

Mythic Conjunctions in Transit: Ontopoiesis in Ben Okri's *An African Elegy* and *Mental Fight* and Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt*

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Summary

Drawing on Ben Okri's *A Time for New Dreams* (2011) and Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* ([1976]1995), this article adopts a literary aesthetics approach, explaining that mythic conjunctions are inherent in ontopoiesis or the self-induced development of consciousness (Tymieniecka 1992). Okri (2011: 27) argues that self-creativity or innovation "come from being able first to see what is there, and not there; to hear what is said, and not said And ... the art of intuition", whereas for Soyinka ([1976]1995: 3) "man's attempt to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions" gives rise to cultural mythology. "In Asian and European antiquity ... man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon," he asserts (p. 3.). The poems selected reveal that mythic conjunctions are inherent in such non-dualistic insights. In Okri's poetry (1992 & 1999), a higher state of consciousness or "illumination" is the basis for life's transitions wrought largely through spirit awakenings via a retrieval of traditional geo-cosmic horizons; in Soyinka's (1972), such transitions accrue from a conscious reconstruction of the human self, affected by the trauma of solitary confinement.

Opsomming

Gegronde op Ben Okri se *A Time for New Dreams* (2011) en Wole Soyinka se *Myth, Literature and the African World* ([1976]1995), volg hierdie artikel 'n letterkundig-estetiese benadering om te verduidelik dat mitiese konjunksies inherent eie is aan ontopoiëse, of die selfopgelegde ontwikkeling van bewussyn (Tymieniecka 1992). Okri (2011: 27) voer aan dat self-kreatiwiteit of innovasie “come from being able first to see what is there, and not there; to hear what is said, and not said And the art of intuition”, terwyl volgens Soyinka ([1976]1995: 3), die mens se poging om sy innerlike intuïesies te eksternaliseer en kommunikeer tot kulturele mitologie lei. “In Asian and European antiquity ... man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon” (p. 3). In Okri se gedigte (1992 & 1999) vorm 'n hoër staat van bewussyn of “verligting” die basis vir lewensoorname, wat grotendeels teweeggebring word deur geestelike ontwaking deur middel van 'n herwinning van tradisionele geo-kosmiese horisonne. In Soyinka se werk vloei sulke oorgange voort uit 'n bewustelike rekonstruksie van die menslike self, soos geraak deur die trauma van afsonderlike opsluiting.

1 Towards an Understanding of the Relation between Mythic Conjunctions in Transit and Ontopoiesis

In 1975, Africa's first Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, asserted that “[m]an exists ... in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world, like any other ‘world’, is unique” ([1976]1995: xii). Soyinka, however, goes on to emphasise the African world's mythic conjunction with other “worlds”:

It possesses ... in common with other cultures, the virtue of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is ... an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent.

(Soyinka [1976]1995: xii)

Implicit in this excerpt is Alan Watts's definition of myth as "a complex of stories ... which, for various reasons, human beings regard as a demonstration of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" ([1957]1999: 7). "Stories," says Ben Okri in *Birds of Heaven*, "can sow the seeds of creation of empires, can undo them, can reshape the psychic mould of a people, can re-mould the political and spiritual temper of an age" (1996: 56). Writing almost concurrently with Soyinka and as if in elaboration of Okri's catalytic dimension, Gerald Larue contends that the *purpose* of myth is

[t]o transmit patterns of belief ... and to provide instruction in living by answering basic questions about living, by reinforcing existing patterns, and by explaining the validity of existing social structures.

(Larue 1975: 15)

For Okri, myth or "a complex of stories" reflects a people's sociocultural existence, their struggles, their successes and triumphs, their fate, and "strangers to these lands can feel the vibrations of a people's forgotten histories and fates in the air" (1996: 29).

