

Intersections on the 'Map of Art': Metaphor in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* and Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar*

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Preamble: Signposts

One of the first anecdotes that I was told about Professor Hena Maes-Jelinek – or 'Madame Maes', as we used to call her at our French-speaking university – came in the form of a consolation. The year was 2003; I was writing my master's thesis. My supervisor, Bénédicte Ledent, had just handed me back a draft of my first chapter – twenty-five-odd pages long, double-spaced – with no fewer than ninety-six individual remarks. Patiently, generously, she went through her comments with me one by one. Pointing her finger at two blocks of texts that I had hurriedly stitched together, she said: "See these two paragraphs? The link between them is unclear. These transitions are your weak point. You need more signposting." A decade after this tutoring session, what I most vividly remember is the gentleness of these words of guidance, but, at the time, the experience sent me – or, more accurately, it catapulted my oversensitive ego – into a mild state of shock. My supervisor immediately sensed my discouragement, and shared with me a story on whose significance I have never ceased to ponder since. She told me that when she was a PhD student, she would give chapters of her dissertation to read to her own supervisor, Madame Maes, and would systematically receive feedback which started with the words "very good, BUT," followed by several pages of comments, questions, suggestions, and objections. I felt instantly reassured, but some time passed before I began to realize the deeper meaning behind this story. What my supervisor was ultimately trying to convey to me by telling me this anecdote was the value of the most generous gifts of all for a researcher: that of a mentor's knowledge and experience. In the Darwinian world of academia, in which all too many brilliant scholars prefer to ensure their own survival than to concern themselves with others, let alone members of the inferior graduate or doctoral species, Madame Maes had made a point of sharing her intellectual wealth – not only with my supervisor, but with all her other students, too. Today, although

Hena Maes-Jelinek is no longer with us, her legacy persists – in every word of encouragement, in every remark scribbled in the margin, in every single item of constructive criticism formulated by her former apprentices to their own students. What she has taught us all is to spare no intellectual effort: be curious, be demanding, and never cease to explore.

The feedback sessions about my master's thesis soon morphed into PhD tutorials, and it was during one of these discussions that the idea for the present essay came about. Part of my doctoral work dealt with the Nigerian author Ben Okri – specifically, his representation of the artistic process in his *künstlerroman* *Dangerous Love* (1996). Okri's imaginary, my supervisor pointed out, might be fruitfully put into dialogue with Wilson Harris's artistic vision. The suggestion was exciting, but also daunting, considering the notorious complexity of Harris's work and my own lack of familiarity with it. I left the idea aside for several years, and only sat down to the challenging task of reading one of Harris's novels, *The Mask of the Beggar* (2003), a few months before my participation in the conference held in honour of Professor Hena Maes-Jelinek in 2010. The aim was not to produce an accomplished scholarly study of Wilson's Harris work – an impossible task – but, rather, to attempt a tentative comparative sketch between Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar* and Okri's *Dangerous Love*, and to see where such an exploration might lead.

Reading Harris's novel proved even more challenging than I had anticipated. Barely ten pages into the narrative, I found myself running to Hena Maes-Jelinek's magnum opus, *The Labyrinth of Universality*,¹ to see what on earth Harris's book was supposed to be about. And when, later, I read in another scholar's review of *The Mask of the Beggar* that "Harris expresse[d] his ideas directly" in this novel,² as opposed to his more enigmatic earlier work, I began to worry that I might be among those whom Harris himself calls the "illiterates of the imagination."³ However, as I progressed in my reading of the novel, under the guidance of Hena Maes-Jelinek's scholarship, I began to realize that my puzzlement might be due to the fact that *The Mask of the Beggar* was perhaps, to quote Wilson Harris again, "a chorus of contradictions from which we need to learn" (*MB*, 11). Regardless of the ultimate 'result' of my own research, I feel truly grateful to Hena Maes-Jelinek for the arduous, but ultimately

¹ Hena Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality: Wilson Harris's Visionary Art of Fiction* (Cross/Cultures 86; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006).

² Zulfikar Chose, "Reading Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar*," *Context* 14 (nd): <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/reading-wilson-harris-the-mask-of-the-beggar/> (accessed 1 March 2010).

