

Ben Obumselu

Educated at the University College Ibadan, Nigeria and Oxford University, England, Ben Obumselu has had a varied career. He has recently published on Chinua Achebe and Chris Okigbo and been engaged in community work among the Igbo people.
E-mail: odenaebele@yahoo.com

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*: A re-evaluation

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*: A re-evaluation

This paper assesses positively the important contributions which Ato Quayson and Douglas McCabe have made to the understanding of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. But it questions whether placing the novel firmly in the context of Yoruba orality, as Quayson does, or in the tradition of New Age spirituality, as McCabe does, does not diminish the work unduly. It points out that Ben Okri did not take his Yoruba material directly from traditional folklore but from secondary sources in which the myths and legends of the Yoruba have been modified and re-interpreted and in *The Famished Road* the original folk narratives are further transfigured by close linkage with the myths and legends of other lands. Similarly, Azaro's chanting of the soft paradisaic anthems of New Age travellers does not stand in the novel unchanged; it is absorbed and transformed by the context of a novel which deals with the problems of growing up and willingly accepting the burdens of an adult life. The article concludes, after a careful re-evaluation of leading episodes in the novel, that a broad late twentieth century context of existentialist thought and postmodern fiction is the proper background for appreciating a novel in which the extravagances of African folk art are adapted to contemporary myth of the culture hero. **Key words:** existentialism; New Age spirituality; postmodern Nigerian fiction; Yoruba folklore.

Ato Quayson's sixth chapter in his *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997) must be the most authoritative study of Ben Okri's prize-winning novel, *The Famished Road* (1991). Examining minutely the traditions of oral memory and myth-making among the Yoruba as these traditions appear in the works of the Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson, in the prose fantasies of Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa, and in the prose and drama of the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, Quayson makes his deductions about the essential structures and protocols of the mythical imagination among the Yoruba and brings these to bear upon a patient and eye-straining examination of *The Famished Road*. Quayson is in no hurry to rush to interpretations and judgments. Instead he looks closely at the materials and strength of the component parts of the novel and provides in the process a model of how works of art should be stripped to the bone and analyzed. If there are reservations to be expressed about this meticulous study, it is that Ben Okri is, after all, more a Londoner than a Yoruba; and that in paying so much attention to the sociology of the Yoruba, Quayson runs the risk of not distinguishing enough between the social ethos and works of art produced within that ethos.

To those who doubt whether Okri's brief residence in Lagos from about 1976 to 1978 and his use of Yoruba folk characters are sufficient reasons to place him firmly in the Yoruba tradition, Douglas McCabe's "Higher realities: New age spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*" is a welcome statement of support. For McCabe postulates that the tradition in which the novel operates is to be found in the very heart of London counterculture. He argues, to use his own words,

[...] that New Age spirituality – not postmodernism or postcolonialism – is the most important cultural vector shaping *The Famished Road* [...] that the features often noticed by critics as distinguishing Okri's *abiku* novel – the adoption and deployment of "African" narrative modes and ways of seeing the world, which exist side by side with "Western" modes and ways; the continual references to nationhood, elections, and the colonial period, the narrative's main motifs (e.g., roads and rivers, hunger and eating) [...] – are all importantly determined by, and subsumed within, New Age spiritual discourse and its attendant politics, so much so that *The Famished Road* verges on being a New Age allegory. (McCabe 2005: 2).

There is good reason for this interpretation of the novel. In Books 4 and 5 and again in the last two chapters, Azaro, the first person narrator of the story, lays heavy emphasis on a millennial vision of world history and on prophecies of an imminent second coming. These annunciations, couched sometimes in Pythagorean or even socialist terms and sometimes in Krishna terms of a deluge of monsoon rains, appear to be endorsed by Dad and Mum. Azaro even foresees the drowning of Western civilization in a muddy ditch of its own making (*Famished Road*, 288). But even so, the novel must be approached as an organic whole. McCabe seems to mistake Azaro's voice for Okri's and he forecloses the possibility of a much broader interpretation in which all the elements which he mentions mutually adjust their functions within an enveloping imaginative form. McCabe seems also to identify the work of art far too much with a system of thought in which that work might have some of its roots. To re-direct attention to the mutual interpenetration and readjustment of one component by other components in an organic imaginative form, this article attempts a detailed review of the structure of *The Famished Road*.

