

Astonishing the Gods: A Book Review and Invitation

“And sometimes—very rarely—but sometimes nevertheless, our highest creative acts, our highest playfulness, our self-overcoming, our purest art, our ascending songs, by some mysterious grace transcend so many boundaries and enter so many realms that we occasionally astonish even the gods.” (Ben Okri)

Once in a great while, maybe in the space of many decades, comes a work of art that fits no definite category. Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) is one such book. It's not a tale, not a philosophical treatise, not a parable, nor a fantasy. It has a little bit of all of these and could be a modern day parallel of Herman Hesse's *Siddharta*. Even more so, I see it as a modern *Light on the Path* but in the form of an initiation journey. Ben Okri is not new to such attempts, witness his *Starbook*, or its amplified version, *The Last Gift of the Master Artists*, which Okri gleaned from the 'book of life among the stars', a veiled reference to the Akashic record.

As in much of what he writes, Okri's language acquires a lyrical, poetic quality. In fact everything in this book, composed of a succession of a multitude of short episodes, could be read twice; once for the sheer pleasure of words, sounds and cadences, a second time for the storyline of a book that is meant to be meditated upon. As Okri has done in other writings the hero is nameless; he is simply a person who feels invisible and wants to become visible. Visibility is here a metaphor for external appearance, invisibility the state of our true being. And Okri plays on this dichotomy throughout the book in creative ways, through the device of mirrors and reflections, seeing and being seen, appearances and disappearances, to name a few.

At every step of the way the disciple has to overcome the semblances of the world, behind which can be found the "invisibles." He has in effect to first see through the images and seek for what speaks through them, then to the realm of thoughts and to the beings. It is in effect a journey through Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition.

The hero of this journey is born invisible; he believes he doesn't exist for others. He flees home and travels for seven years in search of the secret of visibility. He then arrives at an island which casts a spell on him, and he decides to stay. His trials begin, and the first step has to do with crossing the abyss. This is portrayed in the image of an immaterial bridge that morphs from solid to fiery, to airy and watery. The disciple has to become everything that he fears; he has to find new ground, accept new laws, new logic; overcome himself rather than what the appearances present to him.

The modern disciple is more than a follower; he is also an initiator. Even at the beginning of the journey he is told "It is possible that you are the one who will initiate the new cycle of the invisibles." (Book I) Not only does he seek; he is sought after. The bridge he needs to cross goes from visible to invisible and back again, and he fears becoming nothing. In the passage into the elemental realm he experiences the reversal of earthly laws, those of time and space. When he overcomes the trials

he is led to the city of the invisibles where "the myths in the air made him feel as if he had left his body and entered a temple of world dreams. This was compounded by melodies heard and not located. It occurred to him that the city was composed of songs, and that the stones were singing. It occurred to him that the marble facades and the radiant statues, the stained-glass cathedrals ... had been erected, put in place, and shaped purely by music, and by spirit." (Book II) He becomes witness of the efforts of a civilization that carries forward impulses from a previous epoch, "the founding fathers of legend [who] had made the public declaration of the creation of a new civilization." (Book II)

What takes place after this can be hinted at in broad outlines, in the series of general, overlapping themes. The first is that of the guides which accompany the disciple; the initial one is just a glow and a presence, the second one a child, the third a feminine presence. The questing person experiences past the abyss and the gate to the city that everything he sees is a pretext for something more, that he lives in overlapping levels of experience which he has to pierce through gradually, and that "every experience is suffered till you experience it properly for the first time." So does he have to meet the same experiences again before he fully awakens to them, at which time the guide can offer subtle hints as to what he must pursue. "At the gate of every new reality you must be still, or you won't be able to enter properly" (Book II). And every time a guide leaves, he offers a gift that will later mature in the person's soul. Meanwhile the hero is now visible in the city of the invisibles.

Book III introduces us to experiences in the spirit which cast their shadows forward. A theme is hinted at and then reappears as a test. When the trial is undergone then the spiritual counterpart manifests, the fruit of the test overcome is transformed into a spiritual experience. With time the matter becomes more and more one of trusting the Self and its strength, learning to wait for the right moment, developing new capacities.

More and more we are led into the heart of the city of the spirit, realizing that "The suffering was there in the beauty of everything. It was there in the infinite care of the city's planning, in its clarity." The disciple can discern that the wisdom has arisen over time from suffering, "a suffering which demands to be continually turned into gold." Neither is this place static, a place of ultimate achievements. Rather "the wisdom of the civilization and the majesty of the city were all doomed. But doomed in order to become higher, and last forever, in the place where things are most powerful and truly endure, in the living dreams of the universe." (Book III)

Book IV leads us to the heart of three temptations in which we see the imaginary landscape of a square, with a bed and various symbolic objects at its center, and all around it a palace, a loggia, a house of justice, and statues that are almost living beings; those of a bronze equestrian rider, a sea-god and horses emerging from a fountain of adamant, and the guardian figure of an ancient prophet-king. These enter in a delicate conversation with the disciple at the moment in which he faces the three central temptations. We assist now to a silent and subtle dialogue between this kind of soul figures, the disciple and the tempters.

The trials are seen as opportunities; in fact the tempters deter through the fear of losing visibility and attachment to illusions and therefore spur to find true being and meaning to the experience of invisibility. Once they are treated with respect they deliver the key messages and soul tasks for the progress of the disciple. Turned upside down and inside out what the tempters describe as dead-ends become questions for finding inner resolve. An example: what comes from the exterior as a call to pleasure and lust becomes, when overcome, a deep experience of the feminine in front of which sensual pleasure pales and becomes new bliss.

For the reader who may have acquired interest in what has been said so far here are just some further pointers to what makes the reading compelling. At each step of the way what appears as an external experience becomes intimately personal. The search for wisdom of a civilization becomes the hero's continuing journey in time. The search for answers coming from others is also the path toward offering new co-creative impulses. And although it is clear that we are in the spirit realm, it is a realm of the human being rendered divine in concert with spiritual beings; it is the realm of the tenth hierarchy, of those who "do not want to be remembered or praised. [but] only want to increase the light, and to spread illumination." (Book VII) A last pointer that added much delight to my reading: the subtle symmetries between the beginning of the journey and its ending.