

Ben Okri

The Lost art of Enchantment: Story Telling and Magic

Poetry first.

This poem is called *On Modena* or rather *About Modena*.

I suppose it is important that when one comes in somewhere new, he wants to praise it, describe it, cancel it out, destroy it, make it exist though it does not exist before, give it one's own space, take away one's own space, I want to act to it, do something to it.

This is a famous place and I think I would be diminished if I did not scribble my *graffiti* on the air of this place.

It is written in red.

Birds in edges

On the rain brought

In the bag

From the rain cloud ringed island

Portraits in sun touched skin

And a gold covered green

And a face known for years

In silence smiling and tears

Raining in the square

When an old church

Groans sfumato in accretions
Transports some modest ardour
In stone and pink fading mood
Squares to dreaming
There is nothing left here but the music and the sin that is always forgiven
The sin of loving
And not speaking of it to one who should hear
Speak but do not shout of love
Speak it through the rain
And shelter it under the green
That is what the music should mean

I'm here to talk about something more dynamic than poetry. Story telling. And magic. And the lost art of enchantment. I think we forget what story telling really means, I think we take it too much for granted and I think because we take it for granted we do not listen to stories properly any more.

Story telling is a sort of fire, it is not air, it is not water and it is not earth. It is a fire, it is what burns in the human journey, it is what lights away in the dark, it is what guides us through the centuries.

If you look at the whole arch of the human mystery, it is just story. Man, woman is born, they live, they suffer, they are foolish, they learn a little bit and then they die. That is the story.

All stories tell us the same arch over and over again. That is why we do not hear them so clearly. Signs can only speak to us through stories. Mathematics with its abstractions can only really appeal to us through its own particular forms of story telling. Buildings are stories. The stars at we stare at night are stories. The air that sometimes perplexes us by its absence are stories. While we are here in this place living in this body we are sunk in the sea of stories. Stories are given to us to guide us, not

really to entertain us. The entertainment is a deception, cooked up by the aesthetic sense, covering something much more essential, which is that we all have a single, common, unavoidable *destinazione*. When I speak of story telling and magic I speak of the essential fact of living and the illusion that surrounds it. So all story tellers are sword bearers, they cut through our eye balls so that we bleed the truth from what we see. This is one thing I would like to do tonight: it is to make you leave this room and never take stories for granted again, any more we should take water for granted, no matter how boring it seems. The fact of its boringness is what is so essential about it, like life itself.

So before I get to the next part of this *esposizione*, (forgive the occasion to that interjection of the Italian phrases. It is just simply too tempting), I am going to read to you a bit from *The joy of story-telling* to tell you what it takes to perform this essential service for all of us: the service of story telling as it used to be in the olden olden olden days, the golden golden golden days that never existed.

«In my cabin looking out over the primordial waters my mind made journeys back to the time when the sea was a god and when fire was a new deity, a deity that brought out terror and story telling from the hearts of the emergent humanity. I seemed then to travel back to those unrecorded ages when communities and families sat huddled beneath the undeciphered sky, gazing into the mystery of fire, with all the terrors of the world looking about them in the darkness which was also a god. The fire was the home then of the living soul and the refuge of the unknown shapes of monsters of the growing dark. It was terror that brought out the mystery from which humans gazed into the fire and so their only hope. It was uncertainty, the unknown, the darkness and the unquenchable fire in the human breasts which made that a time of dread enchantments. And the masters of enchantments, of bringing the dark sky

and the howling dark within the realm of the bearable, the masters of keeping terror at bay were the story tellers.

The earliest story tellers were magies, seers, bards, griots and shamans. They were, it would seem, old as time and as terrifying to gaze upon as the misteries with which they wrestled. I can see them now the old masters. I can see them standing on the other side of the flames, speaking in the voices of lions, of thunder, of monsters, of heroes, heroines, of the earth or fire itself. For they had to contain all voices within them, had to be all things and nothing. They had to have the ability to become lightning, to become a future homeland, to be the dreaded guide to the favour land where the community was settled and fructified. They had to be good to fight in advance all the daemons they would encounter and summon of all the courage needed on the way to prophesy about all the requisite qualities that they ensure their arrival at the dreamt lands.