As a starting point, it would be useful to remind readers of a rather obvious point of literary basics which they would do well to keep in mind. Okri does not have to believe that spirit children exist in the real world. In all probability, he does believe that spirits and spirit children are out there. But he must not structure a novel on the premise of that belief. Objectively, *abiku* may just be a notion in which West African societies have taken refuge against the scourge of mosquito infestation and the endemicity of sickle cell anemia in the sub-region. But a writer who holds this view could still use an *abiku* in his work as a fictional convenience to achieve a particular imaginative effect. In the same way, he could invent a Pegasus, a unicorn, Zeus or a

magic carpet. He does not thereby invite his readers to believe that these figments of his imagination exist in the real world. What he asks of them is that they willingly suspend disbelief as they watch his play or read his story. The signifier in literature is hardly ever the same as the signified. Soyinka has a great deal to say about Ogun in his poetry. At one point he refers to Ogun as “my god”. But the reader does not have to ask whether Soyinka believes, in any of the various meanings of that word, in the god. J. K. Rowling’s imaginative world in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* is a place of enchantment and witchcraft. But the novelist does not ask us to believe in wands, spells and magic rings. Defending the use of the fantastic in stories against puritan attack, Philip Sidney argued four centuries ago that the fictional signifier in a poem or a story must not be confused with the imaginative truth that is signified. The signifier could be as fantastic and false as it chooses to be because in that regard the work of art “nothing affirms and therefore nothing lyeth” (Sidney 1957: 59).

The Famished Road cannot affirm that spirit children exist in the real world. What, as a vehicle for experience and not a register of facts, the novel can do is to provide an other-worldly sensibility, which can feel and describe African conditions with horror as a spirit exiled for a season “to taste the bitter fruits of time” (338) would feel and describe them. The novel needs the disgust and nausea which Azaro’s point of view entails. The theme is essentially that of a famished land in need of nourishment and no interpretation of the novel can stand if it fails to take cognizance of the value of Azaro’s consciousness in the presentation of this theme. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson (1992: 84), Okri suggests that everybody could be seen as an *abiku*. He does not just mean that we all have a spiritual nature. He means also that Azaro’s rejection of his circumstances is bound up with the natural aspiration of the human spirit for more and more fullness of life. But Azaro is not just disgusted and appalled. He is unable to understand the human condition. The West African novel of spiritual outcry started with Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965), Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966), and Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* (1968). *The Famished Road* (1991) takes this tradition one step further by introducing the unusual perspective of a spirit child as narrator.

Azaro is often lost in the forest, in the streets, in the market and in his nightmares. Okri tries to fuse Azaro’s experience of spiritual anguish and disgust with a criticism of political and economic conditions. But the two things are not the same. “I was frightened by the feeling,” Azaro complains, “that there was no escape from the hard things of the world. Everywhere there was the crudity of wounds...” (*Famished Road*, 161). These wounds as the afflictions of poverty and misgovernment are capable of remedy. As the essential grossness and contingency of the created world, the wounds are beyond remedy.

Okri shows extraordinary imaginative resourcefulness in the selection and accumulation of detail to dramatize Azaro’s experience of disgust. But this disgust is

often existential, not political. In the market, for instance, he can hardly bear the sight of the merchandise on display:

There were stalls of goods everywhere. And filling the air with the smells and aromas of the market place, the rotting vegetables, the fresh fruits, the raw meat, roasted meat, stinking fish, the feathers of wild birds and stuffed parrots, the wafting odors of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow dung and sahelian perfume, and pepper-bursts which heated the eye balls and tickled the nostrils. And just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of things. (*Famished Road*, 161).

