertextuality and an effect of *deja vú*. Nevertheless, Okri explains in a note previous to the novel that he uses "the outer facts of a real journey as a vehicle for fictional characters." He declares that the characters "are imaginary creations." and he insists that

² O.B.E.: abbrev. For Officer of the Order of the British Empire (A British title).

³ All the biographical information is compiled from Robert Fraser's "Biographical Outline" (pp.xii-xvii) in his book *Ben Okri*.

⁴ Arkadia is the name of a mountainous region in the central Peloponnesus in southern Greece.

"The journey is real, but the people are invented" (p. 0). Hence the train journey is the thread that could sew the different patches of the two works to bring together Okri's ideas about different types of Arcadias, into an eclectic tapestry, a fabric of life, inscribed with his philosophical and mystical thoughts.

In the film the concept of Arcadia is mysteriously entwined with the journey itself. He induces the notion of journey in his interviews with young and elder people from different nationalities, as a twofold idea, escape and quest. The first has to do with leaving something behind and the second with searching for something. Hence the former traveller looks forward to leave the old station, whereas the latter, at a loss, searches for an unknown destination wandering (with an "a") in a wishful embrace with destiny. In the film every field of work to which an interviewee belonged enhanced a new idea of Arcadia or Paradise. For example, for the train driver, it was the peace of mind and pleasure that he experimented in his motionless private garden through the cultivation of his flowers and trees. For the museum guide, it was the pleasure and emotion felt on Tuesdays when the museum was closed and all the masterpieces were only for his eyes and soul to enjoy. For the museum goers it was the pleasure of contemplating art. For the undertaker, the closeness of death became his inspiration to change his life. He left the cold cemetery and went to a little Paradise in Greece where he got married and was happily raising his children under the warm sun.

However, if the spectator has the pleasure of seeing the physical aspect of the various Arcadias proposed by Okri, the reader, in addition to perceive the proposed different Arcadias in space and time, will indeed have the satisfaction of experiencing the concept through the intellectual pleasure of reading the book itself. In the novel Okri also works out the double sense of the journey. The story starts with Lao, the cultured man who will be responsible for the presentation of the film, and whose voice will perform the first story-teller function of this adventure. He will describe in his sour mood the need that urges the fictional film-makers to accept the proposal of making this film. According to Lao they all accept this offer in order to escape from their failures and frustrations. They had all lost something sometime in the past or even before, and now it was time to start their search for their private treasures. Okri also allows the reader to appreciate through the narrator's voice the meaning of Arcadia for the fictional characters we have mentioned above. Again for the train driver it was the static space of the garden. For Marie Antoinette it was the freedom she had in her hamlet. For any visitor to the famous gardens of Versailles it was the beauty and the balance of the architecture that was "joy made visible" or "embodied happiness in space" (p.167). For the museum guide of the Louvre, one of the most famous museums in Europe, it was the joy he experienced when the museum was closed, therefore very quiet, and the works of art belonged only to his senses.

The novel is divided into three parts, seven books and many numbered pieces of paragraphs that resemble little chapters. Okri includes in some of the numbered sections different titles that allude to the contents that follow, but, most of all, awake in the reader an interest to inquire about the possible connections with the works of other writers who belong to different times. He presents some of the sections with titles such as, for example, in Book Two: *Intuitions in the Garden 1, 2, 3 and 4*, where Lao describes his first notions of Arcadia. The planet Earth becomes the mother of its vegetation and animals. It was the smallest garden in the Universe where these creatures preferred to be. Creation and destruction belonged to the same coin. Life and death were the same thing. Uniqueness and originality did not imply loneliness. They were rather the wonder and the blessing of the mystery of life. Then humanity arrived and converted

death into something bigger than life itself. At this stage fear, sorrow, lack of love, anxiety and misery were born and humanity dreamt of their lost paradise.

In Book Three: *Intuitions in the Dark 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5*, Lao describes tunnels and darkness as the previous stages to space and light. He elaborates the idea of how philosophy sprouts from the questions born in the darkness. Our passage through any kind of tunnel, be it physical, mental or spiritual, allows an acute appreciation of wordless inscriptions that are found everywhere under the light. He compares the world to a giant womb where humanity dwells in oneness awaiting for re-birth.