³ Wilson Harris, *The Mask of the Beggar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003): 72. Further page references are in the main text after "*MB*."

fulfilling, journey of discovery of Harris's work, which I would not have undertaken if not for her interest in the Guyanese writer, which began long before I was even born.

Explorations

The final sentence of the above section contains the phrase "journey of discovery" – by all accounts, an unremarkable expression. The image of the 'journey' that is here used to conceptualize the process of 'discovery' is in fact one of the innumerable metaphors found in the English language, from its poetic forms to its most mundane, 'ordinary' avatars. The omnipresence of metaphors in everyday speech has been studied by cognitive linguists for decades now, in the wake of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's seminal *Metaphors We Live By*.⁴ In this book, the two linguists convincingly argued that metaphors were not simply "device[s] of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish,"⁵ as had been assumed by many for centuries, but, rather, that they pervaded language as a whole. To give but one example, the authors studied the metaphor TIME IS MONEY, which finds expression in conventional phrases such as 'spend time', 'invest time', and 'use time profitably'.⁶ Importantly, Lakoff and Johnson claimed, people do not simply talk about time in terms of a valuable commodity or act as if it were one (at least in Western cultures), but they also "conceive of time that way."⁷ Thus, in the words of Zoltán Kövecses, another cognitive linguist, "metaphor is not simply a matter of words or linguistic expressions but of concepts, of thinking of one thing in terms of another."⁸ The 'thing' that helps us to understand another – that is, the field from which a metaphorical expression is drawn – is, in more technical terms, known as the 'source domain'. In the example above, that domain is MONEY. The more abstract domain which the metaphorical expression helps us to understand is called the 'target domain'. In the example above, that domain is TIME. This set of correspondences between domains is known as a 'mapping'.⁹

The so-called 'conceptual' metaphors found in everyday language also have more creative, innovative equivalents known as 'poetic' metaphors.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, Ben Okri's

⁴ George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980).

⁵ Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3.

⁶ *Metaphors We Live By*, 8. Conceptual metaphors are written in small capitals by convention.

⁷ *Metaphors We Live By*, 4.

⁸ Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (2002; Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2010): xi.

⁹ For further details and examples, see Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 4-10.

¹⁰ These metaphors are studied extensively in George Lakoff & Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989).

Dangerous Love and Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar*, as works of literary fiction, contain an incalculable number of both types. But this unexceptional fact becomes potentially more significant when one considers the many convergences between the poetic metaphors used by the two writers. This article aims to investigate precisely such figures of speech, especially as they relate to the authors' representation of the artistic process. In a nutshell: I will be arguing that, despite some idiosyncracies, Okri and Harris rely on similar – and sometimes even identical – spatial metaphors to conceptualize the artistic explorations of their respective protagonists. Such striking parallels between the two writers' work may appear to be either predictable or surprising, depending on one's point of view: on the one hand, Okri and Harris have much in common, starting with their shared belief in the universality of human experience; on the other, Okri's novel *Dangerous Love* is mostly realist in nature (unlike the bulk of the Nigerian writer's oeuvre), whereas *The Mask of the Beggar* is a highly allegorical text.

Even the briefest evocation of the novels suffices to highlight this basic difference between them. *Dangerous Love* tells the story of Omovo, a painter who lives in a poor neighbourhood of Lagos, Nigeria, and who becomes the lover of Ifeyiwa, a young woman who has been forced into a loveless marriage to an older man. As David Jowitt has suggested, the "dangerous love" of the title can therefore be seen as a reference, first of all, to Omovo's romance with the married Ifeyiwa and, secondly, to his artistic practice, which gets him into trouble with the Nigerian authorities and also entails a considerable emotional and intellectual investment.¹¹ Towards the end of the novel, when Ifeyiwa is killed by accident, Omovo goes mad with grief, but he eventually exorcizes his feelings by painting his dead lover. Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar* has no such realist, linear plot. The novel features an unnamed artist who, in the year 2000, discusses the nature of art with one of his creations, a sculpture of his mother, who died in 1952. The opening sections of the book, narrated by the mother, introduce the incident that gives the novel its title: the artist's encounter, as an eight-year-old, with a beggar in the streets of Harbourn town, an imaginary South American location "not unlike Georgetown, Guyana."¹² The sight of the man troubles the boy to such an extent that he refuses to eat, seeing the "face of the Beggar" (*MB*, 1) in his plate of rice and vegetables. This narrative episode, inspired by Wilson Harris's own encounter with a beggar

¹¹ David Jowitt, review of *Dangerous Love*, by Ben Okri, *Wasafiri* 24 (1996): 62-63.

