

Ben Okri

Songs of Enchantment

London: Vintage, 1994. Pp. 297. £5.99

Reviewed by Derek Wright

Songs of Enchantment, the sequel to Okri's prize-winning novel *The Famished Road* (1991), continues the story of the *abiku*, or spirit-child, Azaro and his hovering existence "in the middle space between the living and the dead" (258). Okri's second spirit narrative, like his first, is a book of wonders, a work in which anything can happen. Once again, Azaro's occult, hallucinatory spirit realm, and the contiguity of living and unliving, spirit and substance, dream and reality, and imagined and perceived phenomena, are the accepted givens of the book, requiring no defense or explanation. As the punch-drunk pugilist and prophet Dad puts it, "Everything is alive" (222); or, as his *abiku* son tells him, "All things are linked" (58). Azaro's liminal half-world, in which all earthly and unearthly substance interpenetrates, is a flux of limitless, fantastic transformation, where everything is really (or is in the process of turning into) something else. In this zone of synco-pated realities all Western categorisms are dispensed with. Stones cry, trees talk, corpses sing, the wind changes color and mythologies do battle. People dream each other's dreams, are struck blind by flowers, and their heads and limbs mutate constantly into those of animals and reptiles, their thoughts into butterflies. Miraculous reversals and inversions are routine functions of this interminable metamorphosis. Blindness, Dad discovers, is really insight and illumination, and dead branches are living roots; perfidy is really fidelity, disgrace triumph, and despair glory.

Songs of Enchantment is, however, a more thematically structured work than its predecessor. Fortunately, the unceasing metamorphosis is periodically broken, and its mystic monotony relieved, by grand controlling images which attract to themselves radical complexes of meaning and nuance, and which subsequently help the book escape the intellectual flaccidity of so much fantasy fiction. Chief among these crystallizing focuses is the marvelous figure of the jackal-headed Masquerade. This is a creature of many hermeneutical heads, though it appears, primarily, to signify the naked aggression and brute political will of totalitarian power which, whether it be of the "Party of the Rich" or the "Party of the Poor," spreads itself contagiously through everything with the same intimidating menace. Thus it is that even Azaro comes to inhabit the jackal's skull and look out through its eyes, entering "the universal mind of all evil things" (114). The serial spirit-child's repeated deaths and rebirths also gather a number of important interpretative threads. These encompass ideas of cosmic reincarnation, the doomed colonial-postcolonial cycle of Africa's historical destruction, and the failure of nationalist idealism and democratic ideology to survive political independence.

Okri is perhaps the most eclectic, multicultural and hybrid of contemporary West African novelists. In his new novel, chaos theory and parallel-worlds science fiction rub shoulders with Yoruba and Igbo folklore, mythology, and oral tradition. Okri's sources are legion. They include the magical metamorphoses of Ovid and Apuleius; the lurid apocalyptic imagery of *Revelations* and biblical Apocrypha; the eroded ontologies of fantastic and fantasy fiction (Borges, Márquez, Mervyn Peake, Kafka); and, last but not least, the spiral structures and

repetitive rhetoric of certain African writings and oral narratives which resist linear chronology and sequential form. On the last score, Okri maintains in *Songs of Enchantment* an intertextual dialogue which gives high visibility to his African sources and influences (notably, Tutuola, Soyinka, Fagunwa, and Armah).

The novel is not without its problems. While the stupendous force of Okri's poetic imagination and verbal invention, and the brilliance of his imagery, cannot be denied, it is to be doubted whether his surging lyricism is really suited to the epic form. Through narratives 500 pages (*The Famished Road*) and 300 pages (*Songs of Enchantment*) in length, the zeal of his surreal imagery remains unwearied, but it begins to weary the reader, and the spectacular transformations eventually become tedious, the tropes turgid. Additionally, much has been made of the energy of redemption and the ambitiously hopeful gestures and resolutions with which Okri, in both his fiction and his poetry, tempers his savage picture of political oppression. In the new novel it transpires that the task of redemption and creating "a new cycle of world justice" falls to "the luminous jugglers of dreams" who are "escape-artists from the hell of our accumulated negative perceptions," the ones who create "realities" with their "thoughts" (290, 295). This begs the question of exactly where, except in the inward-facing consciousness of the appropriately named "escape-artist," the novel's utopian projections of ideal political justice occur. The artist's personal salvation seems at times to have been mistaken for an act of political salvaging and the essentially sublimatory and consolatory view of art that emerges—the view that the artist's vision can transcend even the worst sufferings—is pitifully unequal to the world of violent political oppression portrayed in the novel.

The fictional road through Okri's enchanted forest, never famished of poetic resources, has been negotiated with an inventive exuberance that is not to be found in any other contemporary Nigerian writer. But after 800 pages of phantasmagoric apocalypse sweetened by romantic utopian effusions, one seriously wonders whether Okri's super-highway has run itself into a formal cul-de-sac. His second *abiku* novel, like his first, is an awe-inspiring achievement. Yet, as Dr. Johnson said of another poet's epic, no man wished it longer. One hopes that at the end of even the longest road there must, somewhere, be a new turning.

Denis Hirson and Martin Trump, eds.

The Heinemann Book of South African Short Stories: From 1945 to the Present

Ibadan: Heinemann, 1994. \$10.95

Reviewed by Jamal En-neh

In this anthology, Denis Hirson and the late Martin Trump have collected twenty-one of the most representative short stories in contemporary South African literature. The collection covers a span of forty-seven years, which witnesses the rise and the fall of the National Party and its notorious Apartheid policy. Most of the stories are politically charged and, as Hirson writes in the introduction, reflect the totality of the human condition in twentieth-century South Africa. Racial segregation and its egregious effects on individual relationships,