

THE 'DEADLY SECRET' OF THE PROPHECY: PERFORMATIVE AND PARABOLIC LANGUAGE IN CHIGOZIE OBIOMA'S *THE FISHERMEN*¹

EL 'SECRETO MORTAL' DE LA PROFECÍA: LENGUAJE PERFORMATIVO Y PARABÓLICO EN *THE FISHERMEN*, DE CHIGOZIE OBIOMA

María J. López
University of Córdoba
ff2losam@uco.es

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Abstract:

In Chigozie Obioma's novel, *The Fishermen* (2015), we witness the tragic events triggered by a prophecy delivered to four Nigerian brothers. My main aim in this essay is, following J. Hillis Miller's analysis of speech acts in literature, and also ideas by Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, to develop an argument about this prophecy as a performative use of words that makes things happen in the world by way of its listeners and believers. The prophecy is presented as a speech act characterised by secrecy, obscurity and ambiguity, given the impossibility of subjecting its words to true and false verification and its undecidability in relation to the literal and the figurative uses of language. It is a speech act that requires an addressee that literally and naively believes in it, with Ikenna—the oldest brother—emerging as such a believer, who in this sense is just like his siblings, repeatedly presented as taking language at face value, unable to recognize its parabolic and duplicitous nature. This leads them to act on

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reality led by words, in all cases with fatal consequences. Through its performative dimension, and by making a parallel between family tragedy and the tragic development of the Nigerian nation due to the effects of colonization and the political events of the 1990s, *The Fishermen* enacts the power of words to determine and transform personal and collective beliefs and even reality itself.

Keywords: Prophecy; Speech act; Performative language; Secrecy; Figurative language; Parable.

Resumen:

En *The Fishermen* (2015), de Chigozie Obioma, contemplamos los trágicos acontecimientos provocados por una profecía de la que son testigos cuatro hermanos nigerianos. En este artículo mi objetivo principal es, siguiendo el análisis de J. Hillis Miller de los actos de habla en la literatura, y también ideas de Jacques Derrida y Derek Attridge, desarrollar un argumento sobre esta profecía como un uso performativo de las palabras que hace que algo suceda en el mundo a través de las personas que la escuchan y creen en ella. Es un acto de habla caracterizado por el secretismo, la oscuridad y la ambigüedad, dada la imposibilidad de verificar sus palabras como verdaderas o falsas y su indecidibilidad en relación con el uso literal y figurativo del lenguaje. Un acto de habla de este tipo necesita un destinatario que crea en él de un modo ingenuo y literal. Ikenna, el hermano mayor, resulta ser ese destinatario, ya que, al igual que sus hermanos, interpreta el lenguaje al pie de la letra, incapaz de reconocer su carácter parabólico y engañoso. Ello les lleva a actuar en la realidad dirigidos por las palabras, en todos los casos con fatales consecuencias. A través de su dimensión performativa, y haciendo un paralelismo entre esa tragedia familiar y la trágica evolución de la nación nigeriana debido a los efectos de la colonización y de los acontecimientos políticos de los años 90, *The Fishermen* representa el poder de las palabras para determinar y transformar las creencias personales y colectivas y la realidad misma.

Palabras clave: Profecía; Acto de habla; Lenguaje performativo; Secreto; Lenguaje figurativo; Parábola.

In Chigozie Obioma's first and highly-acclaimed novel, *The Fishermen* (2015), Ben, the youngest of four brothers—Ikenna, Boja, Obembe and himself²—and narrator of their story, opens the narrative in the following way: “We were fishermen: My brothers and I became fishermen in January of 1996 after our father moved out of Akure, a town in the west of Nigeria, where we had lived together all our lives” (11). For professional reasons, their father moves to the city of Yola, in northern Nigeria, an absence that the children use to start going fishing at a forbidden local river, Omi-Ala, which people once identified with a divine presence, but which after colonialism and the arrival of Christianity, became “an evil place” and “source of dark rumours” (27). It is no coincidence that the prophecy that will trigger all subsequent events and that will transform the brothers' lives will take place in such a location: the river's association with evil and danger foreshadows future tragic events and introduces the novel's mythic overtones, together with its concern with the effects of the belief in magic and the supernatural.