The phrase “unholy fecundity of things” is an objection to the riot of things because they are pointless; and “unholy” is a disincarnate spirit’s sneer at the absurdity of all earthly things. There is perhaps an allusion in this passage to the many occasions in *Le Nausee* in which Sartre’s hero speaks about “the tasteless obscenity of life” and the “terrifying and obscene nakedness” of all things. It is with this existential horror that Azaro speaks of roads, markets, mazes, labyrinths and the nightmares of the world. His descriptions may refer in an unclear metaphoric way, as they must do, to political and economic realities in African nations. But the main thrust is ontological. The human world is an obscene jungle in which the individual is lost and incapable of achieving rationality. Azaro’s complaints about roads repeat, among other things, the complaints of Kafka’s moral pilgrim in *The Castle*:

The roads seemed to me then [Azaro says] to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, like snakes, tail in their mouth, twisting themselves into labyrinths. The road was the worst hallucination of them all, leading towards home and then away from it, without end, with too many signs, and no directions. The road became my torment, my aimless pilgrimage, and I found myself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end. (*Famished Road*, 114–15).

It will be recalled that in the opening chapter of *The Castle*, Kafka’s hero finds that the short road which goes to the Castle “did not lead up to the castle hill, it only made towards it and then, as if deliberately, turned aside....” (Kafka 1957: 17). The reference is not directed to political conditions in Africa or anywhere else. It is about the mystery of the road of life. Another similar passage will establish this point.

It was very dark; I was hungry, wet, lost; and I heard voices all around me, the twittering vicious voices of my spirit companions wailing in disappointment. I ran till the road became a river of voices, every tree, car, and face talking at me, cats crossing my path, people with odd night faces staring at me knowingly. At crossroads people glared and seemed to float towards me menacingly. I fled all through the

night. The road was endless. One road led to a thousand others, which in turn fed into paths, which ended in avenues and cul-de-sacs. (*Famished Road*, 112–13).

Azaro is not just frightened of the road of life; he is also terrified by human faces and voices. In the episode in which he has his first sexual arousal, he is amazed at his own human impulses as the woman pulls him roughly “against her groin and intoxicating smells staggered me like a new kind of dangerous wine” (*Famished Road*, 272). His defensiveness is predictable and he deals with the crisis by describing the event purely clinically.

Even in reporting politics, Azaro typically omits, except incidentally, any reference to the motives which explain the activities he describes. The effect is deliberately disconcerting. He sees, laments and mocks, as primal human infirmities, the aggressive instinct and will to power, which seem to be the root of politics. The political thugs who do battle against each other go to the trenches “with absolute disinterested ferocity”, “without passion, without politics even” (*Famished Road*, 193). The opening paragraph of the description of this engagement is worth recalling for its suggestion of an unbridgeable distance between the narrator and the actors.

In the diabolical heat of that afternoon six illegitimate sons of minor warlords, whom I first thought were minotaurs, enacted a battle of ascendancies. They fought near the burnt van. No one came to separate them. They lashed at one another with long sticks, clubs, and whips. They all looked alike. They were the interchangeable faces of violence and politics. (*Famished Road*, 192).

The impression is that the narrator does not understand what is going on and that he sees it predominantly as spectacle.

Yoruba folklore establishes the main outline of Okri’s portrait of Azaro. But in filling in the details, of the music-filled paradise which is Azaro’s spiritual home, of the mazes, labyrinths and lonely crowds which are the backdrop of daily life, of intolerable poverty and misery in city slums, and of disgust and anguish as existential responses to the human condition, Okri consults the folklore of many lands, the tradition of the West African political novel, and contemporary world literature. Okri’s insight into Azaro’s sensibility in particular appears to have benefitted from the study of the absurdist and existential traditions in England and France most especially of Sartre’s *Le Nausee*. In creating the character of his narrator, Okri shows an astonishing capacity for the hybridization and synthesis of literary traditions, which is what we should expect in a novelist who spent his formative years in the melting pot of contemporary London.

To correct the impression that New Age optimism is the main burden of *The Famished Road*, it would be necessary to show that the structure of the novel taken as a whole is against the dance and song which Azaro presents so positively in his first chapter and

that Azaro's love of unearned pleasure is disconfirmed at the end of the story. It should be recalled that the first chapter of the novel is full of images of spirit children as they frolic on the shore with "fauns, fairies, and beautiful beings" and that "tender sibyls, benign sprites, and the serene presences of our ancestors" bathe them "with divine rainbows." "Wondrous spirits danced around us to the music of gods, uttering golden chants and lapis lazuli incantations." But even in these opening pages, these deep ecstasies are distanced and criticized as being self-indulgent and possibly deceptive. For we are told that spirit children "disliked the rigors of existence," that they are "unwilling to come to terms with life" and live in "a world of pure dreams" (*Famished Road*, 3-6). This warning suggests that the narrative will show the reader in due course a more satisfactory human ideal.