¹² Michael Mitchell, review of *The Mask of the Beggar*, by Wilson Harris, *World Literature Today* 77.3-4 (2003): 83. This (not entirely unexpected) similarity is also pointed out in Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality*, 454.

as a child,¹³ constitutes the artist's "first visionary experience [...] of a true Beggar in the place in which he lived" (*MB*, 2). As the novel makes clear, the figure of the Harbourtown beggar echoes that of Odysseus, Homer's epic hero, who, disguised as a mendicant, returned to his home island of Ithaca to reclaim his throne. Unlike the Greek character, however, Harris's beggar "is not animated by a spirit of vengeance. Instead, he is the medium through which the past victims of history are resurrected in the artist's consciousness."¹⁴ The beggar, in short, embodies the "fundamental philosophical exposition at the heart of [Harris's] novel," whose aim is "to build cross-cultural bridges between peoples rather than allow the perpetuation of divisive blame-attribution."¹⁵

The cross-cultural bridges that play a central role in Harris's artistic vision are but one element testifying to the importance of space and geography in the Guyanese writer's work.¹⁶ *The Mask of the Beggar* is no exception in this regard, as it abounds in spatial images of all kinds. A notable example is the artist's sculpture of his mother, several times referred to as the "Mother of Space." As Hena Maes-Jelinek suggests, this notion is "a further development of the 'womb of space' which, in earlier novels, is the seat of all human experience [...] and the source of Harris's art."¹⁷ Another striking space-related image that recurs throughout the novel is that of the "map of art," an elusive metaphor used to conceptualize the physical and psychic spaces in which the artist exercises his craft. This image is particularly apt, for the novel itself may be considered a complex 'map of art' designed to be decoded by readers who are trying to negotiate the book's cross-cultural terrain.

Ben Okri is also known for his "engagement with space," which, like Harris's, is put in the service of a "cross-cultural discourse that brings different worldviews together."¹⁸ This "cross-cultural" impulse finds many manifestations in Okri's imaginary: the Nigerian writer is known to have made such declarations as "Shakespeare is an African writer";¹⁹ moreover, like Harris, he has had a longstanding interest in Homer's *Odyssey*, a book from which he "derives

¹³ Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality*, 454, note 10.

¹⁴ *The Labyrinth of Universality*, 454. The parallels and divergences between Harris's beggar and Homer's Odysseus are further explored in Justine McConnell, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013): 181-210.

¹⁵ McConnell, *Black Odysseys*, 187.

¹⁶ The significance of space in Wilson Harris's writings is well-documented. The collected articles of Hena Maes-Jelinek offer fascinating insights into the different forms taken by this concept across his oeuvre. See Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality*.

¹⁷ *The Labyrinth of Universality*, 453.

¹⁸ Sara Upstone, "Writing the Post-Colonial Space: Ben Okri's Magical City and the Subversion of Imperialism," *Partial Answers* 2.2 (2004): 150, 152.

¹⁹ Ben Okri, in Alan Ryan, "Talking with Ben Okri," *Newsday* (19 July 1992): <http://emeagwali.com/nigeria/biography/ben-okri-19Jul92.html> (accessed 26 September 2014).

immense inspiration"²⁰ because it is "about homecoming and that's what the human condition is."²¹ Indeed, according to Okri, "we're all trying to get home, of one kind or another. It might be a spiritual home, it might be a real home, it might be the home in someone else's heart."²² Considering "the place [*The Odyssey*] occupies in [Okri's] mind,"²³ it may not be incidental, then, that one of the central motifs in *Dangerous Love* is that of the journey, developed in the form of the poetic metaphor ART IS A JOURNEY.