After a neighbour tells their mother about their forbidden act, the brothers stop going to the river, but before that, Ikenna, the oldest brother, had begun voicing out his discomfort with their activity of fishing and his desire to disclaim his identity as a fisherman: “I'm a student. Not a fisherman” (33). As Ben wonders about “what had come over Ikenna” (34) and Solomon, a friend, reminds them that he told them not to listen to Abulu, “an evil, crazy, madman” (34), we as readers begin to suspect that something has indeed happened between the children and Abulu. This, however, is not revealed to us until much later, after we start witnessing a transformation in Ikenna whose reason is not given to us. His brother Ben describes this transformation as one in which Ikenna turns into a python: “A wild snake that became a monstrous serpent living on trees, on plains above other snakes. [...] a mercurial and hot-tempered person constantly on the prowl” (63). This metaphorical identification between Ikenna and a python at the beginning of chapter 4 mirrors the beginnings of many other chapters in which characters are also identified with animals or natural elements: “Father was an eagle” (41), “Mother was a falconer” (139), “Ikenna was a sparrow” (204), “Boja was a fungus” (291), “Obembe was a searchdog” (271), “Abulu was a leviathan” (302). The most obvious effect of this constant use of metaphorical characterization is its contribution to the strongly symbolic and mythical dimension of the novel. But it also needs to be seen as related to the novel's inquiry into the relation between the literal and the figurative uses of language, in particular, into the fatal consequences that the blurring or confusion between these two dimensions may have.

Ikenna's metamorphosis—by virtue of which he becomes increasingly distrustful and aggressive towards his brothers, from whom he more and more distances himself—makes his mother wonder what may have happened to him and it is when she finally manages to make Obembe tell her the truth that the reader also learns about the encounter between the brothers

2 They have two more siblings, David and Nkem, who due to their early age play a marginal role in the main events of the novel.

and Abulu the madman, locally known for his power of prophecy. This encounter, then, is shrouded in secrecy, a secrecy that operates at different levels. As we have seen, there is first a secret dimension that works at the level of discourse, affecting the reader's access to this event, which we only know about weeks after it has taken place at the diegetic level of the story. This would be the first type of secrecy that Matei Calinescu identifies in his analysis of secrets in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a secrecy that relates to "the sequential construction of the story" (454). According to Calinescu, a second type of secrecy, very much connected with the first one, is that of "the fictional secrets of the characters who inhabit this fictional world, secrets that are kept, penetrated, or confessed" (454), one that we also find in *The Fishermen*. Certainly, until Obembe tells their mother about it, the encounter with Abulu had been kept as a secret by the four brothers: "a metal-lidded secret, one that Boja had warned us never to reveal to anyone after Ikenna first started drawing a line between us and him" (113). For a few weeks, then, the four brothers had become a community of secret sharers, sharing a common knowledge and a common concealment. But this very secret constituting their communal bond is at the same time what is going to bring dissolution and death to this community³.

Horrified by what she is told about Abulu's prophecy, their mother scolds her children in the following terms: "you have harboured a deadly secret when I thought you were safe" (142). This characterization of the children's secret as "deadly" encapsulates the blurred and ambivalent opposition between the constative and the performative, and between the literal and the figurative, traversing the novel as a whole. Following J.L. Austin, J. Hillis Miller provides the following basic distinction between a constative and a performative statement: in the case of the former, it is "a statement of fact to be judged by its truth or falsity", whereas a performative utterance is "a speech act in which the saying or writing of the words in some way or other does what words say. [...] The words of a speech act do what they say. They are speech that acts, rather than describes" (*Speech Acts* 2). In *The Fishermen*, the brothers' secret is certainly deadly as it is a secret about death: what Abulu prophesies is that Ikenna will die. In this sense, "deadly" means in a constative way, as a description of something that has already happened. On the other hand, their secret can be seen as deadly if we believe it to be likely to cause or capable of producing death. In this sense, "deadly" has a performative meaning: it is a secret that is going to bring about something that has not happened yet, namely, death. The children's mother, however, may be speaking figuratively, something she has a tendency to do, as we will see below. The adjective "deadly" can be used in a literal sense, as in the collocation "a deadly poison", but we may refer to something as "deadly", even if it does not necessarily lead us to death, at least death in a literal sense.

3 In *The Unavowable Community* (1988), the reader will find Maurice Blanchot's intriguing reflection on the relation between community and "the sharing of the secret" (19-21). For an analysis of secret communities in other contemporary literary texts, see Martín Salván or Rodríguez Salas.