Azaro's personal story follows a trajectory of moral development from the love of indolent ease to the discovery of the Ogun ideal of creative living. He learns to love his parents and to bear his share of the burden of their very difficult life. The process of healing begins when Azaro takes the first step in bonding with his mother. She has had a fever and suddenly loses consciousness. "Grief threw me to the floor," Azaro says, "and I thrashed about and wailed because I thought Mum had died" (*Famished Road*, 57). The relationship deepens and reaches its peak by the middle of the story. The next time, Mum only speaks about dying and Azaro falls down in a faint. "Misery filled me like water fills a deep well after a heavy down pour" (*Famished Road*, 229). He recovers only when apparently his mother kisses him. Similarly Azaro gradually learns to identify with Dad. He takes the first step after seeing and sympathizing with a porter staggering under the crushing load of three bags of salt.

He wobbled in all directions, banging into stalls, toppling tables of fresh fish and neat piles of oranges, staggering into traders' wares, trampling on basins of snails. Women screamed at him, pulling at his trousers. He went on staggering, balancing the weights, slipping and miraculously regaining his footage, grunting and swearing, uttering the words 'more!' "more!" under his breath, and when he went past me noticed that his crossed eyes were almost normal under the crush, and his muscles trembled uncontrollably, and he groaned so deeply, and he gave off such an unearthly smell of sweat and oppression that I suddenly burst into tears. (*Famished Road*, 145-46).

It is worth noticing that the language and the substance of this episode, like most episodes cited in this article, are rational and realistic in their conception. Okri indeed grants some power of agency to his supernaturals. Spirit children throw stones; a three-headed monster abducts Azaro; and the forests are full to bursting with spirit dwarfs, hunchbacks and antelopes. But they do not shape the major situations, influence character, or determine the overall structure and meaning of events. In this regard, *The Famished Road* is unlike any of the magical fantasies of Tutuola or Fagunwa. Azaro's development is the process of his coming to maturity emotionally, morally

and intellectually and this process is triggered by the growth of his powers of bonding, affection and sympathy. Soon after his encounter with the human beast of burden, Dad appears on the scene burdened with an even heavier load. Azaro reports how deeply he suffered when Dad is insulted and how he followed him at a distance “grieving for the cuts and wounds on his arm” (*Famished Road*, 149). As Azaro wakes up to the sanctity of human affection, his spirit companions turn against him, threaten, blackmail, and kidnap him. He escapes and returns to his parents. But when he breaks a neighbour’s window pane in an effort to ward off his friends, Dad and Mum both cane him mercilessly. He suffers a relapse.

Okri’s treatment of Azaro’s descent during his relapse towards the House of the Dead throws some light on the imaginative freedom a novelist may exercise in picking and choosing and combining motifs, symbols and episodes from many cultures. The road down which Azaro and his three-headed guide travel, is possibly the Greek road to Lethe’s wharf. But it is transformed by mystical ideas about the spiral stairs which the dead must descend, their need before they are born again to undergo punishment and purgation, and the cycles of astrological transformation in the course of the Great Year. At the same time, Okri makes allusions to Krishna’s flight on the back of the great bird Garuda who takes him through heaven and earth and through universal history (Frith 1976: 110ff). Meanwhile Mum and Dad have called in a babalawo who kills a cockerel to appease the ancestors and mutters powerful incantations to guide Azaro’s soul safely up the winding stairs. Some readers will, of course, believe that it is the renewal of love in the family which restores Azaro’s confidence in living. Okri does not choose one set of protocols instead of another. He creates a magpie composite in which readers from different cultures will each find a familiar motif to stimulate the imagination.