Cultural liberation, insists Soyinka ([1976]1995: viii), is attained through "the expression of a true self-apprehension"; it is *conjunctively* in transit, because "in order to transmit the self-apprehension of a race, a culture, it is sometimes necessary to liberate from, and relate this collective awareness to, the value of others" ([1976]1995: viii). True self-apprehension¹ thus correlates not only with the Zen notion of "mindfulness", but is also analogous to both myth-making and onto-poiesis, that is, to the self-induced development of consciousness, as propounded by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka's phenomenology of life (2011b: 110)).

Self-apprehension or onto-poiesis therefore embraces the self-creative activity of consciousness. "All our creativity, our innovations, our discovery, come from being able first to see what is there, and not there; to hear what is said, and not said. Above all to think clearly; to be nourished by silence. And – beyond that – the art of intuition," says Ben Okri in *A Time for New Dreams* (2011: 27), encapsulating Soyinka's "(For let it

1. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993: 101) defines "apprehension" as "the action of perceiving with the intellect ... with the senses".

always be recalled that myths arise from man's attempt to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions.)" ([1976]1995: 3). Contiguously, Mircea Eliade (1967: 18) contends that an account is mythic in so far as "it reveals something as having been fully manifested and this manifestation is at the same time creative and exemplary since it is a foundation ... of a kind of behaviour".²

How to make those intuitive leaps that can transform humanity, how to make this mysterious faculty available to all – this will be the true turning point in the future history of civilisation.

(Okri 2011: 27)

The focus now shifts to an application of the article's terms of reference to selected poems from the three anthologies chosen for discussion in order to illustrate the concept of ontopoiesis.

2 Ben Okri's *An African Elegy* (1992) and *Mental Fight* (1999)

"We ought to conjoin faith in evidence with a need for self-discovery," Okri avers in *A Time for New Dreams* (2011: 28). This section is restricted to select excerpts from Okri's two anthologies. "Lament of the Images" (*An African Elegy* 1992: 9-13) reflects on the coming of the colonisers who, uncomprehendingly, pillaged the African works of art ("the masks", "sacred bronze leopards", "stools of molten kings") and "... burned what/ They could not/ Understand" (p. 9). Verse 3 of Stanza 1 provides an additional rationale for such wanton destruction: the invaders burnt "[a]ll that frightened them", that is, "... the ferocious power/ Of ancient dreams"; "... all that held/ The secrets/ Of terror/ And all that battled/ With dread/ In the land". It is, however, this mythic force that ensured the nation's

2. Myths thus evolve through the conscious conjunction of the Coleridgean primary and secondary imaginations. "The universities of the future will have to engage the sublime value of intuition in our lives and work," opines Okri (2011: 27).

physical, psychic and so cultural survival: "... that helped/ The crops/ Sprout"; "... that spoke/ To the gods/ In their close/ And terrifying/ Distance" (pp. 9-10). The final verse, Verse 4 of the first stanza, provides a kind of codicil to the pious pyromania, stating that some of these sacred artefacts were taken "... across/ The whitening seas" to be subjected to "scientific/ Scrutiny" – the sibilants here evoking a scathing indictment of the Westerner's attempt to comprehend "... the African's/ Dark and impenetrable/ Mind" (pp. 9-10).

Debilitating memory and prophetic vision conjoin in the next two stanzas. The second tells of the production of facsimiles by artists of the alien land "Which purified of ritual/ Dread" can hardly constitute "Art"! In contrast, the third stanza resuscitates the magic of the mythic conjunction of the few remaining authentic masks, which "... still live/ Still speak" (1992: 11); yet "... only a few/ Can hear them/ Hear the terror of their/ Chants/ Which breed powers/ Of ritual darkness/ And light/ In the centre/ Of the mind's/ Regeneration" (p. 11). Here, the tonal shift in the juxtaposition of "dark-ness" and "light" facilitates psychic recuperation. Such "regeneration" inheres in the reinstatement of the power of the African spirits, made manifest in these images. "We all want the magic of that mythic sword that can conquer the darkness," Okri (2011: 18) attests in *A Time for New Dreams*. Light and darkness are essentially conjunctive as well as in opposition. "[T]he elements of light and darkness in their dialectics transmit into the human significance of life the basic existential operations of *life itself*" (Tymieniecka 1992: vii).