If the characterization of the children's secret as deadly, then, underlines an intense undecidability as to the nature and possible effects of this secret, this is completely in tune with the rhetoric of concealment, indirection and ambiguity that surrounds the moment of delivery of the prophecy, which highlights the third type of secrecy traversing the encounter between Abulu and the children, a secrecy that affects the very nature of the prophecy as speech act. As already pointed out, it is revealing that the prophecy takes place in a context—that of the river Omi-Ala—associated with the supernatural, but also a place that in its double reading—a place of spirits and gods in precolonial times, a place of evil in postcolonial times—suggests the semantic instability that may accompany our acts of interpretation. It is in such a context that Abulu addresses Ikenna in a manner that very much resembles an oracular prophecy as defined by Gordon and Gary Shepherd: “As a form of communication, oracular prophecy is typically declarative, highly personalised and often epigrammatic” (175). As regards the personalised dimension, certainly what makes Ikenna pay attention to Abulu's words is that they are specifically addressed at him: “He is calling my name. *He is calling my name*. How did he know my name? How—how is he calling my name?” (120; emphasis in the original). Abulu then pronounces a series of statements that contain the typically predictive dimension of prophecies and all of which suggest a future state in which Ikenna will lose his physical and linguistic capacities: “*Ikenna, you will be bound like a bird on the day you shall die*’ [...] *Ikenna, you will be mute*’ [...] *Ikenna, you will be crippled*’” (121; emphasis in the original).

The character of Abulu—who presents himself as the oracle of the Yoruba god Olu Orun (123)—and his prophecy are clearly grounded in the Nigerian context. In an interview with Nathan Go, Obioma has pointed out that “the phenomenon of a madman or madwoman is very common in [Nigerian] society” and though he goes on to affirm that most madmen are not considered prophetic, he states that he also wished to explore the “superstitious” aspect of African people. This superstitious dimension is related to the fact that, as he explains in another interview, “a little piece of the supernatural, of the metaphysical, and of the unknown placed within the realm of the known is how—at least to the West African mind—the world works” (Austin). *The Fishermen* engages with this particular aspect of the Nigerian context but it does so within a narrative structure that derives from a very specific Western literary tradition—namely the tragic tradition—which, which explores the concept of fate in relation to the causes and effects of terrible events, human misery and the possibility of some larger metaphysical force or transcendental scheme, often drawing on the common cultural beliefs in fates, oracles and prophecy (Wallace 137-138). Obioma has repeatedly referred to his interest in both Greek tragedy and Shakespeare (Go; Austin; Sides), two influences that, he argues (Go), converge in a fundamental book for him, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), by Amos Tutuola, the first African novel in English. Similarly, African elements, Greek echoes and Shakespeare converge in the novel concerning us⁴.

4 Habila sees *The Fishermen* as “grounded in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy”, according to which a good man shows hubris and is punished by the gods for it. He identifies this hubris in Mr Agwu, obsessed with turning his children into great men, and whose aspirations are going to be dashed by events in the novel.

Going back to Abulu's prophecy, it is highly meaningful that when it seems to be about to reach its climax, it is interrupted in the following way:

As he spoke, the din of an aircraft flying overhead mopped his voice into a desperate whimper at first, and then—when the plane had drawn much closer— it swallowed the rest of his words like a boa. The last statement we heard him make, '*Ikenna*, you will swim in a river of red but shall never rise from it again. Your life—' was barely audible. The din and the voices of children cheering at the plane from around the neighbourhood threw the evening into a cacophonous haze. Abulu cast a frenzied gaze upwards in confusion. Then, as if in a fury, he continued in a louder voice that was whipped into faint whispers by the sound of the aircraft. As the noise tapered off, we all heard him say, '*Ikenna*, you shall die like a cock dies' (122; emphasis in the original).

This is a truly ironic moment, in which what should be a moment of revelation and unveiling becomes a moment of veiling and darkness. The children's secret, then—what happened between them and Abulu—is actually grounded on more secrecy, namely, the secret of Abulu's words swallowed by the plane's noise. Abulu delivers a prophecy characterised by fragmentation and confusion, which in this sense, resembles the pronouncements of the Delphic Oracle in ancient Greece, which, as Salisbury explains, would have been "fragmentary phrases and words, or confused sentences" (82), "imprecise messages" (83). The *prophetai* or mediators, then, would have had to interpret these words into coherent responses, which, nonetheless, would have been ambiguous, often adopting the form of a riddle, with the subsequent possibility for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Similarly, Christidis points to the "cryptic nature of oracular utterance", based on "[i]ts play with ambiguity, homonymy, multiple meaning" (1371).

