



Literature and Mental Health: Reading for Wellbeing

Discussing Poetry Writing with Ben Okri

Ben Okri: This is a shortish poem called 'The Core':

'I looked so much I could not see
And in everything I looked at only saw me.
The sky isn't really blue you know
Leaves of grass are not really green.
I want to drink in all the beauty in the world.
Especially the things not seen.

Many of the stars I see are not really there.
Waves of light move in a way not entirely clear.
I watch the birds till I stop thinking about flight.
I gaze at the river till I am lost in light.

What was I afraid of, always hiding my eyes?
I've got to face my truth, and my lies.
I've got to stop wanting to be in control.
Being at peace is a much better goal.

(I'm just learning what eyes are for.
To see with the heart, see right to the core.)'

Paula Byrne: I just want to start by talking about your poetry. When did you start writing poetry?

Ben Okri: Poetry was the first thing I began writing, when I wanted to write (I didn't know when that was, I just found myself writing). The first thing I did was write poetry and I've since discovered two things. The first thing is that it's natural for people to want to write at a certain stage in their life — in other words, it's a natural desire to express something, whether it's grief, whether it's love, whether it's just understanding your environment. At some point in your life, there's this need to express on paper, if that has been part of your education in any way.

The other thing I discovered is that the poems that I began writing were love poems. It turns out that love poems are secretly seduction poems, and seduction poems are really some of the oldest poems in poetic history. So, yeah, I began writing poetry because I fell in love, I suppose.

Paula Byrne: Were you aware? I mean, do you write sonnets? Are you worried about technical stuff? Do you write odes? Is there any sort of formality in the way that you write or does it just free flow?

Ben Okri: Both. I like the technical difficulties — I write some sonnets and then I desonnetise

them — and I write odes, but mainly I like the constriction. Now I impose my own constriction on myself. I like the tension between what you want to express and the form in which you have to express it, and so I'm moved more, now, towards greater and greater brevity rather than to say more and more, if you know what I mean?

Paula Byrne: I do. Let me just take you back to love poetry and sonnets (because I love Shakespeare's sonnets, and most of them are love poems). You talked about constriction of form, and I'm quite fascinated by how many of our great poets do like the rigour of a tight form. The stanzas and the couplets at the end. I'm fascinated, because I'm not a poet, to know how does that help you in terms of formulating a love poem?

Ben Okri: It helps because without any rigour, without any formal structure, you really could go on and on and on, and we need—

Paula Byrne: Good point.

Ben Okri: We need the discipline of tightness in order to express a lot. It's not just the discipline of the tightness of the forms, but also the discipline of the rhyme and the discipline of the iambic — the actual beat. You inherit these forms and into them, you pour your personality. It's the way in which you pour your personality into these forms that makes it individual.

So, when you ask, why do we need these forms, it's the same reason that we need our houses to be in the shape that are. They can't just be funnel-shaped and go off into infinity, we need defined spaces in which to live infinite lives. Our cars are defined spaces; the shoes that we wear — even our clothes follow the mould of our body. I think the form ought to follow the mould which best amplifies — I think it's all about amplification. I think the more tightly coiled a thing is, the more it amplifies.

Paula Byrne: I'm very interested the word 'composition' and 'composed,' because I think we can compose ourselves to read a poem and we can compose a poem, but I'm interested in whether there's a sort of concentration that poetry demands of us? Can that concentration slow us down? Can our breath and our blood pressure slowdown? Can we take a time a moment to sort of reflect like reading mindfully, I suppose, like being in the moment? Do you feel poetry has a role?

Ben Okri: I don't know, I'm sort of ambivalent about this; I'm not so sure that it's concentration that poetry really requires. I think the myth of the concentration required for poetry is responsible for putting a lot of people off. It's made them think: 'oh, poetry is so difficult. I need to really concentrate. I need to think very hard to understand it, and therefore it's going to be so obscure.' I don't think it's concentration. I think it's—

Paula Byrne: Is it more heartfelt?

Ben Okri: I think it's more listening. I think it's more surrendering, actually. I think it's more immersion, more entering into. I think it's more moving into the world, into the space of a poem.

Paula Byrne: I believe it was C. S. Lewis who said: we read poetry not to feel alone. Something that's come up over and over again in the course is people saying: 'I don't feel alone,' because sometimes we don't have the words to say, but someone else does. You then have that sudden moment of recognition, that sort of Eureka moment of: 'I feel like that!' Have you had an experience of reading a particular poem where you just thought, it's like that for me?

Ben Okri: I would put it another way, I'd say, what really great poetry does, is it coalesces that which you did not know you were feeling into a body of feeling and words. So, it's another way of saying that we've got a thousand unformed poems inside of us, which great poets bring alive from out of our experience, like the conjuring of a vase in the air (in a way).

So yes, frequently, Shakespeare does it for me often; Rilke does it; Neruda does it; Whitman does it. It doesn't always have to be a whole poem — Emily Dickinson would do it sometimes with two lines. She's got a wonderful poem, the name of which I can't remember, which is really just words in a landscape, and the first time you read it you wonder what connects all these words? But then you go for a walk, and you connect all those words. It's almost like an abstract painting, where you supply (from out of yourself) the only things that can make those words, put so close together, live in their context. I love that about great poets and great poetry — that they don't say everything for you.