As I will be arguing below, this particular metaphor also pervades Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar*. Yet, before a comparison between the two novels can be established, it seems necessary to clarify exactly how the ART IS A JOURNEY metaphor infuses *Dangerous Love*. This is perhaps best done by taking as a starting point the idea that Ben Okri, in his *künstlerroman*, devises poetic metaphors on the basis of more conventional linguistic expressions.²⁴ Passages describing his artist-hero at work, for instance, make use of 'ordinary' conceptual metaphors: "He [Omovo] felt he was capturing something more strange and real than the actual event."²⁵ In the literal sense, the verb 'capture' primarily denotes the action of "catch[ing] by force, surprise, or stratagem" but, in this sentence, the verb is used, in the domain of ART, in the conventional metaphorical sense of "represent[ing], catch[ing], or record[ing] (something elusive, as a quality)."²⁶ The conceptual metaphor underlying Okri's linguistic choice could be formulated as REPRESENTING IS CATCHING. If the use of the verb 'capture' in the quoted extract may be said to be so deeply entrenched in everyday speech that its metaphoric quality is almost imperceptible, the following passages strike one as more remarkable:

He [Omovo] began to think about [...] the long silent phases it had taken him to
trap the scumscape [i.e. a nearby scumpool that he has painted] on canvas [...].

(*DL*, 71, my italics)

²⁰ Ben Okri, in Erica Elkhershi, "I Always Go Back to *The Odyssey*," interview with Ben Okri, *Telegraph* (21 July 2011): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/ways-with-words/8650555/Ben-Okri-I-always-go-back-to-The-Odyssey.html> (accessed 26 September 2014).

²¹ Ben Okri, in Adilah Ismail, "One Hat Worn Many Ways," interview with Ben Okri, *Sunday Times* (12 February 2012): http://www.sundaytimes.lk/120212/Magazine/sundaytimesmagazine_04.html (accessed 26 September 2014).

²² Elkhershi, "I Always Go Back to *The Odyssey*."

²³ "I Always Go Back to *The Odyssey*."

²⁴ The next four paragraphs summarize an argument developed in Daria Tunca, *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 100-21.

²⁵ Ben Okri, *Dangerous Love* (London: Phoenix, 1996): 6. Further page references are in the main text after "*DL*."

²⁶ These definitions are from the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*: <http://www.oed.com> (accessed

There was so much he wanted to *catch* which appeared in his mind and *moved away* so rapidly. (DL, 146, my italics)

It [i.e. the subject that Omovo is trying to sketch] had to be [...] *grasped, released*. (DL, 59, my italics)

These extracts introduce several new elements into the metaphoric mapping mentioned above. While the term 'trap' can be said to refer to the same process as the verb 'capture', it is not ordinarily used in the domain of ART to denote representation. In this sentence, it brings to mind, rather, the physical act of 'catching', using subterfuge. Thus, while the understanding of 'representation' in terms of 'capture' is a conventional one, the term realizing the mapping in this extract is not. This may be considered an example of metaphor 'elaboration', which consists in describing an existing element of the metaphoric mapping in an unconventional way.²⁷ Such examples discreetly signal that Okri uses the conventional metaphor REPRESENTING IS CATCHING as a foundation for the creation of a richer poetic image. This claim finds confirmation in the second quotation. In this sentence, the verb "catch" is used in the conventional metaphorical sense, much like "capture" above, but a far less common idea is introduced when the images and moods that Omovo wants to capture are said to "move away." As Kövecses reminds us, metaphoric mappings are always partial;²⁸ in the instance examined here, the fact that the subject of the drawing may be in movement is not part of the conventional metaphor REPRESENTING IS CATCHING. The novel, in other words, poetically exploits a conceptual metaphor by introducing an 'unused' element of the source domain, a technique known as 'extending' a metaphor.²⁹ As a result, the original metaphor is apprehended in a new light: the verb "move away" introduces a sense of dynamism, and images are presented, quite literally, as mobile entities that leave the visual field of the artist's inner eye. The introduction of such dynamic concepts suggests a shift from the conventional REPRESENTING IS CATCHING metaphor to the more generic poetic metaphor ART IS A CHASE.

