Writing with an Accent: Components of Style in the Intercultural Narrative

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The paper that follows is part of a larger project aiming to examine the textual production of writers having access to more than one set of representational resources. It is premised on the notion that access to such dual or multiple resource-bases permits the production of texts that are 'marked' in salient and systematic ways.

Cet article vise à proposer l'existence d'une littérature «avec accent», c'est-à-dire composée de textes écrits par des auteurs bilingues/biculturels ou multilingues/multiculturels. Par l'application des catégories narratologiques proposées par Naficy dans son œuvre sur un cinéma accentué, j'analyse le nouveau roman de Ben Okri dans le but de démontrer à quel point ceci est conforme aux éléments stylistiques d'une littérature dite accentuée.

Keywords: accented literature, intercultural narrative, narratology, multi-literacies, cultural translation, literary stylistics

Introduction: Towards a Definition of Accented Literature

In a thorough analysis of the cinematographic products of two waves of exilic and diasporic filmmakers, the first dating from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, the second relating to the 1980s and 1990s, Naficy (2001) points to the existence of what he terms an accented cinema. By this he means to refer to a newly emergent genre of film produced by exilic and diasporic filmmakers in whose work he identifies common stylistic features and modes of representation. Through the use of individual case studies (e.g. Atom Egoyan, Mira Nair) as well as by analysing the stylistic features of groups of filmmakers from particular originating countries and regions (e.g. Latin America, Lithuania, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Russia), Naficy (2001) outlines the components of an accented style in relation to three types of filmmaker: the exilic (e.g. Jonas Mekas), the diasporic (e.g. Armenian filmmakers) and the postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmaker (e.g. Wayne Wang).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present in detail the theoretical framework underpinning Naficy's articulation of an accented cinema, I wish, nevertheless, to transpose the notion of cinema with an accent to the domain of writing and to employ an abridged and adapted version of Naficy's tabular representation of the components of the accented style (Naficy, 2001: Appendix A) with a view to testing the extent to which its principal features hold in respect of examples from literature. Following Naficy (2001), therefore, I shall posit the existence of an accented style in literature which I see as being

characteristic of the textual production of particular types of writers, namely those having access to more than one set of cultural and linguistic resources.

In previous articles I have focused on the work of Dorfman (Doloughan, 2002) and Kundera (Doloughan, in press) and have demonstrated the ways in which their textual production is underscored by their capacity to draw on multiple representational resources. In the present context, I shall concentrate on Ben Okri's latest novel, *In Arcadia* (2002), exploring the effects of the discursive employment of multiple material and representational resources and 'the interpenetration of cultures' (Quayson, 1997: 101). In doing so, I shall point to the significance of Okri's biographical and sociocultural location as well as to the elements of narrative structure and the particular modes of representation which serve to place *In Arcadia*, and indeed Okri's oeuvre in general, in the category of accented literature.

For, according to Quayson (1997: 102), Okri is a writer whose diasporic existence has permitted him to draw on an indigenous discursive field in his quest for identity and for new direction in narrative discourse. He sees Okri as activating in 'animist realism' (cf. *The Famished Road*) a resource-base which he uses to highlight a conceptual opposition to the dominant protocols of (western) realism (see, in particular, Quayson, 1997: 148–149, 164). While *In Arcadia* is less rooted in the kind of poetic realism characteristic of, for example, *The Famished Road*, it is concerned, nevertheless, with the coexistence of different belief systems and forms of knowledge and with the conjunction of different representational modes.

In Arcadia: Story, Character, Plot

In our different ways, we were all on the verge of nervous breakdowns when the message came through. We were to follow inscriptions that would lead to treasures hidden in Arcadia. Of course, it wasn't as simple and straightforward as all that. Things rarely are. They proceed in roundabout ways, as if through a constantly changing labyrinth. The message came obliquely, in broken bits, like shards of rare porcelain. (Okri, 2002: 5)

Thus begins *In Arcadia* which uses 'the outer facts of a real journey as a vehicle for fictional characters' (author's note). It plots the journey undertaken by a film crew made up of a group of largely unsuccessful professionals and messed-up individuals brought together or rather 'summoned' (Okri, 2002: 5) by a mysterious contact man called Malasso who pays them to make a television film about a place named Arcadia. The journey begins at Waterloo station and takes them to Paris, Versailles, the Louvre, and then on to Switzerland and beyond.