Bringing the collective consciousness to life, "Lament of the Images" closes with a lyrical assurance that

The makers of Images
Dwell with us still
We must listen
To their speech
Re-learn their
Songs
Recharge the psychic
Interspaces
Of our dying
Age
Or live dumb
And blind

Devoid of old
Song
Divorced from
The great dreams
Of the magic and fearful
Universe.

(Okri 1992: 13)

Okri's language is charged with imaginative creativity; it is neither mimetic nor expressive: it is "pure poetry" predicated on onto-poiesis. It does not represent external reality; nor does it express pre-existing feelings or thought. Okri's language, like Soyinka's, as we shall see later, transcends mere communication. Such language *shapes* consciousness and perception.

Okri has spent most of his creative life in London. Set in an icy northern November winter and prefiguring the theme of his second poetry anthology, "The Poet Declares" (1992: 79) tells of a "wind of metallic shivers" that results in "an illumination of the soul" or what, in his 2002 novel *In Arcadia*, Okri terms "an akashic still point":

It comes upon us all at different time
this quaking of our spirit's foundation
this bursting of the devil's banks
this explosion of primordial powers
this *mindful* infiltration by our heavenly fears.

(Okri 2002: 190; my emphasis)

"Practising mindfulness in Buddhism means to *perform consciously* all activities, including everyday, automatic activities such as breathing, walking etc., and to assume the attitude of 'pure observation', through which clear knowledge, i.e., clearly conscious thinking and acting, is attained" (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen* 1991: 145). This "mindful infiltration" is, at once, performative and transformative in that language brings man and his world into conscious existence, as in the closing lines of "The Poet Declares":

From red eyes and burnt fingers
in this rusted month of ice
I connect the embers of an
ancient dream –
Let the music irradiate my spirit

And I shall travel farther than allowed
to find the gifts of the new light.

(Okri 1992: 79)

Again, simple yet profound, the language is ontopoietic, calling a pheno-menology of life into being:

We ought to step out of our old, hard casing. We think we are one kind of people, when in fact we are always creating ourselves. We are not fixed. We are constantly becoming. Constantly coming into being. Writers hold out a mirror to the bright visions of what can be.

(Okri 2011: 18)

Here, as in *Mental Fight* (1999), subtitled *An Anti-spell for the 21st Century*, Okri is searching for true conjunctions between the individual and the world, between national hermeticism and absorption into a cosmic unity beyond time. In the opening section of his second anthology, subtitled *Time to be Real*, he writes:

Now is a material event
It is also a spiritual moment
And the blinding light of the real
Can pierce through and tear
Asunder the unreal.
Every moment thus carries
The ordinary and the monumental.

(Okri 1999: 7)

Unblinded, the “celluloid” stripped from our eyes, “... behind it all we see things/ As they could be” (Okri 1999: 7). *Mental Fight* is thus likewise ontopoietic; the new millennium is “richly potent” (p. 18); humanity is on the threshold, on the “cusp” of new beginnings, “transcending the political/ Hinting at the evolutionary” (p. 16); “In time’s ovulation/ We are now at a rare intersection/ That magic favours” (p. 19).

The seventh and final poem in a section titled “Signs from the Old Times” points, by implication (7=3+4), to the conjunction between the temporal and the divine, or between his/her story and poetry:

How often have great minds
In the past prayed, and wished
For better favoured moments
In time to unleash their best

Gifts of humanity?
This is one such *conjunction*:
It fills the heart with too much humility
And amazement to behold.

(Okri 1999: 20; my emphasis)

And in a *carpe diem* injunction, the poem closes with:

But we must behold it, with minds calm,
With aspirations clear, And with a smile in the soul
That only those fortunate people have
Who find themselves at the right time,
At the perfect *mythic conjunction*
That is also a living moment,
A moment lived through.