In Book Five: *Jim's Intuition, Propr's Intuition, Mistletoe's Intuition and Jute's Intuition* are pieces of prose or verse where the characters' perception of the notion of Arcadia are insinuated after visiting Marie Antoinette's arcadia constructed away from court life in the eighteenth century Versailles before the French Revolution. In Book six: *Intuitions before Dreaming 1, 2, and 3*, the reader can meditate on the meaning of painting and its sublime truth of being a "mysterious metaphor of Arcadia" (p.190) Okri dotes artistic painting with mystical, religious, metaphysical and magical capacities and qualities: "Painting is an inscription on the flesh of time" (p.188), and "Painting is the still life of God's mind." (p.188).

The titles given to the dreams of the characters such as *Mistletoe's Dream, Jim's Nightmare, The Mystery of the Invisible Third Man, As You Don't Like it, Love's Labour Redeemed, Riley's Regret, Journey with Camels* and *The Silence of Mothers*, are inscriptions that once the texts are read they become metonymies for the desires and hidden lacks of each character. A Close reading, will on the one hand, allow an interpretation of their individual quests, and on the other hand, link up Okri's texts with Virgil's Eclogues and bounce forward the idea of Arcadia that used to be the object of nostalgia in the Renaissance.

Apparently, Okri seems to move ahead in his literary creation and leave behind the African subject-matter in this new novel. Although this work is also about universal worries and transcendental anxieties as many of his previous masterpieces, he bluffs the reader into thinking that *In Arcadia* is far from being African literature as he sets his story in Europe and his characters are not openly described as African. His Western characters are described in Book One: Three, as we have seen above, by the first narrator who speaks in first person and is finally given a name on page 38. However if we pay attention to the inscriptions, as Lao and Okri repeatedly advice, we will know by reading between the lines that Lao is African and his view of the world is impregnated with African knowledge. The first time that the word "Africa" appears in the novel is on page thirteen when Lao compares Sam, the talkative cameraman, with an African faulty tap that never stops running and wears the stones beneath it. Later when he describes the mysterious malign figure Malasso he exemplifies again in page twenty-six with his knowledge about the stories that are told in Africa regarding men who once they shake hands with you, you never feel well again. Lao also seems to be a juju man who can see all the invisible fears and frustrations that accompany each passenger along their trips to earthly destinations and burden their lives with ghosts that bring them down. The maximum manifestation of his African origin is in Part Two, Book Three, section Twenty-seven where a second narrator describes how Lao once he arrived at Paris immigration control he had "to ford human perception" and "submit to one of his endless trials", that of colour (p.104). Okri needs four pages in this novel to display his idea about the invisible lines that some societies have drawn to pin down people who are condemned at birth, because of a different sun. He sketches his main character with a state that Camus coined as "humiliated consciousness" where a human being is

conscious of being automatically distrusted, de-humanized and weeded out of a crowd for his skin colour (p.106).

Moreover, when Okri explores the two-fold idea of a journey in Book one, he uses his African character, Lao, to introduce one of his most paradoxical thoughts, that of escaping backwards to go back to his original self in order to advance. Then he relates this thought with the idea of the journey in search of a most valuable and intangible loss. Lao wants to find his lost beginnings, his childhood. He believes that death could become his inspiration for life but he cannot find the way except through the process of re-birth. Hence, one of Okri's most recurrent African topics, the abiku child process of re-birth, peeps out of Lao's words. At this point of the story Lao's attitude resembles that of the West African mythological figure of the Sankofa bird from the Akan Adinkra that wants to fly to an open time ahead but still looks back to grasp what is essential from its origin in order to choose the best path leading to an optimum future. Nevertheless it is Okri who deserves to be seen under the amplifying glass of the Sankofa Principle applied to the contemporary Ghanaian arts creators even though he is Nigerian. Kofi Anyidoho explained the principle in his article "*National Identity and the Language of Metaphor*" as "a view of life in which the present is in constant creative interface with the past, but always with expectations of future harvests as their essential driving force".(p.5). As Alfred Hickling has written in his review of *In Arcadia* in *The Guardian Weekly* in 2002, Okri "retreads" Wordsworth's philosophy gathered in his "Intimations of Immortality" and mingles it with Yoruba influence. So Okri himself is constantly searching for outstanding models of aesthetics, philosophy, and literary creations and he does not hesitate to deploy the influence that the African together with the Western literary, philosophical, and mystical masters as well as artists have exerted on him. Okri re-visits his own creations as if to revise his own sublime ideas already expressed in his previous works such as *Astonishing the Gods*, for example, where from the first two chapters he starts to play with the words and the concepts of "invisibility", "riddle", "journey", "travelling" and "quest".