In the course of the journey they receive instructions telling them where to go next and who to interview. Some of the party (Jim, the director; Lao, the anchorman; and Riley, the assistant cameraman) also receive messages on the way, the content of which they reveal to no one but which they generally attribute to the influence of Malasso, whose 'evil-sounding name'

(Okri, 2002: 6) and malign presence – he is described as an ‘elusive reality’ (Okri, 2002: 76) – accompanies them on their journey.

The journey, originally undertaken by the crew for the money and the chance to escape their ruined lives, starts over time to interest them and the ragged band of ‘shipwrecks and derelicts’ (Okri, 2002: 5) begins to be transformed.

In Arcadia is divided into three parts and consists of seven books, each subdivided into numbered, and occasionally titled, sections. Part 1, which includes Books 1 and 2, is told by Lao who appears as the rather cynical and caustic anchorman for the project. It is he who introduces the reader to the other members of the crew: Jim, the director; Propr, the soundman; Husk, the researcher and general organiser; Riley, the assistant cameraman; Sam, the head cameraman; and Jute, who oversees the financing of the trip and ensures that the crew stick to budget. We also learn that Lao has invited Mistletoe, his red-haired painter friend, to accompany him on the journey. What they all have in common is their status as luckless and challenged human beings ‘propping up falling lives ... in this inferno we call the modern world’ (Okri, 2002: 5).

And so the search for Arcadia, or rather the making of a film about our notions of Arcadia, becomes a transformative, sometimes frightening, but ultimately redemptive inner journey. The journey in both its literal and metaphorical manifestations is the narrative drive behind the book. Yet the book’s structure is somewhat more complex than such a brief summary would suggest. For interspersed throughout what might be termed the mimetic sections insofar as we have a representation of a journey with references to places and personages both real and fictional, there are passages of a lyrical and dream-like quality, usually headed ‘Intuitions’, as well as some which are declarative and didactic, full of philosophical ruminations and metaphysical speculations.

Indeed what characterises *In Arcadia* is the juxtaposition and blending of different ‘styles’, discourses, and genres: at one level, we have a tripartite account of the making of a docudrama – a kind of narrative equivalent of reality TV. At the same time, this narrated filmic journey is a modern-day quest, albeit a rather inverted or distorted one insofar as the protagonists are anti-heroic and, at least to begin with, largely antipathetic. Concurrently, there is an element of mystery involved: who is Malasso (real or imaginary?) and is it he who is responsible for the strange goings-on on the journey which leave members of the group feeling disorientated, vulnerable and fearful?

It is also a highly allusive text full of references to Virgil’s *Eclogues*, to *The Odyssey*, to Shakespeare, to Dante, to the Bible and to myths of the Creation and the Fall. There are meditations on art and creativity, on painting and the decoding of the visual, as well as references to enigmas, enchantments, revelations, secret messages and laws, hidden inscriptions and inexplicable events. In other words, the mimetic impulse is undercut by a sense of the liminal, the unknown, the mysterious, the inexplicable. ‘Reality’, like Malasso, is seen to be a construct that constantly eludes us as we try to pin it down; it acts upon us and we feel its effects but we cannot get to the heart of the mystery and uncover, once and for all, its singular meaning. For, as Lao muses:

‘Life, the world, society, reality, history is a sprung text that we endlessly learn how to read better’ (Okri, 2002: 154).

Components of the Accented Style in Literature

Having given general indications of the substance and texture of Okri’s *In Arcadia*, I wish to turn now to aspects of the work which, following Naficy’s characterisation of an accented cinema (Naficy, 2001), seem to me to reflect what I wish to call an accented literature. As already stated, my contention is that the kinds of narrative produced by bilingual/bicultural and multilingual/multicultural writers are ‘marked’ in systematic ways. I should point out that I do not mean to suggest that such texts are either ‘deficient’ or ‘deviant’ in some way nor do I intend ‘accented literature’ to be construed in relation to some fixed notion of ‘unaccented’, ‘standard’ or ‘mainstream’ textual production. Rather, I wish to test the claim that, in parallel with certain kinds of cinematographic productions which Naficy (2001) has shown to conform to what he terms an accented style (p. 22ff), there is an emergent body of literature (cf. Dorfman and Kundera) produced by writers having access to more than one set of representational and cultural resources (cf. Dorfman and Kundera), and that these texts display shared stylistic features, evidence similar narrative structures and present a common thematic. For as Kress (2000a: 154) puts it: ‘If change and convention are not to be treated as mutually exclusive terms, then the question still remains, fearfully, how are we to account for change.’