The old masters had to be good to tell stories that make sleep possible on those inhuman nights, stories that would count out terror with enchantment or with a greater terror.

I can see them beyond the flames, telling of the hero's battle with the fabulous beast, the beast that is in the hero.

I can hear and see them as they rise storms before their people's eyes, make great snakes appear before their mesmerized gazes, as they take them to the deep of the sea and show them great monster-fishes, in whose belly sits the last of the human kind.

I can hear their deep voice rising in the dark, imitating the growl of two-headed beasts with resonant names and I can see that terror-stricken community gather even closed together under the dreadful spell of the ritual stories».

If you look about you right now, behind you, maybe inside you, behind you in the history and into the future, if you close your eyes and you think of

the universe I think maybe you will agree that the first thing you become aware is the sense of darkness. Darkness seems to be a primal condition, our first condition. It is not for nothing that the Bible itself speaks of everything coming out of chaos and darkness. It is out this darkness that the possibility of stories begins. What perplexes us about our lives and makes it necessary for us to create is a suspicion that the darkness is greater than us and the hope and the dream that there is something in us that is just possibly greater than the darkness. This is where the magic comes into it, the magician converts darkness into light. That is the greatest magic of all, and the most difficult, and one which all of us must master, or we are damned and doomed and condemned to hopelessness.

We have to work with silence, we have to work with emptiness and empty page and empty mind, doubt, boredom, uncertainty, loss of faith, paralysis, impotence, ignorance. At this particular moment we are all sculpturing the silence: the first condition of magic. Anybody who wants answers doesn't know the question. Do you noticed how everyone is afraid to be silent? I am pretty scared here now on looking at you. I am looking at that lovely girl right now in front of me and I am trying to resist the power of her restlessness and the devastating effect. The smile of that child that wants the world to be exciting can destroy the entire universe around with her beauty. I have to find the way to resist. You are all carrying this place as much as I am. More than speaking to you about magic and the lost art of enchantment, it is probably better if we all experience it and you will understand why it was lost and how it can be found.

The responsibility seemed too much: to take people back to the enchantment of ancestors. Four glasses of wine, one day, one day

through Modena, later I came to a very simple realization that could liberate me completely. I realized that we can not go back, can not take anybody back to the ancient art of ancestors and the lost art of enchantment, can not go back. The art is lost, the arch is lost, it does not exist any more, it is finished, end of story. Only one thing left to do: finding a new art of enchantment, go forward, take what is dead in the past, its ashes, its empty air, the rumours of its past and go forward, find the ancestors in the future. I have to find new ways of being African, stories, experiences learned in order, a pose. The African past has to be reincarnated into new possibilities. Europe too. Orpheus is still singing.

Ben Okri: What do you want by me?

What do you want to see?

Audience: *What we cannot see.*

Okri: That is where story begin. That is where the story speaks to you, not what you can see in the other person, but what you can not see and you do not know.

Nothing is where we begin. All stories begin before they begin. It is important what I have just tried to stress. Before a story there are stories, a secret existence before the first word on the page, before the first "In the beginning". It ought to make us wonder about human life, this story that exists before the story begins. Every beginning of a novel makes me think that I am reading the beginning of my own story, and I wonder about the story that began before my own story began. People sometimes ask me which is more important, before you began or after you have gone, before the story began or after the story has ended. I say what happens before is more important. It determines everything.

The art of the enchantment was lost because we have lost the way, lost our way in history, lost ourselves in erroneous explanations, lost ourselves in our certainties about life, matter, death, certainties which are errors, lost our terrors. The soul wakes in the terror of the dark, for the dark is an illusion. Time, space, matter, history, death, fear are illusions.

Enchantment takes us beyond the illusion, reminds us of the essential and only story that there is to tell, the story of transcending the terror of things, the terror of death, and finding hints of something that redimes, a light in the dark of our mortality. Only one story to tell, but a million variations. Born in dark, a journey towards light, or else about incidents on the epic way from light to dark.