(Okri 1999: 20; my emphasis)

The injunction encapsulates Soyinka's notion of self-apprehension as the key to cultural and personal liberation, reflecting the thrust of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. In *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri proposes:

Let life inspire you, and teach you always how to be free, and to encourage freedom in others, if they so desire.

All of humanity is really one person. What happens to others, affects us. There's no way out, but up.

Let's all rise to the beautiful challenges of our age, and rise to our true mysterious luminosity.

(Okri 2011: 95)

It is this quest for individual and communal freedom that runs passionately through the writings of both Okri and Soyinka. "In Asian and European antiquity ... man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon," asserts Soyinka ([1976]1995: 3). The argument attempts to show that mythic conjunctions are inherent in such holistic or non-dualistic insights.

3 Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* ([1972]1986)

In Okri's poetry (1992 & 1999), a higher state of consciousness or "illumi-nation" is the basis for life's transitions wrought largely

through spirit awakenings via a retrieval of traditional geo-cosmic horizons. In Soyinka's tellingly entitled *A Shuttle in the Crypt* ([1972]1986), such transitions accrue from a conscious reconstruction of the human self, affected by the trauma of solitary confinement. The crucial point of convergence, however, between these two poets is not the context within which each writes, nor the number of poems each has written, nor yet the number of lines each poem contains: it is the breadth of ontopoietic vision that each offers in his own particular way. For both these poets, human development is embodied in the consequent transformations of meaning.

In the poem "Wall of Mists" in the pivotal section of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* titled "Bearings", Soyinka castigates the "transformations" wrought by Kaduna prison³ officials drawing on the classical myth of Circe:

Mists of metamorphosis
 Men to swine, strength to blows
 Grace to lizard prances, honour
 To sweetmeats on the tongues of vileness
 There rose a shrillness in the air
 Grunts, squeals, cackles, wheezes
 Remainder membranes of once human throats
 A thundercrack in air – the whip
 Of Circe calling home her flock
 Of transformations?

([1972]1986: 36)

In lines from "Joseph [to Mrs Potiphar]", Soyinka invokes the first of his four archetypes,⁴ predictive templates foreshadowing this theme of deceit as metonymic for the miscarriage of justice and the vicious obliteration of opposition in neo-colonial Nigeria:

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3. In 1967, Wole Soyinka was detained for an article he wrote in the *Daily Sketch* of 4 August 1967 in which he called upon the federal government to declare a truce after Odomegwu Ojukwu's secession of Biafra, arguing that the "inevitable" war would "blow the country finally to pieces" if the "velvet cushion commandos" failed to think of the aftermath: the inevitable destruction of the Nigerian nation.
 4. The Four Archetypes, all illustrating gross miscarriages of justice, both historical and fictional, are: "Joseph", "Hamlet", "Gulliver" and "Ulysses".

A time of evils cries
Renunciation of the saintly vision
Summons instant hand of truth to tear
All painted masks, that poison stains thereon
May join and trace the hidden undertows
In sewers of intrigue

([1972]1986: 21)

The poem implicitly compares his own unjust detention with that of the biblical Joseph. A conscious effort is required to “trace the hidden under-tows/ In the sewers of intrigue”, to see the links, to join the dots (those “poison stains” on “painted masks” [recalling the false images in Okri’s “Lament of the Images”]), to detect the patterns of evil. Survival is depend-ent on a kind of mind game to avoid the end game of solitary confinement.

The two extracts conjoin to convey Soyinka’s stated creed, a conviction embedded in all his writing that “[t]here are no abstractions. There are only upholders of the living ideal *and* those who trample the human embodi-ments of such ideals underfoot” (quoted by Gibbs 1983: 33; my emphasis). “The cold reality of power,” says Soyinka in the Preface to *The Man Died* (1972: xiv), “is that it has to be endured”.

