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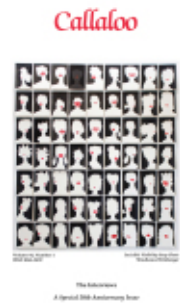
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AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN OKRI

Charles Henry Rowell

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This interview was conducted on March 28, 2005, at the British Arts Council in London, England.

CHARLES HENRY ROWELL: This morning, as I opened the newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* in my hotel, I noticed that there was an article on an exhibition of European-American paintings, a small collection from New England. This exhibition is being mounted at the Dulwich Picture Gallery here in London. I love art in various forms. All of us as human beings love it, and some few of us create it. You are an artist, a maker, a creator. Your literary texts are art; your poetry is art; your fiction is art. What is this thing that you make? Will you talk about the fiction you make as art. Art is the essence of the narratives you create; the essence of your narratives is art. Will you talk about what you make as art? What is it, how it moves in the world, how you want it to exist in the world, and how you want us to respond to it or experience it?

BEN OKRI: It is the most mysterious, and the most future-making, past-transforming, prophetic, death-consciousness-resonating, civilization-shaping, life-molding activity that we do. I see art as a bridge between the secular and spiritual aspects of humanity. In art I'm including everything from song, dance, architecture, painting, music, literature, conversation of a certain kind, even certain silences. Society is held together by laws, but is animated by art. When the art of a people die, not long afterwards, the people die. It's the art that keeps the brightest and the most important aspects of a people, inwardly, alive. It keeps them alive to conscience, to their failings, to their missed roads, to their wrong turnings, to their great destination which keeps moving forward and taking us with it. Art connects the prophetic; aside from the spiritual, art is the next great realm of humanity. It is practically a continent just off paradise, within the spirit. That's how important it is. That's how important I see it. Therefore, it requires from us on the one hand the greatest consciousness in our execution of art, the greatest responsibility, the greatest freedom, the greatest wisdom, the greatest discipline. On the other hand, the greatest, the humblest, capacity of interpretation, because an art that is not originally an interpreter is like a sphinx that doesn't speak. Right now, we exist in a world where so many things in our art have been speaking to us and telling us all kinds of things we need to know about ourselves, the mistakes we've been making, the kind of human beings, the kind of society, the kind of families, the kind of people we can be; all of these works of art are speaking to us, but we're not hearing them because of poor interpreta-

tion. Interpretation is not something that should be left only to the cultural interpreters. It is the responsibility of every human being. The way we interpret art is a preparation for the way we interpret life, and vice versa. They are in a perpetual dialogue with one another. If you can't read a book, if you can't read a poem, you're not going to be able to read a situation that you find yourself in clearly; it's the same textual interpretation. We need the same moral intelligence, the same spiritual aliveness, the sense that everything is a text we can learn from. Whether it is literature, painting, music, dance, a building, it is always there speaking to us about our open possibilities. Interpretations should be an important part of the educational curriculum. This whole idea of interpretation has been too culturally isolated. Rap artists constantly are interpreting one another's performance. Interpretation is one of the most wonderful things we do; it's just that we separate it from critical interpretation. This broadened sense of art spreads that, and becomes a life thing. Life and art complement one another, perpetually in dialogue, with our consciousness as the mediating place.

ROWELL: I am convinced that art is necessary; it is a necessary thing for the human being as an individual, and it is necessary for societies.

OKRI: If I can find a word that is a bit more than "necessary," I would say yes. People are really only as great as their art, and as their interpretation of art. You're not going to be greater than your art. Even your science is not going to be greater than your art. The science is only great in relation to the art, because art frees the human spirit, frees the place that talent and possibility pour out from. Art is closest to that place; everything else comes second, third, fourth, because an art thing is a life thing. It is not just that it is necessary: it is fundamental. This cannot be stressed strongly enough. People who do not respect art are in trouble. It will be pretty evident eventually. You can look at a people, and you will be able to tell just how much they value their art and how much they live, are lively, in relation to it.

ROWELL: When you first started speaking you used the word "spiritual." I don't understand the word "spiritual" as you are using it, because I think you're saying something far beyond what I know or imagine, far from my own cultural background, my own historical background, of what "spiritual" means. It seems that your "spiritual" was beyond religion, but it had something to do with the soul; it had something to do with another world. And then there is the figuration you spoke of, the "spirit-child." Will you talk about that? Is it the same thing as the spirit, an embodiment of the spiritual?

