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Ben Okri's Aphorisms: "Music on the Wings of a Soaring Bird"

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Abstract

*The title of this presentation is derived from Ben Okri's latest publication, *The Magic Lamp* (2017), itself an intersectional text featuring a selection of Rosemary Clunie's art and Okri's accompanying ontopoietic/ heightened consciousness prose. This trans-disciplinary paper traces the trajectory and suggests the import of Okri's blueprints for regaining our true state of being: his aphorisms in *Birds of Heaven* (1996), *A Time for New Dreams* (2011) and those in *Johns Hopkins's journal, Callaloo* (2015, 38(5): 1042-1043). Reviving a wisdom corpus from antiquity, this Booker Prizewinning Nigerian novelist provides a guiding paremiological exemplum in *A Time for New Dreams* to counter postmodernity's obsession with the pleasure principle or fast living and hyper-connectivity: "And out of the wilderness/ The songbird sings/ 'Nothing is what it seems./ This is a time for new dreams'" (2011: 147). Based on Italian Renaissance's Desiderius Erasmus's ([1540] 1982) view on the luminous benefits of concise thought, the argument is that the quintessence of aphorisms or proverbs has been and is their pithy wisdom. A basic premise is that the *Imaginatio Creatix* communicating in poetic prose aphorisms provides fertile ground for new connections, new depths, and new transversals as well as epiphanies or what Okri terms the alchemy of 'serendipity'. A fragment in *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 40) highlights the moral purpose of Okri's aphorisms: "It is precisely in a broken age that we need mystery and a re-awakened sense of wonder: need them in order to be whole again."*

Keywords: aphorism; *A Time for New Dreams*; *Birds of Heaven*; Ben Okri; serendipity

1. Introduction

Based on Italian Renaissance's Desiderius Erasmus's ([1540] 1982) view on the luminous benefits of concise thought, the argument of this paper is that the quintessence of aphorisms or proverbs is their pithy wisdom; that that of the *Imaginatio Creatix* communicating in poetic prose aphorisms provides fertile ground for new connections, new depths, and new transversals as well as epiphanies or what Ben Okri terms the alchemy of "serendipity". In contrast to the biblical *Book of Proverbs*, Okri is neither prescriptive nor doctrinaire: he prods us gently towards the light. This is encapsulated in the title to this presentation which is derived from his latest publication, *The Magic Lamp* (2017), itself an intersectional text featuring a selection of Rosemary Clunie's art and Okri's accompanying ontopoietic poetic prose. The metaphor, "Music on the wings of a soaring bird" serves to illustrate Okri's synesthetic mode.¹ While the immediate appeal is to the auditory, our visual as well as sensory faculties are simultaneously stimulated. Okri's view of reality, reflecting that of phenomenologist, Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, "encompasses three ontological categories:

¹ *Synesthesia signifies an experience of two or more kinds of sensation when only one sense is being stimulated* (Abrams 1999: 315).

the physical, the vital and the meaningful" (Smith 2011: 18).² The African world-view, as Wole Soyinka reminds us, turns on belief in "the continuing evolution of tribal wisdom through an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality, as signifying no more than reflections of the original coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality" (1995: 53). Integral to Okri's probing of rationality is the evolutionary process of nature and "the emergence of human creativity as the stimulus to the development of human culture with its aesthetic, moral, and intellectual senses" (to borrow from Jadwiga Smith on A-T. Tymieniecka 2011:17).

A fragment in *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 40) highlights the moral purpose of Okri's aphorisms: "It is precisely in a broken age that we need mystery and a re-awakened sense of wonder: need them in order to be whole again" (1996: 4). "We are all wounded inside in some way or other," Okri insists. "We all carry unhappiness within us for some reason or other" (ibid.). "Heaven knows," he writes in *A Time for New Dreams* (2011: 3), "we need poetry now more than ever. We need the awkward truth of poetry. We need its indirect insistence on the magic of listening." So, I invite you to sit back and enjoy the magic of listening!