Table 1 is abridged and adapted from Naficy’s rather more detailed categorisation of the components of an accented cinema (cf. Naficy, 2001: 289–292). Clearly, in adapting Naficy’s cinematographic stylistics to a stylistics of narrative text, not all categories and aspects will apply equally¹ (e.g. lighting scheme). In the main, however, the components of style identified by Naficy (2001) as constituting an accented cinema will be seen to be transferable to the printed medium. Indeed, Okri’s *In Arcadia* is particularly

Table 1 Abridged and adapted from Naficy (2001)

<i>Narrative structure</i>	<i>Characters</i>	<i>Subject matter/theme</i>	<i>Structures of feeling</i>
Multilinguality	Outsiders	Journeys	Liminality
Multivocality	Twoness	Identity	Interstitiality
Juxtaposition	Shifters	Historicisation	Hybridity
Self-reflexivity	Accented speech	Problematisation of reality	Multifocality
Border aesthetics	Identity and performance	Exile/displacement	Nomadic sensibilities
Memory/nostalgia			Synaesthesia
Narrative time and space			

well adapted to such an analysis, given its thematised narrative interest in the visual in general and in the production of filmic text in particular.

As Table 1 indicates, accented cinema, and, I would argue, accented literature, is characterised by a particular type of narrative structure, by particular character types and subject matter and by distinctive structures of feeling. Bearing in mind that not every work will necessarily include all of the components listed under each heading, I shall illustrate what Naficy (2001) means by the various components insofar as they apply to *In Arcadia*.

As I have already referred to the central role of journeying in the book, let me start with subject matter or theme. According to Naficy (2001: 223), '[w]hether documentary or fictional, accented filmmakers consistently feature [a] journey of some sort in their films . . .'. He goes on to point out that 'certain universalist or particularistic mythical and epic journeys, such as the expulsion of humans from Eden or the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and their search for the promised land' (Naficy, 2001: 223) may be mobilised. Dividing journeys into three types, he identifies (1) home-seeking journeys, (2) journeys of quest, homelessness and lostness, and (3) inward, homecoming journeys.

In relation to *In Arcadia*, it is clear that the narrative is premised on a journey both literal and metaphoric; indeed, the search for Arcadia is the pretext for a journey whose ostensible purpose is to make a documentary film about our notions of Arcadia. The narrative is interwoven with references to Eden and the Fall and to the cultural and literary attempts to remake a kind of secular Eden, otherwise known as Arcadia (Okri, 2002: cf. pp. 65–66). By virtue of being both 'a real place in the Peloponnese and an imaginary place' (Okri, 2002: 65), Arcadia occupies an ambivalent and contradictory space, a space transformed culturally and imaginatively over time to coincide with a human yearning for a terrestrial paradise, a semi-ideal landscape, or a place of dreaming.

In short, the journey embodies a quest, even if to begin with the crew's motivation is pragmatic rather than metaphysical. Thus, for example, almost despite himself, Lao begins to be seduced by the prospect of a journey which reignites in him a long-forgotten enthusiasm for travel and for flight:

And then a gentle litany of magic names, place names; vowels and consonants that, for a moment, lisped past the fortress of my impregnable cynicism, and wove a feathery enchantment over the little boy who once dreamt of flying with his own wings to all the lovely places of the world, places whose beauty was compacted into their names. (Okri, 2002: 17–18)

Over the course of the journey feelings of loss and alienation give way to moments of reflection and insight. The members of the crew, a diverse band of renegades, begin to 'gel' and to communicate their feelings, anxieties and aspirations with honesty and self-awareness. In Paris, for example, they go out to eat together and over dinner some of them reveal their own notions of Arcadia (cf. 134ff), exposing their innermost thoughts and hopes to the scrutiny of the others, something which would have been unimaginable at the start.