This idea finds an interesting development in the third quotation. In this passage, "grasp" could be considered an elaboration of the metaphor REPRESENTING IS CATCHING, since this verb is not conventionally used in the 'capture' slot, even though both 'grasp' and 'capture' are near-synonyms denoting the act of seizing. Alternatively, since 'grasp' also has the

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²⁷ Lakoff & Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 67-68, and Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 53-54.

²⁸ Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 91.

²⁹ Lakoff & Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 67, and Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 53.

conventional metaphorical sense of 'seizing intellectually' (i.e. 'comprehending'), its presence here may be regarded as a linguistic expression of another conceptual metaphor, UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING.³⁰ But it is the presence of the verb "release" that gives more decisive insight into Okri's conception of the nature of the artist's unusual chase. Unlike the outcome of a physical pursuit, which typically leads to the imprisonment or death of the entity being chased, people or objects temporarily fixed in the artist's mind do not die or become caged. Rather, they undergo a transformation which offers them an imaginary release, a process which, as the rest of the book makes clear, also liberates and transforms the artist.

The metaphor I have identified, ART IS A CHASE, is combined in *Dangerous Love* with the more general idea that ART IS A JOURNEY. Indeed, Omovo is at one point said to have "chosen the most terrible path" (*DL*, 267); even more remarkably, he is reported to have "set his sails to the fortunes of art. How was he to know," the novel asks, "what cruel and difficult seas his ship would travel?" (*DL*, 265). The ART IS A JOURNEY metaphor called forth by these words evokes the artist's process of maturation. It is based on the more frequent suggestion that LIFE IS A JOURNEY, exemplified in conventional expressions such as 'getting off to a good start in life' and 'not getting anywhere in life', and more creatively exploited in literary works such as Robert Frost's famous poem "The Road Not Taken."³¹ In the ART IS A JOURNEY metaphor, just as in the LIFE IS A JOURNEY one, "DIFFICULTIES" are presented as "IMPEDIMENTS TO TRAVEL"³² – in Okri's case, the "cruel and difficult seas" that Omovo must cross indicate that the journey of the artist's "ship" is not an easy or straightforward one.

Interestingly, Wilson Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar* also establishes a parallel between art and sea voyages by using the phrase "the Ship of Art" (*MB*, 4). Okri's and Harris's choice of this particular mode of transportation in their conceptualization of the artistic process may not be unrelated to the subject-matter of their novels: in *Dangerous Love*, transatlantic slavery is one of the major historical events that impact on Omovo's imagination, while in *The Mask of the Beggar*, the unnamed artist is able to perceive a "fleet of Ships from Spain, Holland and Britain" marking the Europeans' arrival in Harbourtown (*MB*, 32), and he also sees the "ghostly ships" that later brought "Chinese Immigrants" to the city (*MB*, 7). However, the poetic metaphors used by Okri and Harris do not rest solely on allusions to historical events; rather, the similarities in the writers' use of imagery extend to other, less culturally bound correspondences between the ART and JOURNEY domains. Thus, just as

³⁰ *More Than Cool Reason*, 129.

³¹ Lakoff & Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 3.

³² *More Than Cool Reason*, 3.

Omovo has, as mentioned above, "chosen the most terrible path" (*DL*, 267), so Harris's unnamed artist "move[s] to a perilous path" at the moment of his revelatory encounter with the Beggar (*MB*, 21). Much as Okri's painter is said to be "on a threshold" (*DL*, 99) when learning to shape traumatic memories into art, so Harris's artist, exercising his imagination, is "on the threshold of a collective Memory" (*MB*, 22) and seeks to "gain an entrance into different worlds" (*MB*, 135).³³ The descriptions of the two artist figures' creative vistas, too, bear striking resemblance, for where Okri speaks of "landscapes within" (*DL*, 170), Harris writes about "inner countries of [the] mind" (*MB*, 92).