That is why, for example, he structures his prison poems against the sharply divergent poles of a dehumanising system, on the one hand, and the fiercely intense struggle of the detainee to preserve his own humanity, on the other. In recollecting his incarceration as a political prisoner for daring to challenge the Federal Government (see footnote 3) by calling for negotiation to protect the interests of the Igbos, rather than secession – an act that would inevitably lead to civil war, Soyinka points to the madness of power:

When power is placed in the service of vicious reaction, a language must be called into being which does its best to appropriate such obscenity of power and fling its excesses back in its face ... suppose we begin by accounting all arbitrary power – that is, all forms of dictatorship – as innately and poten-tially obscene. Then, of course, language must communicate its illegitimacy in a forceful, uncompromising language of rejection, seeking always to make it ridiculous and contemptible, deflating its pretension at the core Language needs to be part of resistance therapy.

(1972: xiii-xiv)

Language is thus invoked as “the collaborative face of intellectualism” (1972: xiv). The federal authorities may have succeeded in incarcerating a physical body, but Soyinka’s real battle is being played out in the mental theatre of the war. As the embodiment of human life, the mind moves beyond mere physical vitality. The struggle for survival is fought on two fronts: first, against the prison officials, “the mindlessness of evil made flesh” (1972: 228) and, second and more importantly, “against unreason/ Against the dark sprung moment of the trap/ Against the noontide thunder-clap!” (“O Roots!” *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, [1972]1986: 3). Here, language and poetry conjoin as the poet consciously strives to protect his own mind through heightened self-apprehension. Poetry becomes a co-constituent of Being. The poet is the shuttle, “the restless bolt of energy” (Preface to *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, [1972]1986: vii), resisting the inhumanity of “barbarous mind-butchers” (*The Man Died*, 1972: viii). This is graphically illustrated in Soyinka’s incantatory plea in “O Roots”:

Roots, I pray you lead away from streams
Of tainted seepage lest I, of these crimes

Partake, from fouled communion earth
In ashes scattered from a common hearth

Roots! lead away from treachery of the dark
From pit of acceptance, from the baited stake

Lend not image to a serpent spawn
Of lures, to monster prodigies of spleen.

(Soyinka [1972]1986: 1)

Shot through with the Yoruba myths of Ogun and Sango, the roots are at once “pathfinder” and “lightning” striking down malefactors, able “To clear the path of lowland barriers/ Forge new realities, free our earth/ Of distorting shadows cast by old/ And modern necromancers” (“Conversation at Night with a Cockroach”, [1972]1986: 7). The two gods are conjunctive symbols of Soyinka’s intellectual tenacity. The prayerful plea is to protect the detainee in his darkest moments against “unreason” (“O Roots”, [1972]1986: 3), to help him be true to himself, to his ideals, his “large/ Design” (p. 2). In Nigeria in the 1960s, the possession and abuse of power reduced the federal authorities to “monster prodigies of spleen”. They are the

“baited stake”, the “fouled communion earth” from which “streams/ Of tainted seepage” flow and “ashes [are] scattered from a common hearth”. Such obscene abuse of power by the ‘seething compost of inhuman abuses’ is reiterated in “Conversation at Night with a Cockroach”. The poet laments:

Not human faces, hands, were these
That fell upon us, nor was death withheld
Even from children, from the unborn,
And wombs were torn from living women
And eyes of children taken out
On the points of knives and bayonets.
The sky was blotted out in funeral pyres
And the faggots were limbs of the living.
...
Death's face of mockery grinned
And beckoned, rock or pole in hand.
None came living from the floods
Of hate's dark waters.

(Soyinka [1972]1986: 10-11)

Characteristically satiric, Soyinka writes to conscientise the world to the disease and “dis”-ease, the depravity of wilful degradation by the power mongers. As can be seen from this description, mindfulness cannot be separated from consciousness: “The man dies,” asserts Soyinka in his often-quoted prison diary truism, “in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny” (1972: 13).