2. Interdisciplinarity in Ben Okri's Aphorisms

As can be expected of a Booker Prizewinning writer, Okri has spared no genre or medium in his creative impulse, erasing artificial disciplinary and generic boundaries. Not only does he argue for the healing power of poetic truth, he also sees a symbiotic relation between the language of literature and philosophy, stating in a *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 40) aphorism that, "Philosophy is most powerful when it resolves into story. But story is amplified in power by the presence of philosophy". According to Ron Grace (s.d.: 4), etymologically, philosophy is the "love of wisdom". Okri revivifies the ancient philosophy of the wisdom corpus, embracing its ideas, points of view, ways of life, systems of belief, and so religious myth in his pithy observations which contain a general truth, the definition of an aphorism in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998: 76).

An early Okrian aphorism asserts unequivocally that, "The greatest religions convert the world through stories" (1996: 20 no. 12); and Okri (1996: 19) elucidates on the role of fiction in the perpetuation of religious mythology: "All the great religions, all the great prophets, found it necessary to spread their message through stories, fables, parables." This echoes the claim of Italian theologian, Erasmus ([1540]1982: 17), who suggested that, paremiologically, the overlap between philosophy and theology is such that theology is served as much by proverbs as by philosophy. The *Book of Proverbs* in the Christian Bible, with its principle theme of wisdom, testifies to this view.³ "The Bible is one of the world's greatest fountains of fiction and dream," Okri (1996: 19) aphorizes. Grace (s.d.: 4) suggests that faith provides the deepest level of wisdom, akin to what Okri terms serendipity, in its advocacy of an integrative underlying order. 'On Klee' (1996: 45) provides Okri's poetic objective correlative:

*Wisdom reigns in hidden symmetry
And colours are but charmed invisibility.*

*What lingers in the soul
Often bypasses the eye
And the birds of heaven, without wings –
How much more sublimely do they fly. (Stanza 4)*

² According to the philosophy of Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Imaginatio Creatrix liberates the human spirit from one-sided dependence on nature and opens it to the acts of interpretation of organic processes. The creative act is an act of self-individualization ... the evolution of the universe is to be seen as being fundamentally connected to the process of seeing*" (Smith 2011: 17).

³ *Themes in the Book of Proverbs, attributed to King Solomon, encapsulate almost all aspects of what constitutes the good life: from generosity, helpfulness and humility, through work ethic, teamwork and wealth creation, the law, prudence and governance; to the benefits of knowledge/understanding/wisdom; and to the dangers of evil and the need to fear God – where God's ontology, as asserted in Genesis, is that God is all attributes and all attributes are God [Logos].*

In contradistinction to Roger Fowler's notion that "'Art' ... like 'good' must be simply a commendatory word covering a multitude of incompatible meanings" and – more insightfully – that "Art, as all know who are in the know, is not Life" (1973: 12), Okri avers in an aphoristic correlative that "All art is a prayer for spiritual strength" (1996: 12 no. 8). He adds: "If we could be pure dancers in spirit, we would never be afraid to love, and we would love with strength and wisdom" (ibid.). Erasmus's articulation on the efficacy of aphorisms or proverbs, such as these, concurs in greater detail:

...to weave adages deftly and appropriately is to make the language as a whole glitter with sparkles of Antiquity, please us with the colours of the art of rhetoric, gleam with jewel-like words of wisdom, and charm us with titbits of wit and humour. In a word, it will wake interest by its novelty, bring delight by its concision, convince by its decisive power. ([1540]1982: 17)

3. The Trajectory of Okrian Aphorisms

This trans-disciplinary paper traces the trajectory and suggests the import of Okri's blueprints for regaining our true state of being, for loving "with strength and wisdom" (just quoted), conveyed via his aphorisms in *Birds of Heaven* (1996), *A Time for New Dreams* (2011) and those in Johns Hopkins's journal, *Callaloo* (2015, 38(5): 1042-1043). Although one cannot here provide a comprehensive overview of Okri's many aphorisms, broadly speaking, the trajectory is a secular sermon on ontopoietic "beingness".