In the final example above, the parallels that can be established between Okri's and Harris's texts are not lexical, but conceptual: both metaphorical expressions rely on the ideas that THE MIND IS A CONTAINER (as suggested by the words "within" and "inner," respectively) and that THE MIND IS A PLACE (as indicated by the presence of "landscapes" and "countries"). These particular mind-related metaphors bear mentioning, as they lead to the assertion that, upon closer inspection, *Dangerous Love* and *The Mask of the Beggar* feature the more precise idea that the mind is a place to which the artist tries to gain access, even if his attempts are only ever partly fulfilled. In Okri's novel, Omovo's lover Ifeyiwa (who can also be perceived as an artist-figure, as I have argued elsewhere³⁴) yearns to be given "the keys with which to unlock doors of understanding" (*DL*, 255). In Harris's book, the painter-sculptor, in the course of his imaginative journey, finds himself holding "A Key to open all doors" (*MB*, 90). As in the case of Okri, these doors are clearly those leading to artistic insight, locked within the artist's mind: "I," says the protagonist, "sought to paint her [i.e. the woman to whom the artist had sold his childhood home] but her flesh-and-blood became a door requiring a Key I possessed but did not know how to use on this particular occasion" (*MB*, 97).

In sum, *Dangerous Love* and *The Mask of the Beggar* both include spatial metaphors that present their artist-figures as handling a key to the inner chambers of the mind.³⁵ More than this, the novels explore the ultimate outcome of such an endeavour and, once again, they do so using similar images: while the aim of Okri's painter, as previously stated, is the "release" of the subject of his work (*DL*, 59), Harris's artist must "rescue" the prisoners from the gaol that has materialized in his childhood home (*MB*, 99). Crucially, neither Okri nor

³³ The idea of the 'threshold' is central to Harris's vision. See the multiple references to this concept in Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality*.

³⁴ Tunca, *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction*, 117-18.

³⁵ This image, in which gaining access to insight is equated with entering a space, is not only based on the metaphor THE MIND IS A PLACE but again exploits the idea that ART IS A JOURNEY, this time through the sub-metaphor PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS, a well-known component of the usual LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. See

Harris presents this salvaging mission as a straightforward heroic quest in which the artist engages in the glorious liberation of humanity. Rather, the boundaries between the identities of the rescued and the rescuer are constantly blurred, to the extent that the artist himself takes on the role of the prisoner in need of release or rescuing. In *Dangerous Love*, Omovo is often presented as being confined – for instance, he is said to feel "trapped by his own emotions" (*DL*, 26) and "ambushed by images" (*DL*, 203). Revealingly, Ben Okri himself uses the conflicting images of release and imprisonment when talking about his own experience of writing *Dangerous Love*, a revised version of his 1981 novel, *The Landscapes Within*.³⁶ In an "Author's Note" to the rewritten book, the novelist expresses the hope that he has "managed to free [the] spirit" of his early work (*DL*, 325); however, in an interview conducted around the same period, he comments on the long process of rewriting his novel using a reverse image that presents his creative struggle as a state of captivity: "I like to feel that at last I've done time and can be let out of prison now and be a free man."³⁷

Interestingly, the ambivalent state described by Okri could be said to find fictional actualization in Harris's *The Mask of the Beggar*. After the unnamed artist, with a "Key in [his] pocket" (*MB*, 103), has been let into the prison that has replaced his former home, he addresses a heavily pregnant woman in a cell:

"How can I save you, how can I rescue you," I said softly, "when you are so far gone with child?"

[...] She said nothing but I thought I read what she was thinking in the faint but strangely powerful reflection in her eyes.

"I shall *recue* you. Not you me." (*MB*, 104)

This puzzling dialogue echoes an earlier passage in which the sculpture of the artist's mother voices the idea that she is both "rescuer and rescued" (*MB*, 63). However, it is more particularly the artist's interaction with the pregnant woman that leads him to wonder whether he, supposedly the rescuer, might in fact not be a caged person in need of assistance: "Was I a prisoner groping to understand who I was, where I had come from?" (*MB*, 108). This question, prompted by the pregnant woman's intervention, hints at the idea that the people encountered by the artist on his imaginative peregrinations influence him and that, therefore,

Lakoff & Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, 3.