While in jail, Soyinka is faced with an inhuman system that not only denies him personal freedom, but also attempts to break his will, and thus to gain control of his mind. In his determination to withstand the onslaught on his intellect, he embarks on a fast, with the objective of denying the authorities a moral victory and reminding the prisoner of his own powers of resistance, his essential humanity:

I must reach that point where no body of me can be touched, move beyond the capacity of small minds to soil my being or reach towards it. It has not been fasting alone. I have let my psyche roam free, seeking them, learning to destroy them when the time comes.

(Soyinka 1972: 228)

This overwhelming instinct for survival also resonates powerfully in the opening lines of “O Roots!”

Roots, be an anchor at my keel
Shore my limbs against the wayward gale

Reach in earth for deep sustaining draughts
Potencies against my endless thirsts.

(Soyinka [1972]1986: 1)

Such mindfulness is a transformative experience, because such self-apprehension or awareness of the moment – as suggested at the beginning of this article – brings about a conscious awakening of the mind, of intuition. In his Preface to *A Shuttle in the Crypt* ([1972]1986: viii), Soyinka acknowledges that “the landscape of the poems is not uncommon; physical details differ, but finally the landscape of the loss of human contact is the same”. “Viewed as a ‘mechanism’ of consciousness operating within the individual psyche,” states phenomenologist Olga Louchakova (2009: 2), “ontopoiesis underlies the human development, and serves as the foundation for development after deep spiritual experience, but also as the basis for life transitions, transformations of meaning, and reconstruction of the human self[,] affected by trauma”.

“Isn’t it strange how significant human activity has to do with loss?” muses Lao in Okri’s *In Arcadia* (2002: 83): “Art springs out of both alienation and loss. Art replaces what we have lost in spirit. It is therefore a magic replacement” (p. 83). Pointing to its organic mythic conjunction, Lao adds: “Art is finding a new homeland, and yet always setting sail” (p. 84). Soyinka concurs as if in amplification, coincidentally returning to the mask image:

Terror is both contained by art in tragic form and released by art through comic presentation and sexual ambience. The tragic mask ... functions from the same source as its music – from the archetypal essences whose language derives not from the plane of physical reality or ancestral memory ... but from the numinous territory of *transition* into which the artist obtains fleeting glimpses by ritual, sacrifice and a patient submission of rational *awareness* to the moment when fingers and voice relate the symbolic language of the cosmos.

(Soyinka ([1976]1995: 155; my emphasis)

In 1988, in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Soyinka is able to reiterate his onto-poietic thrust thus:

My emphasis is on the human Divine enlargement of the human condition should be viewed dramatically, through man. The mode for this is Ritual. Ritual equates the divine (superhuman) dimension with the communal will, fusing the social with the spiritual ... the ritual, sublimated or expressive, is both social therapy and reaffirmation of group solidarity ... Man re-affirms his indebtedness to earth, dedicating himself anew to the demands of continuity and evokes the energy of productivity. Re-absorbed within the communal psyche he provokes the resources of Nature; he is in turn replenished of the cyclic drain in his fragile individual potency.

(Soyinka ([1976]1995: 155)

“Spontaneous spiritual experiences,” notes Louchakova (2009: 1), “are both the manifestation of, and catalysts to individuation/ego-development”.

4 Conclusion

The idealism of Okri and Soyinka is metonymic for onto-poiesis. As unofficial ombudsmen of life, Okri and Soyinka quest after pure principles of existence. Their quest accords with what Tymieniecka calls “the phenomenology/onto-poiesis of life within the logos-prompted stream of becoming and action, which points to a future of progressing culture” (2011a: s.p.) In this process, the whole mind is “illuminated” by the sudden blazing pure consciousness, “and its deepest *content* becomes available to awareness and pre-reflective and reflective verbalization” (Louchakova 2009: 1; original emphasis).

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