Paula Byrne: Ben, just tell me about the poets that you like, or have influenced you. Is there anyone you want to talk about?

Ben Okri: Yes, there are many poets — I've spoken about Emily Dickenson, and Neruda and people like that, but there are also wonderful poets like Christopher Okigbo (a Nigerian poet, who died during the civil war) who was a— I wouldn't use the words 'big influence,' but I discovered him when I was 23. I went back to Nigeria and I went to this shop, which just had this sunburnt copy of his book called *Labyrinth*, and I stood there and opened it, and was transformed and transfigured by it.

It began with these words.: 'Before you mother Idoto,' (Mother Idoto is a river, so think of this river):

'Before you mother Idoto,
Naked I stand;
Before your watery presence,
A prodigal
Leaning on an oilbean,
lost in your legend'

He's a poet of great rhythmic beauty. A very cryptic poet and a poet who also believes in the power of ritual in poetry.

Then there are poets like Wole Soyinka, who's also very powerful. There's a poem of his, which I learnt when I was very young, that had a big influence on me. 'I anoint my flesh,' (isn't that lovely?):

'I anoint my flesh
Thought is hallowed in the lean
Oil of solitude...
I call you forth, all, upon
Terraces of light. Let the dark
Withdraw'

Yeah, so there are very many very beautiful African poets that I thought I'd speak about as well.

Paula Byrne: Can I ask about your poetry now?

Ben Okri: Shall I read a poem instead?

Paula Byrne: Please read a poem.

Ben Okri: OK. Shall I read a stillness poem?

Paula Byrne: Yes, please.

Ben Okri: This poem is called 'Piano':

'Out of the shining wood
Out of the quiet light
Of its sounding
A blue bird emerges
Soars and touches
The sickle moon that rides
A crescent cloud
In the darkness of a blue sky;
And then, a tender music fills
The dream of an Italian evening
In the hall where a child
Dances alone
Before the sea of light.

Out of the bright mirror
A clear world stands
Waiting. Do we
Dare to enter,
Or follow the strange call
To a new shore
Where time is more?
Where to dream is to love
And to love is to give?

There are no spaces
But are full of unheard
Melodies, colours of spirit.
Arches mirror
The curved universe within,
As the sky mirrors our
Secret eternity.

Out of the drawing she
Sits as on moonbeams of delight.
All things are made
Of a divine music, you know.
When we're happy
Doesn't it show?
We glow
As if the primal word
Plays so in us
Shining
Through our transparent flesh
The god in us singing
To the god about us.'

Paula Byrne: Could you give us a bit context about the poem? I love the flow; it's so musical.

Ben Okri: There isn't much of a context. I was on holiday with a—

[LAUGHTER]

I was on holiday with a friend. It was the last night of the holiday and we were sitting in the

lobby of the hotel looking out to the sea. A beautiful breeze was blowing in, and I felt that rare state of pure happiness. There was paper on the table; my friend had been drawing, and she left a lot of spaces around the drawing, and I just wrote the poem around the spaces. It's just a poem written out of a mood of rare happiness. That's all.

Paula Byrne: Do you mean piano as in it's soft?

Ben Okri: I mean piano as in soft *and* piano as in piano; piano was playing in the background. It was about absence and presence.

Paula Byrne: Really beautiful, but also so musical — just the internal rhymes.

Ben Okri: You see, I don't—

Paula Byrne: Are you conscious of that, when you write? Or do you...

Ben Okri: It is what the poem becomes as you write it. I write secret rhymes, in many ways— inner music. I think it's really important to stress that I'm trying to give a voice to happiness there, to tranquillity, to peace, to stillness. There isn't any concrete way you can do that, except through evoking music, and using a lot of 'O' sounds and 'ach' and 'ah.' So, gentle words. I don't use too many harsh words, because it's meant to be a musical piece as well.

Paula Byrne: It's a wonderful poem. Would you like to read another?

Ben Okri: Of course. OK, this is a much shorter poem and it's called 'The World is Rich':

'They tell me that the world
Is rich with terror.
I say the world is rich
With love unfound.
It's inside us and all around.

Terror is there, no doubt:
Violence, hunger, and drought;
Rivers that no longer
Flow to the sea.
It's the shadow of humanity.

There is terror in the air.
And we have put it there.
We have made God into an enemy,
Have made God into a weapon,
A poverty, a blindness, an army.

But the world is rich with
Great love unfound:
Even in the terror
There is love, twisted round
And round. Set it free.

River, flow to the sea.'

Paula Byrne: It's beautiful. Beautiful. I could say a million things about that, but the word 'terror' now is loaded, so much. When did you write it?