³⁶ Ben Okri, *The Landscapes Within* (Harlow: Longman, 1981).

³⁷ Delia Falconer, "Whisperings of the Gods: An Interview with Ben Okri," *Island Magazine* 71 (1997): 47.

these figures may be endowed with a sense of agency. Admittedly, the woman in the dialogue quoted above does not actually utter a sound: her statement rests on the artist's interpretation of "the faint but strangely powerful reflection in her eyes" (*MB*, 104). Yet any hesitation that may arise in relation to this particular extract is dispelled when considering other figures in the narrative, such as the prison guard who, upon the artist's arrival at the gaol, "instantly [comes] forward" and "open[s] the gate" (*MB*, 103). In other words, the artist is not the only mobile figure on his imaginative travels, but the people and epochs that he engages with also act upon him and *move towards* him, both literally and metaphorically. Accordingly, the artist's mother is said to have "*returned* in [her] son's paintings and writings and sculptures" (*MB*, 3, my italics); a Child on "a pre-Classic, pre-Columbian bowl" (*MB*, 72) at which the artist stares "*brings* a hint of the other side of time" (*MB*, 75, my italics); even "the past" itself, which is "*aroused*" by the artist, simultaneously "*returns*" (*MB*, 93, my italics). Significantly, such a pattern of "return" informs the incidents found on the narrative level too. As mentioned above, the Beggar's presence is associated with Odysseus' homecoming; additionally, the artist-to-be who encounters the mendicant wonders whether the man's appearance might not be "the startling *return* of [his] father from the ocean of the forest where he was lost" (*MB*, 3, my italics).

Echoes of a similar idea can be found in *Dangerous Love*, in which Omovo's mentor advises him that a forgotten memory "*returns* in a hundred other shapes" (*DL* 99, my italics). Nevertheless, Okri's novel seems to privilege the view that "the original experience must be the *guide*" (*DL*, 99, my italics) – that is, the book seems to favour an ART IS A JOURNEY scenario in which the artist *follows* his source of inspiration, an image consistent with the ART IS A CHASE metaphor examined above. This idea is also confirmed on the level of plot by the many pursuits that occur in the book, whether in dream sequences or in the 'real' world of the novel.

Ultimately, the different directions followed by those involved in Okri's and Harris's respective artistic journeys may be said to testify to the singularity of each writer's vision. Before outlining these specificities, one might, by way of conclusion, once again highlight the remarkable commonalities between the novelists' works. Both authors indeed present artist-figures on a "Journey of arts" (*MB*, 73), who are progressing on a difficult path, and who are attempting to open doors granting access to revelatory insights. This process remains, however, "beyond completion" (*DL*, 315): "Creativity," Okri says elsewhere, "is a secular

infinity";³⁸ or, in the words of Wilson Harris, the artistic process is one of "infinite rehearsal."³⁹ The many similarities between Okri's and Harris's uses of imagery can, at least partly, be ascribed to the fact that the conceptual metaphors that serve as a basis for the writers' aesthetic explorations – mainly, LIFE IS A JOURNEY and its sub-metaphors, as well as THE MIND IS A CONTAINER – are regularly posited to be (quasi)universal mappings.⁴⁰ This, in a sense, seems particularly fitting for two authors whose vision is guided by a belief in the existence of a cross-cultural, universal human consciousness.

However, as creative writers, Okri and Harris do more than simply structure their work around existing metaphors. Their artistic contribution resides in their ability to renew, sometimes challenge, the very images upon which they rely. As briefly shown at the beginning of this essay, Okri extends and elaborates specific metaphors to allow readers to apprehend his artist's process of creation in a new light. Harris, even more radically, chooses to foreground colliding agents in his protagonist's journey – one is never quite sure, for example, who is performing the action of "rescuing" or undergoing that of being "rescued." At the risk of creating further confusion, one might even add that the artist-rescuer, at times artist-prisoner, is also himself a potential gaoler, since he detains his creations in "the prison of [his] notebooks" (*MB*, 158).