The ambiguity and uncertainty at the heart of Abulu's prophecy become even more prominent when, as the children walk home, visibly affected by the madman's words, Ikenna asks his brothers whether any of them has heard what Abulu had said when the plane was flying past. It is then that Obembe, who claims he has, delivers the message that is going to change the children's lives forever: "He said Ikenna, you shall die by the hands of a fisherman" (126). Obembe's words constitute an act of testimony, and as such, they work as a speech act that, as analysed by Miller, following Jacques Derrida's thought, cannot be subjected to objective verification. In *Speech Acts in Literature* (2002), Miller refers to Derrida's seminars on witnessing, in which, taking as point of departure Celan's phrase "Nobody bears witness for the witness", Derrida emphasises how the testimony given by the witness can be given by this witness alone. Miller explains how for Derrida "[w]itnessing is absolutely individual, *sui generis*, unique, private, singular", and as a consequence, "no act of testimony can be verified" (85). Obembe is the only witness to Abulu's words, and hence his testimony cannot be submitted to a true or false verification. We cannot know with utter certainty whether Abulu has really said what Obembe reports. Obembe may be lying, although in the light of the evolution of the story and of the relationship between the brothers, it certainly does not seem a plausible

possibility. It is more probable that in the case there is a mismatch between what Obembe claims Abulu has said and what Abulu actually said, he may not be consciously lying, but may have misheard Abulu's words. As Miller puts it, "[t]he witness can always be making an honest mistake" (*Literature as Conduct* 231). In any case, Ikenna's life is going to be transformed by a prophecy whose key message reaches him in an indirect way and which is transmitted to him through a speech act of testimony that cannot be verified and that hence leads to undecidability as to the actual words uttered by Abulu.

There is a further dimension of ambiguity in Abulu's prophecy, one related to the very interpretation of the prophecy: a fourth type of secrecy that derives from the impossibility of knowing whether Abulu is speaking literally or figuratively. As Rabinowitz argues in his study on the Greek tragedy, "prophecies could turn out to be metaphorical as well as literal" (78). Abulu seems to know that in order to make Ikenna believe in his words, he has to make them literally grounded. Thus, as he speaks, he makes a series of physical gestures that suggest the literal interpretation of his prophecy: as he claims that Ikenna will be bound like a bird, he covers his eyes with his hands; that Ikenna will be mute, he closes his ears with both hands; that Ikenna will be crippled, he falls to the ground. And he certainly manages to have the effect on Ikenna he desires, as Ikenna immediately and blindly comes to believe in his words in a literal sense. Thus, after he listens to Obembe's report, he has no doubt as to how to interpret Abulu's words: "He saw a vision that one of you will kill me" (127).

In *Ariadne's Thread* (1992), Miller analyses the "self-destructive fatality of misread signs", arguing that "[o]ne definition of madness [...] is the taking literally of a figure of speech and then living in terms of that figure. A madman misinterprets himself and other people according to false literalizations" (33). In the case of prophecies, I am arguing that what characterises them is the possibility of both a literal and figurative reading, but in Ikenna we certainly see the self-destruction to which the literalization of prophecies can lead. Living in terms of this literalization leads him to madness, the quality that ironically characterises Abulu as well: "the prophecy, like an angered beast, had gone berserk and was destroying his mind with the ferocity of madness, pulling down paintings, breaking walls, emptying cupboards, turning tables until all that he knew, all that was him, all that had become him was left in disarray" (148). This madness, manifested in a growing hostility and aggressiveness towards his brothers, ends up provoking a fight between Ikenna and Boja in which the latter will fatally stab the former. A few days later, Boja's dead body will be found in the family's well. Following a desire to avenge their brothers, Obembe and Ben will murder Abulu, after which Obembe will run away to avoid being caught by the police, whereas Ben will be sentenced to eight years' confinement.

Before all these tragic events take place, there is a key scene in which Ikenna's brothers try to convince him not to believe in Abulu's words, which they do by appealing to the impossibility of making a literal interpretation of them: "But what he said cannot happen', Boja said. 'Listen, he mentioned a red river. He said you will swim in a red river. But how can a river be red?'" (163). Obembe's argument is even more relevant as it hinges on the children's

own identity as fishermen: “None of us will kill you. We are not–Ike–we are not even real fishermen. He said a fisherman will kill you, Ike, but we are not real fishermen” (164). Boja’s and Obeme’s statements suggest the undecidability between the literal and the figurative on which Abulu’s prophecy is grounded but they also show the children’s tendency to interpret language in a literal way–the prophecy cannot be true because there are not red rivers and they are not real fishermen–, that is, their inability to be ironic readers or interpreters, a quality that in the case of Ikenna is explicitly pointed out: “He had no place for ironies or satires” (217).