Premised on the twin aphorisms that "Africa breathes stories" and "We are part human, part stories" (1996: 24 & 26), *Birds of Heaven* explores the notion of humankind as *Homo fabula*. As a variation of the myth of faith and faith in myth-making, and prefiguring a later aphoristic gem – "Great literature is almost always indirect" (2015: 1042 no. 6), Okri aphorizes enigmatically: "To find life in myth, and myth in life" (1996: 42 no. 95). Predictably, given the thrust, a swirling cosmic dance of Okrian maxims has to do with the imagination and creativity, again illustrating the writer's transdisciplinary mode. For instance, he asserts that "The imagination is one of the highest gifts we have" (1996: 42 no. 93), but also that imagination operates best when unbounded, as implicit in "The higher the artist, the fewer the gestures" and explicit in "The fewer the tools, the greater the imagination" (40 nos. 81 & 82). Musing that "Creativity is a secular infinity" and that "Creativity is evidence of the transhuman", he asserts that "Creativity is the highest civilizing faculty" (41 nos 86, 87 & 88). Such aphorisms are at once perspicuous and sublime.

Foregrounding the primacy of love and creativity, Okri intertwines art and spiritual love, moral codification, thankfulness, and politics in numbers 90, 93, 98, 99 and 101 with:

"Love is the greatest creativity of them all, and the most blessed."

"Creativity is love, a very high kind of love."

"Humility is the watchword at creativity's gate."

"Creativity is a form of prayer, and the expression of a profound gratitude for being alive."

And then, in another transdisciplinary observation, Okri avers that

"Politics is the art of the possible; creativity is the art of the impossible." (1996: 41-43)

To adopt Joseph Addison's view, if clarity and perspicuity were all that were needed, "the poet would have nothing else to do but to clothe his thoughts in the most plain and natural expressions" (Jones [1922]1963: 239). Although pared down to their essentials, the aphorisms in *A Time for New Dreams* develop myth-making storying, inviting us to rethink our true state of being. For example, a guiding paremiological exemplum in *A Time for New Dreams* serves to counter postmodernity's obsession with the pleasure principle and hyper-connectivity: "And out of the wilderness/ The songbird sings/ 'Nothing is what it seems./ This is a time for new dreams'" (2011: 147).

Here, Okri is perhaps more methodical in his exhortations. In a section entitled, "Seeing and Being", he provides ten aphorisms on this chosen theme, nine of which are variations on the indivisibility of seeing and being, as captured in "To see, one must first be" (2011: 23 no. 5), while the tenth, "It takes a work of art to see a work of art" (24), illustrates an aphorism from *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 43 no. 97): "All great stories are enigmas."

The next quiver of aphorisms in *A Time for New Dreams* occurs in a section entitled, "The Romance of Difficult Times". In line with this oxymoronic section heading, these maxims turn on paradox, where paradox, as defined by Fowler (1973: 136), is an "apparently self-contradictory statement, though one that is essentially true". Fowler cites an example from Schopenhauer by way of explication: "The more unintelligent a man is, the less mysterious existence seems to him"; as well as one from Shaw that evokes the pathetic fallacy: "The man who listens to reason is lost: reason enslaves all whose minds are not strong enough to master her" (ibid.). Both paradoxes are proverbial or aphoristic. Okri's adage that "Story is a paradox" (1996: 31 no. 48) in *Birds of Heaven* is more titillating; it can perhaps be better understood in the aphorisms 19 and 21 that are clearly paradoxical, when paired: "In the beginning there were no stories" and "The universe began as a story" (1996: 22). To a western believer, the allusion would seem to be to *Genesis*. But I would argue in line with Emmanuel Obiechina (1995: 123) that these aphorisms perform an organic and structural function. They allude to "a return to the roots movement in African literature as a means of giving maximum authenticity to the writing" by sustaining "traditional solidarities" and espousing "values, beliefs, and attitudes conditioned and nourished by the oral tradition", that is, by evoking an indigenous poetics of myths, folktales, fairy tales, animal fables, anecdotes and legends that precede the written tradition.

In *A Time for New Dreams*, difficult times are invoked in paradoxical aphorisms mediated by communal consciousness and impulses arising from group sensibilities (Obiechina 1995: 124) as in: "There can be no rise without a fall, no fall without a rise" and "There can be no prosperity without adversity that has been wisely transformed" (2011: 39 nos 2 & 3). More ontopoietic is "Difficult times do one of two things to us: they either break us or they force us back to the primal ground of our being" (40 no. 6); while more acute is a doxographic aphorism from antiquity: " 'Sometimes the way up is the way down,' Heraclitus said" (41 no. 17).