At the end of the story, Azaro is a new person. He remembers the enchanting song of the sirens but he is not moved by it. He now wants, as Dad’s slogan phrases it, “to be a man” carrying his part of the burden of the world. In Dad’s last fight, Azaro is an able second standing in Dad’s corner, shouting useful instructions to him and in the critical moment of the fight, he takes the significant initiative of seizing the Old Sorcerer and wheeling him out into the night. His closing words: “I wanted the liberty of limitation, to have to find or create new roads for this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be” (*Famished Road*, 487).

But although Azaro’s conversion is in a sense the presiding theme of *The Famished Road*, Azaro is not the hero of his own narrative. His story is burdened far too much with getting lost, treading the labyrinth, and fighting off the advances of his ethereal friends that he has no time to exemplify the positive values which his conversion entails. It is not Azaro but Dad who is the iconic and normative figure in the story. As Quayson has shown, Dad is modelled on the figure of Ogun the favorite deity of the Yoruba pantheon (Quayson 1997: 139ff). Ogun in folklore, ritual, odu Ifa and

mythology is the spirit of creative enterprise and innovation. He presides over roads. As a historical figure, he is said to have been the first metallurgist, hunter, and farmer, but as a deity he has risen to be the Muse and author of *ijala* poetry, an irate warrior god who delights in the blood even of his own men, a founder and destroyer of cities, fire bringer, child giver, and the innovator who changes the raw gifts of nature into the amenities of civilized life (Barnes 1989: 57). Although Okri has some knowledge of *odu Ifa* in which Ogun's dirty habits are emphasized, the god came to him mostly second-hand through Soyinka's works most especially *A Dance of the Forest* (1963), *The Road* (1965), *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967) and *Ogun Abibiman* (1976). Thus by the time the warrior god reached Okri, he had already made the transition from folk art into literary history.

In Soyinka's work, Ogun is the god of creation, a deity "aflame with seed", the maker and destroyer of all things in an eternal process of change. Before creation and the making of mankind, Ogun made his way into primeval darkness and chaos where he built the bridge, which takes immortals into the sub-lunar world. This primordial opening of the door to heavenly blessings is symbolized annually by the stormy deluge of the first rains.

Okri may, however, have gone beyond Soyinka in his search for the true Ogun. For Ogun is a road explorer and long before the colonial era, he had penetrated the old kingdoms of Benin, Igala, and Dahomey. He also boarded the slave ships of Britain and Spain and gradually made inroads into Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Argentina and Brazil. More lately, he is known to have made converts in Florida, South Carolina, California and New York (see Barnes 1989: chapters 4, 5). Although many of these last congregations are said to be non-racial, Ogun in the New World is the god of the outcast, the poor, the colonized, the insulted and injured and the wretched of the earth. John Mason of the Yoruba Theological Archministry of Brooklyn sums up the significance of Ogun in the New World by saying that "Ogun is the clearer of the path and creator of the road that allows both men and deities to travel from one level of reality to the next" (*Famished Road*, 353). The multiplicity of functions in Yoruba folk traditions is set aside. Ogun is still quick to anger but he is essentially a friend who offers present help in times of trouble. It is in this benign light that Okri depicts Ogun in *The Famished Road*.

There is no need to follow Dad's doings in the story step by step. He bears the crushing sack of his responsibilities as a householder who struggles, in pain and humiliation and without resources, to support his family in a city slum. At first he is a porter for cement and salt and then a night soil man. But he soon becomes a bruiser and brawler who fights in defence of his family and the poor of the slums. In this role, he follows in the footsteps of folklore wrestlers who defeat all comers including the champions of the spirit world. As a fighter Dad is a representation of man's "titanic struggle with the elemental forces that would destroy man's soul", as Quayson rightly