This incapacity to use and understand language in a figurative way, one that characterises children in general, is highlighted on the many occasions on which the brothers receive cryptic messages, presented as a deficiency that will lead to a wrong or inappropriate behaviour in reality–even to tragedy. Ben and his brothers are familiarised with the indirect or obscure way in which language may signify, as they encounter it in the everyday context of their conversations with their parents. And this is so because of the tendency of the Igbo language to be structured around parables, “expressions containing concealed meanings” that Ben and his brothers “sometimes took [...] literally” (61), so that their parents needed to explain them. Thus, although Igbo has a literal way of saying “be careful”, their parents say “*Jiri ire gi guo eze onu*–Count your teeth with your tongue”, to which Obembe once responded by moving his tongue over the ridge of his mouth, literally trying to count his teeth (61). This figurative use of language can naturally be found in any language and it is indeed present in the children’s father’s tendency to use English idioms, which also leads the children to misunderstanding and confusion. Thus, when once he asked Ikenna to “take time”, the child obeyed by removing the wall clock from its hook (62).

Similarly, “Mother spoke and thought in parables” (141), so that when the children do something wrong, she tells them stories that “always had kernelled meanings” (141). This is what she does when she finally learns about Abulu’s secret, telling them a story about her walking to the stream with her *udu*, filling it in and then returning home to find it empty. The effect that these words have in Ben is worth quoting:

She let the words sink in, rounding us up with her eyes. I had imagined her walking down the river with an *udu*–an earthen jar–balanced on her head with the help of a *wrappa* formed into many layered rings. I’d been so drawn and moved by this simple story, by the tone in which she told it that I hardly wanted to know what it meant (141).

Of course, the interpretation comes later–it was her children that their mother thought she carried in her *udu*, when in fact they had leaked out of it–but the interesting point is how Ben wishes to remain at the literal level of the story, which in fact he–and probably also his brothers–would have done if their mother had not provided them with the interpretation of the story. The story and the children’s response to it show, then, the gap or distance between literal and figurative language that characterises parables. This is the main point made by Miller

when, in *Tropes, Parables, Performatives* (1990) he explains that the etymological meaning of parable is “thrown aside” (135), which suggests that “parable is a mode of figurative language which is the indirect indication, at a distance, of something that cannot be described directly, in literal language” (135). Similarly, Frank Kermode has argued that “[p]arables are stories, insofar as they *are* stories, which are not to be taken at face value” (24; emphasis in the original). The most obvious example of this narrative mode are the parables of Jesus in the New Testament—which both Kermode and Miller analyse—and it cannot be a coincidence that the protagonists of a novel so strongly concerned with the parabolic dimension of language become fishermen, just like Jesus’s apostles. In fact an identification between the children and Jesus’s apostles is explicitly made when Ikenna encourages Obembe and Ben to go fishing with him and other boys: “‘Follow us, and we will make you fishermen!’—and we followed” (24), an unequivocal echo of Jesus’s call to Peter Simon and Andrew in Matthew 4:19, when he invites them to become “fishers of men”. Peter Simon and Andrew were already literally fishermen and then by following Jesus, they figuratively become “fishers of men”. This conception of Jesus’s followers as “fishers of men” indeed constitutes one of the most central metaphors traversing the Gospels and the fact that in Obioma’s novel the children’s transformation into fishermen is based upon this metaphor underlines not only the analogy between them and Jesus’s apostles but also the great extent to which their new identity is constructed upon the figurative and the metaphorical. Hence the significance of Obembe’s claim, later on, that they are “not real fishermen” (164), a vainless attempt to ground their identity on the literal and to identify reality with literality, while Ikenna and his brothers are inevitably engulfed by a tragedy triggered by the power of words to signify and act in non-literal ways.

In his classic analysis of the Gospels, Kermode highlights the importance of interpreters for parables: “All require some interpretative action from the auditor; they call for completion; the parable-event isn’t over until a satisfactory answer or explanation is given; the interpretation completes it” (24). But Kermode’s point is precisely to show the impossibility of a final answer that sheds light on all the secrets not only of the Gospels, but of narrative in general, given the “enigmatic and exclusive character” (33) of narrative, “its property of banishing interpreters from its secret places” (33-34). The apostles are the recipients of Jesus’s parables, whose enigmatic meanings—Kermode shows—they struggle to interpret. Similarly the four brothers are repeatedly depicted as banished from the “secret places” (Kermode 34) of parables and prophecies, whose “concealed” (Obioma 61) and “kernelled” (Obioma 141) meanings—in a truly Conradian fashion—they are unable to reach. The Bible itself plays an important role in Obioma’s novel, due to the very religious character of the children’s mother, who often quotes and reads from it. She reads from it early in the novel, after she discovers that her children have been fishing in the river: “Mother ended the night with this passage from Proverbs—the most frightening I knew of in the entire Bible. Looking back, I realize it must have been the way she quoted it, in Igbo—imbuing the words with venoms—that made it so damning” (39). In line with the focus on indirect or hidden meanings and on figurative language that we find in *The*

Fishermen, it is from Proverbs that their mother quotes, in which, as James G. Williams argues in his analysis of this book of the Bible, “there are certainly many enigmas or dark sayings” (272), as well as a systematic use of figurative and metaphorical language.