The lost art was never lost, we just got too stupid in our confidence. Our limited discoveries in science made us more blind and foolish and then we threw away the value we placed on the light and lived in a civilized darkness. Spectacular sufferings, which could awaken us again with its challenge, we partially abolished and left to others.

Stasis chokes us with unreality. We die inwardly from unshrinking challenges.

We had no stories to tell because we had limited the range of our communal experiences and adventure in the factual success of our civilization.

To have stories is to live, to fail and to make mistakes. The failure must be changed into enlightenment. The art of enchantment returns when we realize that we each must be Orpheus and go to the underworld of our age that is festering with forgotten evils and bring back our souls, bring back our best ideals, up into consciousness using the power of harmony and restore to humanity its forgotten beauty and its place among the gods, its place in the province of heaven which is always our home on earth, in our bodies and our minds.

It's your turn.

Audience: *What did you do with Euridice?*

Okri: She always was very special, she is the best part of us. No division was ever intended.

Audience: *Is not enchanting a way to re-invent the time? What is the connection between time and enchanting?*

Okri: I think enchantment charms time, which is an illusion anyway. So enchantment charms us into realizing that time is an illusion. It puts us in a condition whereby for a moment we glimpse of something beyond here, something that we do not see clearly but that holds us for the rest of our life, and as long as we keep that something alive in our mind, that brief vision of a magic experience, a unicorn, a miraculous and beautiful thing, as long as we keep that in our mind alive in us we are save from the monstrosity of the illusion of time. Which is to say we are given a great little diamond of hope, a wonder that you did not have to stick your hands in the fire to pull out, given as a gift.

Audience: *It is given to us but we have to look for it, don't we?*

Okri: We do not always have to search in order to find, sometimes we just find, sometimes we are just given, and then after we have been given we have to earn it, to understand and find the way to make use of it in our lives. When it is given like that, it is like an enigma or a flash of eternity, a dream, a vision, something that encounters you in all kinds of forms, a book that you are reading, something that a child says, the unfinished words of someone who is dying or a snatched word of a pop song that you

heard on the way to the football match. The enchantment hides in life, not just in books. We have to be aware of them in life in order to be more aware of them in books and vice versa.

Audience: *How do you usually write? Free hand?*

Okri: I like the way you put it. Free hand, the hand is literary free. I believe in the ancient art of dowser. I never heard anyone dowser with a computer, with all due respect to those of you who use it.

Why do you think I kept quite sometimes during this event?

Also because the world is full of too much noise and media that you talked about is one of the noises. Noises in our ears, in our eyes, there are noises in eyes do you know, noises in our senses, noises in our heads, too much noise, not possible magic with too much noise. Less media more magic, less media more self discovery. We do not need all that much media. It is very important but we do not need all that much. There is more media than humanity.

Audience: *Which is the way to write something which is not just noise?*

Okri: Do you have to write?

Audience: *Yes, I would like to know how to find the right way to write something magic in order to pull out, from what you called noise, the essential.*

Okri: Do you have to write?

Audience: *I love writing.*

Okri: Do you have to?

Audience: *Honestly yes.*

Okri: Do you really really really really have to?

Audience: *Ok, then no.*

Okri: Why did you give up?

Audience: *Because someone from behind told me.*

Okri: You give up want you to really really write because someone from behind told you?

Audience: *No.*

Okri: So your real answer is?

Audience: *Yes.*

Okri: So you will find the way.

Note:

Meeting with Ben Okri, Nigerian English-speaking writer and poet, during the exhibition «Parabole» organized by the Antonio Delfini Town Library in Modena. The meeting took place at the Storchi Theatre in Modena, on May 6, 2001, introduced by Marco Cassini (Minimum Fax Publishing House). Translations by Paul Angus, Michela Aveta and Claudia La Via. [Italian version](#)

¹ J. Masefield, *The joy of story-telling*, 1951.

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