observes (Quayson 1997: 140). Again and again Azaro associates Dad with lightning, thunder, the wind, a lion, and the tiger after whom he is nicknamed and during the fight against the ghost of 'Yellow Jaguar', Dad is shown summoning the basic resources of nature to his side. "He was going back to water, to the earth, to the road, to soft things. I felt a strange energy rising from him. He was drawing from the night, and the air, the road, his friends" (*Famished Road*, 357). The image is not the portrait of a man whom we can meet in the street nor even just a heroic figure. It is an image of the primordial energy of life struggling blindly and desperately against circumstances. Dad is the god immanent in all nature. The idea cannot be realized realistically. Okri tries to express the imaginative intuition in an idiom of cartoons and hyperboles. Sometimes the impression is comic as in the episode when Dad fights rats, mosquitoes, and the chair with his massive jaws set, his muscles rippling, and his neck rigid (*Famished Road*, 95). The reader has to connect this image with similar conceptions in the European romantic and symbolist traditions. Dad is life which in the midst of the material forms that constitute its real existence must struggle and writhe and stumble blindly and endlessly towards higher and higher realizations of its possibilities. The audacity of this conception is one of the attractions of *The Famished Road*, and the image is in direct opposition to the soft ideal, which Azaro represents. Azaro is mistaken not just because his orientation is receptive and hedonistic but also because he is looking for an easy and ready-made road. Dad reads him a harsh creative lesson on this score:

I was coming down the road [Dad says], singing, drinking, and then the road said to me: "Watch yourself". So I abused the road. Then it turned into a river, and I swam. It turned into fire and I sweated. It transformed into a tiger, and I killed it with one blow. And then it shrank into a big rat and I shouted at it and it ran, like the creditors. And then it dissolved into mud and I lost my shoe. (*Famished Road*, 94).

The Ogun positives of fearlessness, resolution and creative improvisation are lost to readers who do not distinguish sufficiently between the fantastic and sometimes comic signifier and the rigors of the signified. The difficulty of holding the two dimensions in tension and in balance is the main challenge of writing *The Famished Road*.

The conception of Dad is rational and contemporary. Yet Okri chooses to picture him in mythical terms. In the same way and for the same reason, he presents Madam Koto as a witch. But we must not be beguiled into thinking that Okri is operating within the protocols of traditional folklore. Okri adopts traditional motifs in order to re-interpret and update them. It is useful to consider how guardedly he introduces the notion of witchcraft as an explanation of Madame Koto's conduct. Azaro does not say unequivocally that Madam is a witch. He says with many hesitations and reservations that there are rumours, legends and myths about her unusual character. She is handsome, generous, hardworking and self-reliant. She is the focus of attention wherever she is. But she drinks a full glass of illicit gin in one gulp. She fights a mad

man and throws him out of her bar. She falls like a whirlwind on a gang of rowdies sending them with her broom into headlong retreat and manages the difficult feat of being in several places at the same time. She paints her face secretly in ritual black and white, mumbles passionate prayers in front of a fetish, and indulges in paranoid dreams of power and glory. There are rumours that she is two hundred years old and has buried two husbands. Okri manages the character in such a manner that contemporary insights into its meaning are conveyed to the reader without those insights passing through the consciousness of the narrator. The handling of first person narration in this instance is perfect. But the point is that the reader has a choice of interpretations. Madame Koto's virtues are many. But she is so self-obsessed, greedy and exploitative that she perverts and poisons every virtue. She is a mother figure but her motherhood caters only to the lusts of the body. In a harsh competitive world, she is determined to make her way by living off other people's vices. "Her dreams [Azaro says] are livid rashes of parties and orgies, of squander and sprees, of corruption and disintegration, of innocent women and weak men" (*Famished Road*, 495). "She became all the things we whispered she was and she became more. At night, when she slept, she stole the people's energies" (*Famished Road*, 495). The interpretation of this character so deeply embedded in folklore tradition places it outside that tradition.

The Blind Sorcerer of the story shares with Madame Koto the role of opposing the hero as the barricades against which life spends its force. He of course partakes in the double tradition of folk fantasy in the vehicle and imaginative truth in the tenor. But the Old man resists interpretation because he appears only in a few episodes. That Okri makes him a central character in *Songs of Enchantment* shows how the dramatis personae gradually assume independent lives of their own and so lead the novelist into new thresholds of thought. The Old Man is blind. He has hypnotic powers and inspires terror. When he plays on his accordion, "music like the awful sound of wild beasts gnashing and grinding their teeth in the forests, poured from the pleats of his instrument" (*Famished Road*, 420) and moods are subverted. The impression is that the Old Man stands for the nameless traditional inhibitions and terrors which exert their blind pressure on freedom, initiative and light. He is King Kamsa of the Krishna legend, Morgana Fay of the Arthurian cycle, and the Giants of Norse tales.