Ben, however, puts the emphasis on another aspect of his mother’s words, namely, their performative power. Thus, by characterising them as “damning”, the child endows the words with the incriminating capacity to bring condemnation upon him and his brothers. Apart from the proverb itself, the children’s mother says all the rest in English, the official language of Nigeria, a formal language with “the potency of digging craters between you and your friends or relatives if any of you switched to use it. So, our parents hardly spoke English, except in moments like this, when the words were intended to pull the ground from beneath our feet” (40). Again the performative dimension of words is brought to the fore: their mother uses “charged and indicting” (40) words with the power to dig craters or pull the ground. This performative power also pervades the proverb that their mother quotes: “The eye that mocks a father, that scorns an aged mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures” (39). It is worth noting that these words actually constitute a prophecy, one that echoes Abulu’s and that makes us wonder, then, to what extent the tragic events that take place later may be actually the effect of the mother’s “damning” (39) words, which, as in the case of Abulu’s, are also grounded in a figurative use of language.

The effect, in fact, that their mother’s and Abulu’s words have on the children is a similar one, being related to the power of words to transform their listeners and to make things happen through them. Abulu is aware of this power, and it is as a sign of this awareness that I interpret the intriguing gesture that he makes after delivering his prophecy: “Then he moved one of his hands in the air as if scribbling something on an invisible hanging paper or book with a pen no one else but he could see” (122). Abulu knows that, through the effect of his words on the children, he has become the writer or author of their fate. The depiction of his vision of the future as an act of writing on an invisible paper with an invisible pen reminds of George Eliot’s description of the imaginative and creative act of an Egyptian sorcerer in the opening lines of *Adam Bede* (1859): “With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past” (7). In his reading of Eliot’s novel, Miller underlines that the Egyptian sorcerer’s mirror is not really a mirror. Being made of a drop of ink, this mirror works “a magical inscription that calls the past back into the present”, one that challenges the paradigm of mimetic realism and that opens “the realm of performative writing that creates what it seemingly only describes” (*Reading* 13).

Like the Egyptian sorcerer’s gesture, Abulu’s figurative act of writing, also a creative “magical inscription”, has a strong performative power. Thus it is possible to see his prophecy as an example of what Miller, dealing with secular parable, calls “a genuine performative”:

It creates something, a 'meaning', that has no basis except in the words or something about which it is impossible to describe whether or not there is an extralinguistic basis. [It] is like a piece of money about which it is impossible in principle to know whether or not it is true or counterfeit. [It] is language thrown out that creates a meaning hovering there in thin air, a meaning based on the language itself and on our confidence in it. The categories of truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, do not properly apply to it. (*Tropes* 139).

Like in Miller's characterization of the genuine performative, Abulu's language is described as floating in the air: it is ungrounded language, language that has no basis except the words themselves. It is furthermore language that cannot be subjected to a true or false verification. Although as probably secular, skeptical readers, we may not believe in Abulu's prophetic powers, we need to see his prophecy as belonging to a world in which people "see his visions as ineluctable" and believe that he is "the oracle of the scribbler of the telegraph of fate" (136). Within such a world, as Obioma himself points out, there are indeed two possible interpretations of the relation between the prophecy and subsequent events: "is the prophecy fulfilled because the kids believed in it? Or is there actually an extraordinary power, a juggernaut, whose force cannot be contained?" (quoted in Go). Did Abulu *really* know that one of his brothers was going to kill Ikenna or is it rather a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which Ikenna's belief in Abulu's words, with the subsequent modification of his behaviour, makes the madman's prediction become true?

This undecidability amounts to the final—and probably most fundamental—type of secrecy traversing Abulu's prophecy, one that I see as exemplifying Derrida's concept of the 'absolute' or 'unconditional' secret. In *Given Time* (1992), Derrida develops this concept through an analysis of Charles Baudelaire's story "Counterfeit Money", in which the narrator's friend has told him that he has given a counterfeit coin to a beggar. There is the possibility, however, that it was real money and that he lied to his friend about it. Derrida emphasises the different hypotheses we can make about the narrator's friend's thoughts and intentions and the impossibility of verifying them, so that at the end of the day the reader—just like the narrator—cannot know whether the coin was counterfeit or not. And this is so because "the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret, that is, by the inaccessibility of a certain intentional meaning or of a wanting-to-say in the consciousness of the characters" (152). In the passage quoted above, Miller describes the genuine performative as a piece of money about which it is impossible to know whether it is true or counterfeit. In Abulu's prophecy, both Miller's concept of the genuine performative and Derrida's concept of the unconditional secret converge, with the same interpretative consequences: we cannot know whether Abulu's words are true or counterfeit. Tragedy in *The Fishermen* develops out of an "enigma" that "gives to be read that which will remain *eternally* unreadable, *absolutely* indecipherable" (Derrida, *Given Time* 152; emphasis in the original).