In Apostolic times, Christ's followers were enjoined to practise the virtue of hospitality as concretized in the parable of the loaves and the fishes. Emulating Jewish Laws on the spirit of hospitality (Lev. 19:33 & 34), a virtue much esteemed by civilized peoples (Cruden 1941: 314), as well as "one of the most treasured laws of the African social existence" (Soyinka [1976]1995: 21), Okri includes a series of aphorisms on the topic in his compendium of wisdom in *A Time for New Dreams* (2011). Having provoked with a counter-argument of, "Philosophically there is no such thing as hospitality because we are all guests on this planet, we are all guests in life" (2011, 54 no.15), he expounds on the virtues of hospitality, once again transcending disciplinary borders. For example, he braids holism, with psychology and the science of relativity; and with ancient Chinese philosophy and creative openness to the world of ideas in 8, 17, 18 and 12 in:

"Hospitality is a secret affirmation of the oneness of humanity, a sort of secular kinship. Hospitality is something we should be able to extend not just to our friends, but even to our enemies."

"... it is quite possible that we are guests in the universe and guests in the condition of mortal consciousness."

"Hospitality is therefore temporary, finite, and subject to the continual changes of the human condition."

"According to Lao Tsu the truest hospitality is when the host is like a guest, and the guest like a host." (52-54)

This set climaxes with an inner or heightened consciousness in, "There is also intellectual hospitality, the hospitality to ideas, to dreams, to ways of seeing, to perception, to culture" (55 no. 20). Okri implies that intellectual hospitality is akin to *Logos*; it is "the most important of all ..." (ibid.), a hold-all for all facets of hospitality. His evocation of the term 'guest' in these maxims illustrates his own intellectual hospitality. Etymologically, the word 'hospitality' derives from the Latin *hospes*, meaning 'a guest' (Brewer's 1976: 349) as in 'hospice' or the Knights of St John.⁴

⁴ "Originally the hospice or hostel (< L. *hospes* a guest) for the reception of pilgrims." The word *hospital* "later applied to a charitable institution for the aged or infirm" or to charitable institutions for the education of children (Brewer's 1970: 549). Cf. the Knights of St John's in Jerusalem and the Knights Hospitalliers at Rhodes and in Malta, dating back to the Middle Ages.

Considering the challenges that confront us in our postmodern age, Okri offers three other significant sets of aphorisms in *A Time for New Dreams*: those on childhood, those on Form and Content, and, those on Healing Africa, which will be touched on briefly. In contradistinction to the *Book of Proverbs* that tends to focus on the once popular adage of “spare the rod and spoil the child”,⁵ Okri’s musings, by contrast, have to do with the need for educated parenting as opposed to biological inevitability. He sees childhood as a paradoxical period: a “focus of love – real love and confused love” (77 no. 2). Underlining the paradox of the vulnerability, and cruelty of childhood, he avers: “Childhood: the place of all society’s experiments, its disastrous ideas of conscious engineering” (78 no. 6); but “a time also of innocent cruelties, tearing off the wings of butterflies, cutting up worms, ganging up on the weakest, the newcomer, or the strange one” (78 no.5); and “the meeting place of an endless chain of failures and successes, hopes and fears, marvels and disasters, disorders and joys, and the hidden narrative of ancestors” (77 no. 6). These adages show modern insight into the psychology of both parenting and childhood, particularly in today’s nuclear family unit.

As expected, the section, “Form and Content”, relates at once to general truisms about literature, and to an onto-poietic take on artistic creation, as in “Form endures longer than content” (125 no. 2) and “Nothing can live in art or in life that does not find the form unique to itself by which its individual soul can be expressed” (120 no. 8). More poetically, Okri states that “Form is the visible manifestation of spirit” (127 no.13); and “The medium is higher the more levels it has within it that correspond to the levels within us” (128 no. 16). The main axis of these latter aphorisms is the phenomenology of life and of the human condition informed by cosmic creativity: a pointer to the creative function of the human condition in recovering our true state of being.⁶ An excerpt from Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1995:52) serves to elucidate:

Where society lives in close inter-relation with Nature, regulates its existence by natural phenomena within the observable processes of continuity – ebb and tide, waxing and waning of the moon, rain and drought, planting and harvest – the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species.