In effect, it is through the journey that issues of identity are raised: most of the crew seem to have lost their way and are out of touch with a sense of who they are. In the society of which they are a part, they have been defined as 'losers', 'doomed and hopeless, full of fear and failure' (Okri, 2002: 5). Jim, the director, is described as '[i]ncompetent beyond description' (p. 10); Propr, the sound man, as '[t]otally unsound' (p. 11); Husk is an obsessive, Riley 'full of a mad squirrel-like amphetamine-driven panic-charged vaguely neurotic energy' (p. 12); Sam, the first cameraman, 'hollows you out with his ceaseless flow of words' (p. 13); while Jute, nicknamed The Spy, is described as '[t]he eyes and ears of Big Brother' (p. 15). In short, according to Lao, they are 'an incompetent crew, a crew from hell' (Okri, 2002: 15).

It is clear from these descriptions that the kind of characters we are dealing with here are outsiders. They are ill adjusted and have enjoyed little success career-wise. Propr, for example, hasn't worked for five years but has been tending sheep somewhere in the North (cf. 11). Lao, in particular, stands outside of the mainstream by virtue of his colour: as the crew pass through immigration in France, we learn that Lao is black, 'condemned at birth because of a different sun' (Okri, 2002: 107). He is conscious of different laws applying in his case, laws based on the colour of his skin, and speaks of society's 'invisible lines and nets, points of interrogation' (pp. 107–108). He lists the reactions he gets from people who cannot see past his skin colour and suspect him of being a mugger, a murderer, a criminal of some kind. In short, he lives in 'a permanent existential condition' (p. 111), denied existence and historical validity.

As well as being perceived as 'other', Lao also masks his identity through performance. He projects cynicism and creates for himself a persona which allows him to disguise his purpose and to slip through society's nets. In Book 3, the narrator comments on the necessity of donning a disguise 'in an age without a centre, an age without beliefs, an age of emptiness' (Okri, 2002: 76). Lao, he suggests, is 'like an actor who played his part on stage longer than he lived his truth in life. His role sometimes overwhelmed his reality' (p. 76). He has donned a cloak of apparent cynicism, verbal cruelty and noninvolvement the better to be able to 'see everything, without being seen, to hear everything, without being heard' (p. 76).

He shifts according to the context in which he finds himself, responding to what he perceives to be the demands of a particular situation. The roles he adopts and what he believes himself to be are in constant tension. Only with Mistletoe, whom he sees as one of the daughters of Pan (Okri, 2002: 175), can he relax and let down his guard. For she is a kindred spirit. As they walk beside the lake at Versailles, Lao feels 'the smooth surface of the water' (p. 170) to be a 'parallel road on which invisible beings played, on which magic notions wandered off into flawed human infinity' (p. 173). Earlier at Versailles, having fallen into a 'mathematical reverie' (p. 170), he finds himself with Mistletoe in a glass labyrinth. In a vast room, they meet the sons and daughters of the great god Pan and are addressed by one of their number who tells them that although the world used to accommodate spirits such as they, it does so no longer and, as a result, they are dying out. The spirit continues: 'The world has lost the meaning of the infinite, and the finite is without

sustenance. What you see is held up by what you do not see. The visible is sustained by the invisible' (Okri, 2002: 171).

In terms of 'structures of feeling', there is throughout the book a sense of the 'simultaneous awareness of and access to multiple cognitive systems and cultural orientations' (multifocality). This is reflected not only in Lao's sense of the coexistence of the material and immaterial worlds – the spirit world is as real for Lao as the world of physical materiality (cf. 38ff) – but also in the admixture of 'intuitions', philosophical reflections, and emotional and lyrical outpourings which punctuate the book. Lao, the product of a different sun and a different culture – there are references to Africa scattered here and there (cf. 13; 26) – is steeped also in a Western cultural heritage. High art and literature provide a home to Lao, the 'mental outlaw' (Okri, 2002: 230); at the same time, he is no stranger to the world of myth and legend and to child-like enchantment. As Mistletoe and he sit silently in a Paris café in the early morning, they contemplate 'the things going on outside as if they were flowing inscriptions, living hieroglyphics, motions in a vast painting, pregnant with mystery' (p. 155). They stare at everything 'like children. In that Parisian dawn all the world seemed an infinite text which the spirit reads, but the brain doesn't' (p. 155).