OKRI: Not really.

ROWELL: What I'm trying to do is to get a landscape, to create a landscape that will aid us in reading your fiction. And I don't want to say "interpret" your work, but the way you were using the word "interpret," I would say "to interpret your work," but not the way I would use the word in a classroom of literature, for example.

OKRI: I prefer “read” to “interpret.” “Read” is more open. “Read” is great. For me the spiritual constitutes the central thing that makes us human. And you’re right, I separate it from religion because religion tends to be, in one form or another, organized; whereas the spiritual is true for everybody. It is a domain that is in every human being, in our makeup. It is immeasurable, unisolatable. It can’t be found in the DNA. It is what makes the whole self, the whole being. It is the first ground in humanity, the prime kingdom within the human spirit, within all of humanity. As for the way it relates to the idea of a creator, I think that’s too contentious to go into here, except I’ll say that the spiritual is what unites all of us. It is the most fundamental thing that unites all of us. When Shakespeare said, “If you prick me, do I not bleed?” talking about mercy, he really is invoking that oneness that all human beings share, regardless of where they’re from. Without being able to invoke that oneness, we don’t actually have a means of feeling for one another. The fact that we’re just all human beings is not enough a basis for feeling this oneness that we mysteriously feel with one another. The spiritual *is* that oneness, is what connects us. Though you are sitting there and I’m sitting here, we are connected by this spiritual oneness. We are both animated by the spiritual, by this fourth-dimensional thing that makes us alive and makes us human. So, for me, that spiritual foundation that one assumes without even knowing that one assumes it is the basis for all the other resonances that take place in society: in art, in literature, in our dealings with one another, in our laws. Because we all assume that oneness. It is very strange that this universal quality that is invisible and cannot be shown or produced as evidence must be assumed in society, even in highly secular societies. It has to be assumed; otherwise, we are talking about societies being composed of millions of isolated and unconnected peoples, which we don’t. We think of societies being one—many millions—but essentially one. We do that, and the intuition of doing that is this spiritual connection.

ROWELL: Were you demonstrating the same in *In Arcadia*? Do you think the literary critics reviewing your novel fail to comprehend what you were demonstrating? Or were you—to put it another way—raising a question about that?

OKRI: Yes, I was raising a question about that, because the very nature of the spiritual and the very nature of the presence of art in us also brings into view the very fact that a society has secret dreams as to where it wants to go. The more intelligent the society, the clearer those dreams are. There are many words in many languages, but only one word known for it in literature. That word is “Arcadia.” Some would choose “utopia,” some would say “Eden.” In the Bible, in the past, and in the fall, too many things are associated with “Eden” and that is problematic. “Utopia” again is locked in this sense of an impossible dream, but “Arcadia” is sufficiently secular and unspoiled to allow this resonance, this influx of the idea of people’s best dreams of where they want to go. This is true of the individual, as well as a people, as well as the human race. We are largely defined by the quality of our Arcadias. If you don’t have an Arcadia, you are in trouble. We are only as rich or as alive as our dreams of who we want to be and where we want to go. It’s that need to bring back into view the fact that deep down inside this unrest, this chaos, this suicidal, genocidal, serial killing age that we’re living in, inside it is still this

hope, this desire for an Arcadia. That's what I was trying to bring out. Most of the critics didn't see it, but that's not so bad. The purpose of art is not to be seen immediately, but also to wait. Art is very patient.

ROWELL: You have destroyed my next question. [*Laughter*] I realize that it is terrible to ask writers to respond to their critics. But I want to ask you your response to the blindness of your critics: that they were expecting you to do one thing while you were doing another, that they were expecting you to stick only with Nigerian culture rather than to use and critique European culture, and to show the oneness of all humanity in African culture, the oneness of humanity via European culture. I am suddenly reminded of the African American artist Romare Bearden in the United States, in his collages reinventing Odysseus, Bearden's rereading of *The Odyssey* using black characters, and white critics were totally thrown off balance: "Why is he putting these black people here?" So why were you tampering with their culture? That is, of course, I hope you get the sarcasm in my words.