Acknowledging attitudes towards Africa of dismissal, patronage, exploitation and even insult, Okri provides a slipway into his aphorisms on the healing of Africa within by reminding us that

Africa is difficult to see because it takes heart to see her. It takes simplicity of spirit to see her without confusion, And it takes a developed human being to see her without prejudice. (2011: 59)

It follows that “To see Africa one must first see oneself” (2011: 60).

Sustaining the metaphor of seeing, Okri has a three-pronged aphorism on cognitive perception: “If we see it, it will be revealed. We only see what we are prepared to see. Only what we see anew is revealed to us” (137 no. 20). He recaps with the anthropological reminder that Africa is the cradle of humankind in “There is a realm in everyone that is Africa ... We all have Africa within (134 no. 6). It is a given, therefore, that to respond to an axiomatic exhortation, “To clear the darkness from the eyes of the world” (136 no. 18), “We have to learn to love the Africa within us if humanity is going to begin to know true happiness on this earth” (137 no. 23). Okri is clearly convinced that our contemporary world requires that reflective intelligence that plays a key role in human life and cognition. This brings me to the final set of aphorisms to be discussed: those

⁵ See, for instance, *Proverbs Chapter 29 verse 15*: “The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame,” while *Chapter 13 verse 24* reads, in similar vein. “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.” *Chapter 10 verse 11* states: “A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.”

⁶ Cf. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. 1966. “Is there Something Rather than Nothing? Prolegomena to the Phenomenology of Cosmic Creation (Assen: von Gorgum)” and Rosemary Gray. 2017. *Recovering our true state of being in Ben Okri’s The Comic Destiny. English Academy Review: Journal of English Studies*. 34(2): 1-15.

in *Callaloo's* special issue on Ben Okri (2015).

Suggestive of the centrality of numerology for Okri, a triad of themes dominates a dozen braided maxims in *Callaloo* viz. modes of reading, freedom and creativity. The first and third reflect those on "Form and Content" in *A Time for New Dreams*; while the second incorporates reading and creativity and encapsulates a pivotal preoccupation for Okri, as testified in titles such as his *A Way of Being Free* (1989) and *Tales of Freedom* (2009) and explored in-depth in his justly famous novel, *The Famished Road* (1991). Aphorism number 12 (2015: 1043) is a terse definition of freedom: "The genius of inner freedom." This adage echoes the philosophical underpinning of an extract from *A Way of Being Free* (1989: 132) which reads:

It is possible that a sense of beauty, of justice, of the inner connectedness of all things, may yet save the human species from self-annihilation. We are all still learning how to be free. Freedom is the beginning of the greatest possibilities of the human genius. It is not the goal. (added emphasis)

The other freedom aphorisms (1042 nos 2, 3 & 4) highlight the necessity for untrammelled freedom:

"The essential thing is freedom. A people cannot be great or fulfilled without freedom. A literature cannot be great without it either."

"The basic prerequisite for literature is freedom. The first freedom is mental freedom."

And paradoxically,

"It is possible to be free in the world and unfree in your head."

Elaborating on literary freedom, Okri asserts: "Reading slowly reveals the hidden dimensions of a text" (1042 no. 1). Speed reading or scanning, so popular in our information age, can lead to misunderstanding. By contrast, "Slow Reading restores sanity to a world where we grasp less than we hear, take in less than we are told, and miss the meaning of our most significant experiences" (1042 no. 11). Okri's injunction is to "Launch the Slow Reading movement throughout the world" (*ibid.*). He believes that "The most striking thing about great literature is the strength of freedom that flows through its pages" (1042 no. 5). This is because "It is art, rather than its subject, which makes a work always mysteriously relevant to us ... It is its art alone which keeps a work alive through the long ages" (1042 no. 10).⁷