Arguably, the ambivalence of the artist testifies to Harris's interest in exploring the "blend of opposites" (*MB*, 94) "that brings us close to the inexpressible truth" (*MB*, 105).⁴¹ This obsessive confrontation of notions considered antithetical in traditional Western thought may be what most clearly distinguishes the Guyanese writer from his Nigerian counterpart. Of course, Okri's work *does* explore the complexities of the artist's condition; yet, while *Dangerous Love* ultimately suggests that experience allows the painter-hero to take timid steps forward on the infinite path of creation, *The Mask of the Beggar* constantly foregrounds the intricacies that constitute the very essence of the artist's exploration. This use of "alchemical epistemological principles [...] foreign to Western materialist rationalism"⁴² is visible on the basic level of semantics: Harris's prose is peppered with oxymoronic

³⁸ Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997): 125.

³⁹ This expression was, of course, famously used by Harris as the title of one of his novels. See Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987).

⁴⁰ This theory relies on the idea that some metaphors are based on embodied experience, and that they may therefore be independent of culturally-specific concepts. A useful summary of this theory, investigated by scholars such as Mark Johnson, can be found in George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987): 271-81. See also Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 195-213.

⁴¹ A felicitous combination of quotations from Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality*, 453

⁴² Mitchell, review of *The Mask of the Beggar*, 83.

expressions (such as "*unburning fires*," *MB*, 87) and with coordinated or juxtaposed antonyms ("intuitive and counter-intuitive," *MB*, 76; "blind-seeing," *MB*, 154, to cite but two examples among many). The author's elusive dialectic is also exemplified on the broader conceptual level, in his use of disorienting spatial metaphors. My own choice of the word "disorienting" is not incidental here, for part of Harris's strategy relies precisely on defeating readers' instinctive search for a sense of direction on the "map of art." For instance, in its concluding pages, *The Mask of the Beggar* states that "art springs from life," only to immediately reverse the direction intimated by this conceptual metaphor: "Or is it life that springs from art?" (*MB*, 164). In sum, the use of a spatial metaphor in this question prompts readers to puzzle over which direction(s) they should take – an "intuitive and counter-intuitive" choice that they are invited to make throughout the novel.

No wonder, then, that Hena Maes-Jelinek entitled her study of Wilson Harris's work *The Labyrinth of Universality*. The richness of the artist's vision resides in the very act of searching for alternatives, of travelling in multiple directions at once, and even of getting lost. As Harris makes clear, this "Journey of arts" is one of exhilaration, uncertainty, and constant renewal. In his introductory "Note" to *The Mask of the Beggar*, he writes: "The artist experiences an excitement, troubling and ecstatic, as he finds himself launched on pathways he never expected to travel and on which his intuition is aroused afresh" (*MB*, x). The same might well be said of the travelling critic, wandering and meandering through the extraordinary maze of Wilson Harris's work.

Postscript: Pathways

In March 2008, the conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS), an organization chaired by Hena Maes-Jelinek from 1996 to 1999, was held on the island of San Servolo in Venice, Italy. During this event, on a sunny late afternoon, Madame Maes and I shared a short walk on the path connecting the conference building to the jetty. We were hoping to catch a *vaporetto* that would take us into town, where we were to meet our respective friends.

The conference had attracted hundreds of delegates, among whom no fewer than nine postcolonial scholars from our home university. I asked Madame Maes whether she had attended any of the presentations given by her younger Liège colleagues. She replied that she had, and then added that it had made her feel proud. "Proud": this is the exact word that she used. She did not comment on our papers using the old academic favourites – 'thought-

provoking', 'stimulating', 'fascinating', all the conventional superlatives often devoid of sincerity. She simply said, "I was proud," and in hindsight I wonder whether perhaps this short sentence, uttered only a few months before she passed away, should be understood as 'I am contented, and my work is done'. Or maybe she simply meant to say 'very good, BUT' – that is, 'you are on the right track, but do not ever forget that you should always aim higher, strive for more'.

When we reached continental Venice, Madame Maes insisted that I go off with my friends while she was waiting to meet hers. She was already quite frail at the time, but she was adamant that I should go. She took a seat on the terrace of a nearby café, and smiled broadly – one of her warm, benevolent smiles. I smiled back at her, and I said: "Goodbye."

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