OKRI: Well, because it is not solely their culture; it belongs to the human race. To go back to our earlier conversation about the hidden assumption of the presence of the spiritual: this human oneness means that the great dreams that a people have don't belong only to them. We don't live in a world where peoples are isolated from one another. The dreams and the nightmares of one people definitely affect another. We know this in relation to all that has been going on over the past one hundred years in human history, whether it's communism, apartheid in South Africa, Tibet and China, we're all impinged on by other people's dreams and ideas about how the world should be. Finally, once it enters into the realm of art, it has said goodbye to the people that it came from. If it is inside of people and not expressed, it belongs to the people. The minute it is expressed, it has said goodbye and made a journey into the world dream. In that sense, every important work of art is a world dream, a world contribution. It is the utmost in cultural selfishness for a people to think that their creation belongs to them alone. It is a startling and singular act of ungenerosity to say that an artist is going to dream for only this small bunch of people on this great globe. And yet, they put this dream-art into the world. If they are going to put the dream-art into the world, they should also put a sign with that dream saying "For English people only," or "For black Americans only" or "For Nigerians only." It doesn't work like that. The minute an artistic dream leaves you it goes into the world in complete freedom. Just like we human beings go into the world, we go in complete freedom—but we forget it. And so, for me, all works of art are mine to enjoy and learn from and use; the whole history of art, the whole history of culture, is my personal possibility and history. And I expect everyone to think the same thing about everyone else's. What are we saying? Are we saying therefore that a work of art does not speak to another human being? The fundamental definition of a work of art, a true work of art, is that it speaks to anyone, it speaks to something in everyone. It is universal in that sense. How can you talk about the universality of art on the one hand and insist on its provinciality on the other? That is a kind of artistic apartheid. It is ultimately damaging. I think art wants to be part of the world family. And so when you say "Am I tampering with their Arcadia?" I say it

never was theirs alone. The very fact of having this artistic dialogue continues the story of enrichment between us. Having said that, I also want to stress one fundamental thing about the nature of art, and that is its right to be misunderstood or to not be understood at the time. The definition of art is not that it is and should be immediately understood, or even that it is perfectly and completely understandable. Because it comes out of one person's consciousness and speaks to certain universal archetypes inside of all of us means, therefore, that art is both time contingent as well as perpetually mysterious: it cannot be ever completely unraveled. It is that perpetual question mark that relates art to Arcadia; for that reason it always takes us forward. Anything that can be completely understood fades. What keeps us interested in artistic creation is the fact that we think we've got it, we go to sleep, wake up, look at it, and we've lost it again. It has changed. It has become something else, because we are constantly becoming something else. Our relationship with the mysterious archetypes, the mysterious dreams within us, is itself evanescent and constantly changing. Change is the territory of our relationship with art and the universe. Because life itself is so fluid and the future is constantly defined and undefined. That's the magic of it. So I'm not overly concerned whether what one does is understood at the time. What is important is the quality of the dialogue. On the whole, my work has been generously received. But there have been here and there small-minded responses. I don't think it is because of the spiritual dimension. I think it is also what you are saying, the limiting rights that one should do only this, one should do only that, and one is going outside that territory—or reminding folks that there is no limited territory, there is just the human territory. One of the things that keeps me going is a belief in the fundamental freedom of the human imagination and of the artistic dream. We have a right to—we must—go everywhere. We're content to send astronauts to space and to distant planets, and we restrict our artists to their culture and their race and their tradition? That is madness. Freedom is universal; limiting the imagination doesn't make sense to me.

ROWELL: I think also, for us in the West to begin closely reading your work, we need to know what you mean when you speak of “stories.” I want to quote something where you used stories: “The greatest stories are those that resonate our beginnings and intuit our endings, our mysterious origins, and our destinies, and resolve them both into one.” It's a very beautiful statement in form. Will you talk about that statement—especially as it relates to your own work?

OKRI: You ask the most profound questions, and what is more deadly is that you ask them so beautifully and so nicely. You are a deadly man. I'm going to try and respond to the edge in that question. There is something that runs through the whole of creation the moment it becomes creation, and that is fundamental change, from a condition of changelessness. When you have the idea of creation, when you think “creation,” you are already creating a break from a previous condition, which is, as it were, pre-creation. When you do that, you are setting into motion the grand theme, you are ringing the great bell of change. That great bell of change is the beginning of story.