The art of *The Famished Road* is an art of oblique forms. Nothing is named unambiguously and the names can deceive. Significance is not pointed out as it might be in Balzac or George Eliot. It emerges slowly and shyly as the reader questions the form and the interpenetration of motif, symbol, rhetoric and characters. The slow awakening of realization removes the film of familiarity from the truth and we see it new as a revelation and a pleasure.

The final episodes of *The Famished Road*, with its long speechifications, its comic inflations of episode and descriptions and its millennial prophecies are the most

likely parts of the narrative to cause misunderstanding. The latter day storms of monsoon rain have fallen. The gods and ancestors of the ghetto have processed across the night sky recalling ancient sanctities and rekindling dying hope. Dad has defeated the ghost of capitalist tyranny and in the three days of his temporary descent to the House of the Dead, he has undergone shamanic initiation. Azaro is uttering prophesies about the coming of the Great Year of Ptolemy and Anaximander. Even Mum has stories to tell about the transmigration of souls and the unreality of time.

But it should be noted that the annunciations of millennial change are not announcements of victory. Madam Koto, her party of the rich and their thugs are in undisputed control of the ghetto. The beggars have been caned and thrown out of the community banquet. There is political terror in the ghetto and Dad is seriously ill. We may perhaps consider that W. B. Yeats who also believes passionately in millennial reversals of the wheels of history does not think that end times are times of victory. Instead they are times of upheaval and tragedy as he states again and again in his finest poems,

[...] somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds
(Yeats 1956: 185).

Hector is dead there's a light in Troy
We that look but laugh in tragic joy
(Yeats 1956: 291).

Azaro's lions and jaguars of the spirit are already roaming the land. The beggars, deformed by the humiliations of the world and yet beautiful with the marks of their spirit origin, are mobilizing. Dad is on the warpath. Change is promised but not peace. W. B. Yeats says a great deal in *A Vision* about gyres and cones and the phases of the moon in his prophesy of millennial change, but he adds that the new life will not dawn mysteriously. It will come, as "an intellectual influx neither from beyond mankind nor born of a virgin, but begotten from our spirit and history" (Yeats 1962: 262).

Cognizance should also be taken of the element of fantasy characteristic of Azaro's language in moments of heightened consciousness. His language in these situations is marked by synesthesia, hyperboles and extravagant tropes of fancy. It does not dwell on the facts but gestures instead at emotions and atmosphere. It is not denotative of meaning but it liberates the reader's unconscious to imagine the facts, which should be appropriate to the emotions. The style may remind some readers of the expressionism and suggestive imagery of many folk narratives. Consider, for example, how Azaro

presents what happened on the first night of political terror in the ghetto: "The dead joined the innocents [Azaro says], mingled with the thugs, merged with the night and plundered the antagonists with the cries of the wounded. The dead uttered howls of mortal joy and they found the livid night a shrine glistening with fevers." (*Famished Road*, 180).

Azaro does not describe what happened. What he conveys is an experience of awe, terror and exultation. Similarly the herbalist who treats Azaro during his great illness is only half-described and half-conjured into life. He has "a face so battered and eyes so daunting that even mirrors would recoil and crack at his glance" (*Famished Road*, 380). Madam Koto in her days of glory "wore clothes that made the beggars ill" (*Famished Road*, 495). The capitalist ghost from the land of fighting demons does not throw punches when he beats up Dad. In the world as it really is, he does not have to fight: "[...] it seemed he was completely still the whole time, while Dad's head kept snapping backwards, as if the air, or an invisible hand, was responsible" (*Famished Road*, 471). These signifiers affirm nothing. The reader well tuned to the frequency will not take Azaro's final prophecies literally. But it is in the convention of myths of transformation that they should end with a vision of change.