- Ben Okri: In the time when terror became loaded for us. They've kind of ruined that word, haven't they? Terror is a very powerful word.
- Paula Byrne: It's a powerful word.
- Ben Okri: And powerful in an open way, but now it's become powerful in a very closed and narrow way because it's got linked—
- Paula Byrne: It has, but the war on terror— What does that mean ?
- Ben Okri: You start to say the word 'terror,' and people's minds immediately goes to 'terrorism.' So, it's like we've lost terror and gained terrorism. However, in that poem, I'm echoing, resonating that, of course, but I'm also saying that terror is part of life. The darkness is part of life. It's important that we have a sense of it, and have the courage to dissolve it at the same time.
- Paula Byrne: You reading that reminded me of when I gave a lecture in Los Angeles, just after 9/11, and a lot of people said that they turned to Jane Austen out of a need for an ordered existence — a life far removed from terror.
- Ben Okri: Something you said earlier connects what you were saying just now (and I think it's worth really stressing it) and it has to do with inner life. When you talk about literature, people turn to Jane Austen — they're not turning to a comfort blanket in times of stress like that. What they're turning to instead is literature, because it's one of the ways that we know most in our times, of getting us back to the inner life.
- Terror, terrorism, news stories, horror stories on the front pages of newspapers, the fear and the stress— what it all does is it constantly makes us live on the surface and the external aspects of ourselves, and that increases our stress. What the best literature does is it returns to us our quietness, because reading, especially reading privately, actually is an act of consciousness. It's an act of the empowerment of your truest individuality. Your soul, your mind, your heart, your spirit, your being. It's given that its primacy again, it's given that its nourishment.
- One of the worst things that a climate of tyranny and a climate of poverty does to people is that it robs them of precisely the nourishment of that inner life, the life of the spirit, the life of the imagination, the life of the heart, the life of stillness.
- Paula Byrne: Do you think the best of poetry can restore that or bring us back to that?
- Ben Okri: The best poetry reminds us. Something really wonderful happens when you read. I notice that with people; I watch people read a lot, and they do something like this: They start to read something, then they pause for a minute and then look up like that. There's sometimes a word or a dialogue, or a line has sent them off into a space, into a memory, into their past lives, into an experience, into a loss that was love, into grief, into someone they haven't seen for a long time — an experience. They go off into this other world...
- Paula Byrne: Reverie.
- Ben Okri: Into this reverie. So, what I'm trying to say is that there are two things: There's the act of reading and there's what reading does to the mind, and to the consciousness, and to the spirit.
- Paula Byrne: Do you think that's different to other art forms like looking at a painting or listening to classical music. Is there something about words?
- Ben Okri: Yes, there is something about words. Music is wordless and speaks of the wordless part of us. You hear a piece of music and unless, of course, you associate it with an experience in the past,

then you don't start thinking of trees and Atlantis and journeys and leaping off bungee jumps. You don't do that. You just enter into the wordless world of music itself. With a painting, the painting immediately confronts your eyeballs — it's an immediate act of visibility. Of course, it can remind you, but first you see it in its completeness, whereas with a word, you see the word, but your mind sees what the words is referring to. Do you get what I'm saying?

Paula Byrne: But other things are happening too, because your heart is responding and your spirit and your imagination, so it's all of those things. I think you're right with the visual sense, it is very immediate and it can be very full-on, but I think you're right about words because it's layered.

Ben Okri: It is layered and also words are loaded. There's a structured archaeology of words, but then there's also our own private archaeology of words, and the word tree (or stress) that you encounter in a poem would do totally different things to me than it would to you. So, we have our own private resonance with these words.

Words stand in a wonderful symbolic relation with life; it's constantly about that resonance, and it's a resonance inward. It really is, like throwing a pebble into the sea or into the quiet lake of one's being, of one's consciousness, of all of one's rich internal life (sometimes rich internal sleep in life, because there's a lot in us that sleeps).

There's so many aspects of our lives we haven't woken up to, haven't asked questions about. We wake up in the morning and we rush through our days — we have things to do. We don't have much time to just stop and ask these big central questions upon which our whole life hangs. Why are you living? What are you doing? Why you getting up in the morning and rushing through the day? What is the purpose of your day? What is the purpose of your life? One day follows another and before you know it, you are at the very door of death itself. What have you been doing? Why are you living?

Unless grief attends us, for example, a relative dies (in my case, when my mother died, my goodness!) very rarely do we get things that wake us up in that way, stun us into suddenly having to ask those deep, resonating, fundamental questions. That's what literature does and it does it very slyly. It says: 'Hey let's go for a walk,' it appears to be at a party, it appears to be entertaining and then bam! It plants this thing, and for—

Paula Byrne: You're never the same.

Ben Okri: You are not the same. When you ask me what does literature do? What does reading do? *That's* what it does, it gives us a parallel life and we need it. The great poets often tell us that you can't rehearse life. Bam! You're right in it. You don't get a chance to say: 'OK, if I get a chance to...' You're in it. You go to school, and then next thing, you finish school; then you get married; get a mortgage, have a house; you have kids (my goodness, I haven't had time to rehearse this! I'm just in it). Literature gives us this parallel opportunity, this alternative life gives us a chance to slip outside our own life and enter into another, or enter into a poem.