ROWELL: Those words have a greater rigor than the rigor of the statement I quoted. Will you give us a little more simplicity? Will you kindly explicate your explication? *[Laughter]*

OKRI: My goodness, you sound like what someone said about Kant. *[Laughter]*

ROWELL: Well, after all I am speaking with Ben Okri.

OKRI: The fact of story sets into motion destinies; it sets into motion a world of cause and effect, action and reaction; it sets into motion a world of laws. It is a profound thing. It is hard to simplify. We think of story in these terms: this happened to this person, and then they did that, and then they got married and they were happy ever after. But that is talking about story in its smallest sense. In its largest sense, story begins a process of laws, destinies, responsibilities, chaos. Story is a primeval thing. A story is not something that just happens to us as human beings. When lightning strikes the side of a mountain, and a rock breaks off, that is story. There is story in the wind, there is story in the rocks, in continents, in continental shifts. We can speak of the story of the universe and its birth of stars. We can speak of collision and fusion. Story is something bigger than us. We are part of it, we tap into it. Story is cosmological force. Story is a God. Story is huge. We really have to transfigure our sense of what story is. We are narrow in our perception of story, and we have lost its secret magnitude. The very fact of story means that you are demarcating something. You have a sense of an ideal, you have a sense of the way you wish things could or should be. This carries already within it a moral universe, a world framed with all kinds of dimensions and boundaries. You shape a world when you begin a story. It's a significant thing. We are children in the realm and possibility of what story is and can be. It is not what E. M. Forster made it out to be. E. M. Forster made out story to be a rather primitive thing in the literary universe. "This happened and then that happened." You must excuse me; "this happened and then that happened"? "This happened" is the beginning of something awesome. Everything else follows from "this happened." A guy was going out one day, saw a coach, got into a fight with the guy who was in the coach, killed the guy, and then goes home, meets this woman, marries this woman, and lives happily ever after for about thirty years. And then one day, he is the king, and someone says, "Hey, the land is going to pieces." He says, "Well, what's that got to do with me?" "You're the king, do something about it." He tries to; things get worse. Then someone comes, "Well actually, you are connected to this problem. *You* are the problem." He says, "Me?" and then unraveling takes place and he finds that one day, when he set out and got into an argument with somebody, unbeknownst to him he had set into motion a whole universe that's going to affect his whole society and himself. Where does the story begin? We don't know its mysterious beginnings. Where does the story end? We don't know its mysterious resolution. Because it widens out, a pebble in an infinite lake with its circles, and touches all kinds of other lives and all kinds of other stories, and gets involved in a grand complex mathematics of connections and interconnections. Excuse me: we're talking about something so awesome and mysterious here, so vast in its networks, that we are mere children in its possibilities. In the twenty-first century we'll be telling stories very differently.

ROWELL: Were you describing *Starbook*?

OKRI: [*Laughter*] This is not expected. Yes and no: let's just say that it is one thing to feel these things; it is another thing to find, or to be open to, the stories that enable one to touch the possibility of these larger stories. The implication of what you are saying, and of this conversation between us, is that a story is not a unitary thing: a story is a thing that cuts across time and dimensions and space. We need a new kind of storytelling. A story that began in Africa has its resonance and its worth in America, and all the way back again. And yet, this is a story of someone who woke up one morning. Do you get what I'm saying? The way in which we tell our stories therefore lies in direct relation to our acceptance, our perception, of the interconnection of things in life. If you think that we're living in a Copernican universe—not Copernican in terms of the stars, but Copernican in terms of one another, that is, I do something here, I get up, I shout, and the effect is just here—if you think that way, then your stories will have only this limited perception of effect or resonance. But you could have another perception, that when I get up and shout, stand up, get up, and SHOUT, that this shouting has a resonance outside this room—that it might affect my brothers, might affect folks in Nigeria, my relations, might affect folks in America, it might affect folks outside the wide rim of the world, not because of the shouting that I shouted here, but because of what the shouting did to me, what it did to you, and what it did to the dimensions in the air. Do you get what I'm saying? When we begin to think on a different level of resonance, we write differently. We have to. We cut across time and space. We become multi-linear. We have to because we see destinies differently.