However, the readers are challenged by Okri when he steps out of Lao's flesh and he scorns us for not being able to "make sense of the invisible inscriptions" (p.21) due to our incapacity to read between the lines the book as a riddle or a paradox. They both have in mind Virgil's Eclogues and they both want to take the notion of Arcadia further than the mere bucolic pastoral paradise where nature, shepherds and music are one. They both want to go beyond words where the highest things are.

Although the idea of Arcadia in the book belongs more to the intellectual and the mystical realms as it rests on the philosophical, emotional and psychological dimensions of the narrators' expressions, it is reinforced by the idea of the possibility of death at any time. For Okri and Lao the book is a riddle just as the notion of Arcadia itself. Arcadia in ancient Greek meant "The place where Hades is averted, i.e. immortality, as in Paradise". This definition converts Guercino's painting, *Et in Arcadia ego*⁵, along with Poussin's painting *Les Bergers d'Arcadie*⁶, the first pieces of art to choose Virgil's notion of an imagined Arcadia with the inclusion of the idea of death in the representations, into a paradox or a riddle. According to Okri, Poussin's work is the epitome for the representation of Arcadia in art. The omniscient second narrator describes the masterpiece as "an open painting", "an enigma for the illuminati" (p.203), as a peaceful though disturbing work of art where simplicity cries out its complexity, a

⁵ Giovanni Francesco Guercino's painting is exhibited in Galleria Corsini in Rome. It is titled *Et in Arcadia Ego*.(1621-1623).

⁶ Nicholas Poussin's painting is exhibited in the Louvre Museum in Paris. It is also titled *Et in Arcadia Ego*.Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665).

fabric where the eye can rest but the mind drills into a perpetual quest. It is a picture of three shepherds and a shepherdess in bucolic scenery in front of a tomb with an inscription: *Et in Arcadia ego*. According to the second narrator, for more than three centuries the unanswered question has been: who is this *ego*? This encircles the notion of Arcadia with the idea of death at any time. In the light of Okri's book *A Way of Being Free* serendipity leads us to see Poussin's painting as a metonymy for the African world's opening of life into death by drawing death over the living spaces (p.99).

Technically speaking Okri puzzles the reader when all of a sudden Lao who seemed to be the official narrator of this story is suspended from this function. A new voice takes up the narrator's role. Okri submits Lao to a process of death through silence. Once the Eurostar train is introduced into the tunnel Lao undergoes a phase of change that will allow an evolution in the character's dimension through his spiritual and emotional growth. His arrival in France and his visit to the city of Paris, as well as the ecstasies breathed at the divine moments of Grace in the presence of beauty experimented through all his senses will cause his re-birth. Through his second narrator Okri exploits his love for art, especially painting and writes down his theories to touch every sensitive soul through his intuitions.

Finally, He wants his book to go further than a mere inscription and become a prescription for a better appreciation of life and art. Okri himself becomes at once the African Romantic writer of the twenty first century when he visits with this work the centre of the French Revolution, where it was believed that humanity can overcome suffering by adopting the principles of Freedom, Fraternity and Equality. His visions and inscriptions make out of this novel an epiphany to remind the reader of the futility of life and its joys and the pleasures of art contrasted to the eternity of death. Moreover, he proves that Arcadia in this era is still by definition the lack or the desire that each human being cherishes in this short journey called life.

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