Lao appears to live at the intersection of national, cultural and aesthetic practices (interstitiality) and to believe in unseen forces and magic (nomadic sensibility). As the plot moves forward, so Lao looks backward (retropectiveness) and has a sense of heightened sensuality, emotionality and nostalgic longing (sensibility).

By virtue of its narrative structure, which juxtaposes not only different generic and discourse markers as well as placing actualities and possibilities in analytic and critical juxtaposition, the text calls into question the need to choose the 'factual' over the 'fictive'; the 'real' over the 'imaginary'; 'Western' over 'Eastern'; the 'material' over the 'spiritual'. It resists the imposition of an either/or logic in favour of a both/and culture and is structured around interstitial, liminal and equivocal cultural and aesthetic spaces. The fact that there are different narrative voices presented in the book – the shift from a first person to a third person narrator, for example – as well as shifts in focus – from Lao to the other crew members; from the events of the story to the events of history and legend – and temporality, serves to emphasise the interdependence of sometimes conflicting perspectives. There is tolerance of ambiguity and the coexistence of different modes of being and seeing. At the same time, however, the book presents a critique of modern life insofar as modern living, at least in the west, tends to privilege the material over the spiritual (cf. 229–231).

Finally, the similarities between Okri and Lao cannot be ignored. Okri, like Lao, is the product of two cultures and has a mixed heritage: African and English. Brought to London in 1961 to join his lawyer father, he started school in one of the mixed race areas in London. Later, in 1966, he was sent back to Nigeria where he continued his education, before returning once more to England in the 1980s. As has already been pointed out, Okri's ability to move between cultures and to take from each what he considers to be of value, translates in his work into texts which mix poetic and philosophical modes,

which contest rigid conceptions of genre (interestingly nowhere is the book referred to as a novel, though undoubtedly it has been marketed as fiction) and which problematise representations of reality which exclude the enigmatic, the mysterious and the seemingly inexplicable. Intuition, enchantment and magic are not for Okri negative terms. The visible and the invisible, rationality and imagination coexist and are seen to be creative and transformative resources. Or as Quayson (1997: 163) puts it: 'Okri represents the indigenous resource-base comprehending its own hybridity and discursive eclecticism'.

Otherness and a sense of dislocation are also present in his fiction. As a black writer, Okri, like his character Lao, occupies a kind of insider – outsider positionality. It is difficult to read the passages relating to difference in terms of skin colour in *In Arcadia* without relating it to the author's own biography. When Lao describes himself as 'a daily victim of the human capacity to cast one into darkness' (Okri, 2002: 112) and talks about the differentiation by which he as a black man is condemned in society's eyes (cf. 109), it is difficult not to hear in this impassioned plea to be judged on his humanity rather than on the colour of his skin an echo of Okri's own experience. The borders between life and fiction are permeable indeed.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up: my contention has been that the kind of texts produced by bilingual/bicultural and multilingual/multicultural writers such as Okri (or Dorfman or Kundera) are 'marked' in systematic ways. The application of Naficy's cinematographic stylistics (cf. Naficy, 2001) has allowed me to show the extent to which Okri's *In Arcadia* conforms to what I have called an accented literature. Such a literature adopts narrative strategies that 'cross generic boundaries and undermine [narrative] realism' (Naficy, 2001: 5), as well as presenting themes which emphasise journeying, transitional and liminal spaces, displacement and dislocation and struggles over identity. In addition, such texts are characterised by an 'aesthetics of juxtaposition' (p. 6) and 'an embedded theory of criticism' (p. 8). They reveal 'the tensions of marginality and difference' (p. 10) and make visible 'discursive and semiotic struggles' (p. 31). In short, they are situated, literally and metaphorically, at the border and, as such, I would contend, constitute a new, emergent genre.

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Note

1. For as Kress (2000b) has argued, different semiotic modes and media have different potentials and limitations (cf. 193ff). Thus visual and verbal or written texts are not coextensive, given their different affordances.

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