Given the impossibility of submitting Abulu's words to a constative verification, the only possible response is to believe in them, like Ikenna does. As Miller points out, the meaning of a genuine performative is "meaning based on the language itself and on our confidence in it" (*Tropes* 139). The response to a genuine performative act such as a prophecy can only be another performative act, namely, the performative act of belief. In spite of all the uncertainty and confusion surrounding Abulu's prophecy, Ikenna believes, a belief that works like a triggering and transforming force in the development of events. Even if Abulu's prophecy was grounded in the madman's knowledge of the future, the novel suggests, it needed Ikenna's belief to become true. As Obioma states in his interview with Go, "[s]hould Ikenna not have believed in Abulu's prophecy, things would've been different. But once people believe, that belief becomes an institution".

In the first part of the novel, the transcendental consequences that our belief in words may have are seen in Ikenna's reaction to Abulu's prophecy. In the second part they come to the foreground in the way in which Obembe and Ben try to cope with their brothers' deaths, a process in which the act of reading plays a key role. After Ikenna and Boja die, Obembe, who had always enjoyed reading, becomes an even more voracious reader, passing on the stories he reads to his brother Ben every night. It is the reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) that has the greatest impact on him and that makes him make the decision that will continue the tragic spiral in the novel. Obembe tells Ben that in Achebe's novel the people of Umofia were defeated by the white men because they were not united. Likewise—Obembe concludes—their brothers died because there was a division between them, a division provoked by Abulu's prophecy. Abulu is hence their enemy and must be killed, which the two brothers effectively end up doing. In a similar way to Ikenna's blind belief in Abulu's words and subsequent transformation of his whole person, Obembe's conception of reality and behaviour is transformed by what he reads: "The things my brother read shaped him; they became his visions. He believed in them. I have now come to know that what one believes often becomes permanent, and what becomes permanent can be indestructible" (278). In Obembe, then, we see the effects of literature as defined by Miller: "We see the world through the literature we read" and "[w]e then act in the real world on the basis of that seeing" (*On Literature* 20).

The Fishermen is then pervaded by a strong metafictional dimension that by repeatedly depicting the effects of the performative use of words, in stories and parables, often in conjunction with the figurative and metaphorical use of language, comes to exemplify the performative nature of literature itself⁵. In *On Literature*, focusing on the power of words to signify on the absence of a phenomenal referent (16)—like Abulu's words written on the air—Miller defines literature as "a use of words that makes things happen by way of its readers" (20). *The Fishermen* is pervaded by uses of words that make things happen by way of their readers, listeners and we may add, believers. This dimension of belief is one that Miller also

5 In this sense, my argument about *The Fishermen* is very close to Nishimura's focus on the performative dimension of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which he defines as "a story about speech acts" (208).

emphasises as he explains that the performative dimension of the literary work demands an active response from the reader: “The reader must utter, in response to the work’s invocation, another performative speech act: ‘I promise to believe in you’” (38). Miller makes a correlation between literature and magic, given the “radically inaugural” (25) power of words in literary texts, their capacity to open new worlds, something that we especially see in the opening sentences of literary works, with their “abrupt or irruptive” character, the even violent way in which they command attention (26). *The Fishermen* points to the complex ways in which the performative and figurative uses of language interrelate with the belief in the supernatural and the mysterious dimensions of reality, an interrelation that is especially materialized in Abulu’s prophecy, whose arresting and powerful words—“Ikenna, you shall die by the hands of a fisherman” (126)—are certainly characterized by a radically initiatory quality, working as the genesis of all subsequent action in the novel.

It makes sense that a novel that is so clearly about the power of words to make things happen and determine our behaviour of the world—even the children’s beheading of a neighbour’s rooster, an incident early in the novel, is an idea that Ben takes from a folktale told by his Yoruba language teacher (67)—should finish with two performative acts with lasting and significant consequences. The first one is a classic example of a performative utterance, such as the ones analysed by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). This performative act is the judge’s verdict on Ben for having murdered Abulu:

by the powers conferred in me by the Federal System of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and by the recommendations of the jury that justice be tempered with mercy—for the sake of your parents, Mr and Mrs Agwu, I hereby sentence you, Benjamin Azikiew Agwu, to eight years’ confinement without familial contacts—until you, now ten, shall reach societal-proved maturity age of eighteen (398; emphasis in the original).