4. Conclusion

To conclude, one cannot dub Okri a Deuteronomist!⁸ His is not a collection of words of command. He does not instruct or preach. His wisdom comes painstakingly gift-wrapped. "We are all, quietly, invisibly, at the vanguard of how our world turns out," he states (2018: pers. comm.). Fellow

⁷ An example of the "mysterious animating element" that turns a work of art into a classic is, of course, Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*, particularly when Falstaff initiates the wordplay by affecting a melancholy [one of the four humors] disposition:

Falstaff	... I am as Melancholy as a Gyb-Cat, or a lugg'd Beare.
Prince	Or an old Lyon, or a Louver's Lute.
Falstaff	Yea, or the Drone of a Lincolnshire Bagpipe.
Prince	What says't thou to a Hare, or the Melancholly of Moore Ditch?

Martin Orkin (1892: 3) explains: "...Falstaff and the Prince allude, in turn, to the proverbial phrases As melancholy as a gibbed cat 1592 (Tilley C129), Lincolnshire bagpipes c.1545 (Tilley B35), As melancholy as Moorditch 1608 (Tilley M1134), and to the proverb Hare is melancholy meat 1558 (Tilley H151). Hal's ability to meet proverb with proverb leads Falstaff to compliment him for his "most unsauory smiles", and for being "the most comparative rascaldest sweet yong Prince" (I. ii. 191)."

⁸ PD Miller (1990: 2) explains that the original Hebrew phrase is "copy of the law". Deuteronomy is where we find the Ten Commandments.

Nigerian, Obiechina (2005: 127) explains the tradition of proverbialization that thrives on analogy and association in African narratives:

... there are in African novels movements forward and backward along symbol- referent trajectories that radically influence their plots ... the embedding of the narrative proverbs necessarily reduces the tempo of narrative, since the reader is constantly compelled to slow down in order to absorb the full import of the newly embedded story, to decipher it as a symbol or image, to relate symbol/image to its referent, and to relate them (story, symbol/image and referent) to the structure of the novel's total meaning.

The appeal for Slow Reading is itself symbolic: it is the mystery of the creative impulse, the secret workings of the artistic mind, the withdrawal from the world into the inner sanctum of creativity that engages Ben Okri. His demonstration of the creative process constitutes a personal aphoristic statement that, not without irony, is given to the Abiku child's drunken father in *The Famished Road* (1991: 419-420) to voice. Azaro's father leads the Party of The Poor with a Churchillian *cri de guerre*

"THINK DIFFERENTLY," he shouted, "AND YOU WILL CHANGE THE WORLD."
No one heard him.

"REMEMBER HOW FREE YOU ARE," he bellowed, "AND YOU WILL TRANSFORM YOUR HUNGER INTO POWER."

With such a powerful paremiological outburst, it seems to me a paradox that only one other critic appears to have been drawn to comment on Okri's aphorisms. Historian, Richard Bauckham (2002), in his erudite survey of the aphorisms in the *Epistle of James* mentions Okri together with Francis Bacon, La Rochefaucault and Elias Canetti (2002: 109) as belonging to a major tradition of aphoristic writing.⁹ More perspicaciously, he draws attention to a similarity between *James* (3: 5-8) and Okri's reflection on "the potential of words to do harm" (2002: 205). Jesus' disciple James points to the paradox that man is able to tame a large horse with a small bit and steer a huge ship with a tiny helm, but is unable to "tame" the "fire" of the tongue, one of the smallest members of the human body. In *James*, Chapter 3, verse 8, we read: "But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." This does indeed correlate with an aphoristic fragment from *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 3). Okri muses:

It seems to me that our days are poisoned with too many words. Words said and not meant. Words said and meant. Words divorced from feeling. Wounding words. Words that conceal. Words that reduce. Dead words.

Another fragment in *Birds of Heaven* (1996: 40) both summarizes my argument and highlights the moral purpose of Okri's aphorisms, mentioned at the outset: "It is precisely in a broken age that we need mystery and a re-awakened sense of wonder: need them in order to be whole again."

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⁹ Bauckham's selection is, of course, somewhat limited.

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