ROWELL: I have no doubt that you are doing something very different from what we have seen in other West African writers—different it seems in the landscape from how you approach the world or how you invent a world. This is actually a comment, and yet I want to make it a question. How do you see yourself as a writer in relation to the traditions of West African writing? Where do you stand aesthetically and ideationally in relation to your literary precursors in Western Africa? What is the nature of your relationship to them? Or do you not view yourself as having a relationship to them at all? Or maybe what I am reading is an ethnic difference and the traditions of your ethnic group(s) as opposed to what I am used to seeing as Yoruba or Igbo. What is your relationship to West African literary traditions? To West African writers? I think that your answers to these questions will help us to read your work.

OKRI: I think I'm best read freely.

ROWELL: How do you mean?

OKRI: One-to-one: me and you. Not me, you, and tradition, whatever that tradition is. What am I really saying? I am interested in the continents inside of the reader. I am interested in the freedom that dwells inside everybody, because without that freedom, I can't be free. This is a problem that folks ... [interruption by third party] tell him to wait, tell him to wait for as long as it takes. What was the last thing I was talking about?

ROWELL: To read freely. Yes, you want the reader to read freely. You want the reader to read one-on-one. You don't want the reader to read with you, the reader, the other traditions, but just the reader and the text, or the reader and you. And yet, if I were asking another question, that question would be this: isn't that reader going to bring to that text—you know that cliché of bringing all the world that he or she has experienced—what he/ she knows to the text also.

OKRI: Absolutely. But what they bring literally to the text depends on the relationship between their inner freedom, and what you talked about, the world they bring with them, the other texts, their readings, their ignorance. That relationship is the problem, the relationship between that freedom or lack of it and whatever it is you are. I begin with freedom. I really begin with freedom. I'm aware of boundaries, I'm aware of tradition, I'm aware of Achebe, Soyinka, I'm aware of all of that and I've read all of that. But to speak to another person in relation to what they already know, and to speak from myself, from what I already know, is not a true dialogue. But to go back to the beginning of our epic conversation—when we talked about art as containing in it the transformation of the past, some numinous destiny, some sense of where we are right now, some sense of our lost journey, some sense of where we could be going, some sense of our possibilities—when you go back to that original discussion we had about art, that for me is always a guiding intuition in the stories I tell. But to be able to do that, I have to begin in freedom. One starts at home, but when you take one step from home—which everybody does, that's part of being human—you take a step away from home, you leave the village: it's a story. You grow up, and you say one day, "Folks, there's a big world out there, and I'm going to go out there and be part of this story." You take a step out of that home one day. That is what the artist does. You take a step from out of home, whatever that tradition is, and you make your journey. And your journey is your contribution. You are either taking a step in freedom or in un-freedom. The step one takes is a step in freedom, which is to say, I'm not sure that one really knows consciously what it is that one is trying to do with each new story that one tells. I think something is being told through one, in relation to one's times and one's elective traditions. Truths can only come through you that can come through the holes in your spirit. In that sense, one's journey as an artist is mysterious. I wouldn't dare to define what I'm doing, because that wouldn't be evident for a long time afterwards. It took a hundred years for folks to be able to see what Melville was doing in *Moby Dick*; I'm not so sure we see what Ellison was doing in *The Invisible Man*. We have certain fixed perceptions of these things, but the truth is more mysterious than we sense it to be. What I'm really trying to say is this: I don't begin with definitions. I love tradition, but tradition is not destiny. Tradition is not the end of the journey. It is the place we set out from. Every new artist compels us to widen the perception of the tradition—to widen it and widen it until you simply don't have arms long enough to encompass it. That is one of the secret responsibilities of the artist. You've drawn the boundary of the world, you've drawn the map of the world and how it should be, and they come along and they make you have to redraw it. God knows, we are seriously ticked off that they make us do this, because we have invested a lot in this map: a lot of time, a lot of trouble. We've sat around, discussed it for a long time, we've come to an agreement, we've said, "This is the way that the world is. Folks, we can now go home and have some fun, drink,

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get on with our lives." Then someone comes along and says, "Excuse me. It's not quite like this." Then everyone has to go back around the table again and spend the next ten, twenty, thirty years redrawing it. This is seriously annoying, and society tends to punish the impudence of the little kid at the back of the class that says, "Excuse me, ma'am; excuse me, sir. That map doesn't have what Thomas Moore would call Utopia. That's a country too." That's what we do, because it is not healthy for us to have a fixed map of humanity, because humanity is not eternally fixed.