This is an example of what Austin calls explicit performances, “all with verbs in the first person singular present indicative active” (56). It even contains the “hereby”, which indicates that the utterance is performative (57). In particular, this type of performative belongs to the first type described by Austin, “verdictives”, “typified by the giving of a verdict, as the name implies, by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire” (150). Austin points out that “[v]erdictives have an effect, in the law, on ourselves and on others” (153). It is this effect that Obioma wishes to highlight: whereas in the case of the other uses of language we have seen, they needed a listener or reader that believed in them in order to have a performative function, the power of a judge’s words is precisely the power to transform an individual’s fate—in this case Ben’s—just through the utterance of certain words⁶.

6 See Fallows for an insightful analysis of performativity in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, with a focus on the language of the law as an agent of power.

The second speech act has to do with the unexpected revelation at the end of the novel that everything we have read actually constitutes Ben's declaration in court. When the judge asks him for his defence, he utters the words with which his narrative had begun: "We were fishermen. My brother and I became..." (411). His words are interrupted by his mother's cry of pain, after which the judge asks him to proceed, with the novel finishing in the following way: "I opened my eyes, cleared my throat, and started all over again" (412). I have already described the uncertain and indeed unverifiable dimension of testimony as a speech act, which, in Derrida's words, can "never be reducible, precisely, to verification, to proof or to demonstration, in a word, to knowledge" (*Name* 23). If everything we have read constitutes Ben's testimony, then we cannot know whether what Ben has told us is true or false, whether he is remembering correctly, whether he is making conscious or unconscious lies. Thus, following Derek Attridge's ideas in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) about literary performance (95-98), we can say that in *The Fishermen* we find a staging of the performative dimension of literature. It does not only depict or represent uses of words that make things happen through people's belief in them, but happens as an event whereby we as readers, faced with Ben's testimony—with no basis except the words themselves, like in Abulu's invisible act of writing in the air or in the Egyptian sorcerer's revelation of visions of the past—have no choice but to believe in it, and it is through such a belief that we make it happen.

To conclude, *The Fishermen* allows for two main different readings. On the one hand, the novel invites what following Attridge we could call an allegorical interpretation, one that consists in the search for meanings—political, historical or moral truths—beyond the literal, meanings related to the reader's stores of knowledge, cultural context or personal history (*J.M. Coetzee* 40). From such a perspective, the effect of Abulu's prophecy on the four brothers can be seen as standing for the effects of British colonialism on the Nigerian context, which turns the novel, as Obioma has explicitly defined it, into "a critique of the British occupation of Nigeria" (Go). In the same line, the tragic development of the Agwu's family may be said to represent the development of Nigeria as a nation during the 1990s. Before the main events of the novel take place, the children have a symbolic encounter with M.K.O. Obiola, the politician that won the 1993 presidential elections, generally considered as the freest and fairest in the history of Nigeria. The results, however, were annulled, which allowed General Sani Abacha to seize power later that year. In the novel, M.K.O. gives a calendar to the children, one that they keep as one of their greatest treasures, symbolizing "a strong hope for the future, for we'd believed we were children of Hope '93, M.K.O.'s allies" (107). After his descent into hatred for his brothers, Ikenna tears the calendar to pieces: if the four brothers, just like the Nigerian nation, could have achieved great things, the destruction of the calendar stands for the end of hope and the frustration of promises both at a familial and at a national level.

On the other hand, as this article has tried to show, this novel is about the powerful, indeed cryptic, misleading or secret, effects that language—especially in its figurative and parabolic dimensions—may have; about the power of words and stories to determine our

beliefs, our vision of reality and our behaviour in the world. And by making the reading event an act of belief in Ben's testimony, this performative capacity of words is not only thematized or represented, but is performed by the novel itself through the reader's response to it. *The Fishermen* invites, then, what Attridge calls a non-allegorical mode of reading, which seeks to preserve the reading event "as an event, to sustain and prolong the experience of otherness, to resist the temptation to close down the uncertain meanings and feelings that are being evoked" (J.M. Coetzee 40). In *The Fishermen* the allegorical and the non-allegorical dimensions go hand in hand: just as Ikenna blindly believes in Ikenna's prophecy or the children literally believe in their parents' proverbs, the reader, as if by magic, enters a world constructed by words that cannot be submitted to constative verification but in which s/he chooses to believe, which is after all what the literary experience is about. To the extent that this novel is about the future of Nigeria as a nation, this is a future in which language and stories will play a key role; a future, indeed, built by words.

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