Okri's literary affinities, as we find them in *The Famished Road*, are elective affinities. He is not bound with an umbilical cord to any heritage or creed. His reading ranges freely in world literature. He was born of Urhobo ethnic stock in the Gwari country of Northern Nigeria. He spent his childhood in England, his boyhood among the Urhobo and Itshekiri of the Niger Delta, worked briefly in Lagos, and served his literary apprenticeship in London. He loves Yoruba oral traditions and is deeply stirred by the imaginative truth of the Yoruba god of the road. But his literary appetite is catholic. It seems likely that Dame Iris Murdoch's ironic and anti-Sartrean first novel *Under the Net* (1954) is one of the many texts from many different traditions which were in Okri's mind as he wrote *The Famished Road*. Murdoch was a Cambridge classicist who, in the years immediately after the Second World War, lived in France and moved in Sartrean circles. She was at first fascinated by existentialism. In particular, she admired the originality of *Le Nausee* especially with regard to the novel's analysis of the nature of consciousness, the lack of harmony between language and reality, and the difficulties of personal relations. But gradually Murdoch began to have serious reservations, which she set out in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953) and in her brilliant first novel *Under the Net*. Murdoch's hero in *Under the Net* Jake Donahue is an incarnation of Sartre's Antoine Roquentin. Both see life as a tasteless and obscene affair not pure, nor logical, nor necessary. Both love art and believe that in music we have an experience very close to the platonic forms. It is this extraordinary taste for music which Okri's hero inherits. Like Roquentin and Jake, he is haunted by an enchanting strain of song which attaches him indissolubly to the source which in his case is the racial unconscious. It is worthy of note that Azoro's surrender to the superterrestrial voice of

music goes back, through Iris Murdoch, Sartre and Proust's exploitation of the wonderful septet in Vinteuil's fictional sonata, to the ancient and continuing debate about Platonic forms and the nature of art. In Murdoch's hero, the music is the golden voice of Anna Quentin's renditions of folk songs. Jake, separated from Anna, as Azaro is separated from his spirit companions, looks for her all over London. Azaro's anguish is Jake's and Roquentin's anguish. The episode in which Azaro enters Madame Koto's secret sanctuary is probably based on Jake's experience in Anna's theatre closet where he finds her clothes and theatrical gear in disarray. Azaro's long search of Mum in the market is probably based on Jake's search for Anna on the banks of the Seine and in the Tuileries. But Jake eventually wearies of Anna and her songs. He realizes that the fascination is an infantile longing. He takes a job and begins an adult life. At the end of the story, he hears Anna's Circean voice for the last time.

The words came slowly, gilded by her utterance. They turned in the air slowly and then fell; and the splendor of the husky gold filled the shop turning the cats into leopards and Mrs Tinckham into an aged Circe. I sat quite still and held Mrs Tinck's eye as she leaned there with her hand frozen upon the knob of the wireless [...] "Turn it off" I said, for I could bear no more. (Murdoch 1954: 283–84).

Azaro recalls the voices of his spirit companions during his last conversation with Ade. He is unmoved. He too is awake to the challenges and delights of adult life. One of the great merits of *The Famished Road* is that Okri takes possession of, re-creates and transfigures the materials, which he uses so completely that the novel does not remind us in any way of his various sources. But his themes are serious late twentieth century concerns. He is new and astonishing only on account of the audacity, humour and poetic vitality which he brings to bear as he tests the creative limits of what we might perhaps describe as African spiritist discourse.

Works cited

- Barnes, Sandra T. (ed.). 1989. *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frith, Nigel. 1976. *The Legend of Krishna*. London: Sphere Books.
- Kafka, Franz. 1957. *The Castle*. Trans. J. Underwood. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Mason, John. 1989. Ogun: Builder of the Lukumi's House. In Sandra T. Barnes (ed.). *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 353–58.
- McCabe, Douglas. 2005. Higher Realities: New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. *Research in African Literatures*, 36(4): 1–21.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1954. *Under the Net*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Okri, Ben, 1992. *The Famished Road*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Quayson, Ato. 1997. *Transformations in Nigerian Writing*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. 1957. Apology for Poetry. In Charles Holmes, Edwin Fussell, & Ray Frazer (eds.). *The Major Critics: The Development of English Literary Criticism*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 46–70.
- Wilkinson, Jane. 1992. *Talking with African Writers*. London: James Currey.
- Yeats, W. B. 1956. *The Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan.
- _____. *A Vision*. 1962. London: Macmillan.