

The spy master's style

John le Carré's fiction could be simultaneously old-fashioned and thoroughly modern, but what made it Le Carré-esque?

By William Boyd

The sudden and unexpected death of John Le Carré last month inevitably prompts an evaluation of the both the work and the man. There are more than two dozen novels, the most recent of which, *Agent Running in the Field*, was published in 2019, days before the author's 88th birthday. Given that his first novel, *Call for the Dead*, was published in 1961, his longevity and productivity as a novelist – close to 60 years – is both remarkable and astonishing.

Therefore it is perhaps an opportune moment to analyse just what it is about his style that makes the prose so “Le Carré-esque”. What is it about the way this writer writes that is *sui generis*? This analysis will have nothing to do with the seriousness of the themes that Le Carré tackles in his novels, or his near single-handed rebooting of the spy genre, or his position as one of our most significant and highly regarded contemporary novelists. It is, rather, an attempt to pin down what we might call his particular tone of voice; an endeavour to answer the question: is there a Le Carré mode of expression that is uniquely his? In trying to answer this question I propose to look at two novels separated by three and a half decades. *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977) and *A Delicate Truth* (2013), both classic novels of espionage, one set during the Cold War and one altogether more contemporary, to see if we can discern any common factors and repeated traits.

There are other similarities in that both novels feature protagonists that might be termed “outsiders”, and both, while they elaborate their complex narratives of espionage, examine ideas of Englishness. English

ideas of class and class-consciousness lurk beneath the surface of many of Le Carré's novels – indeed, apart from espionage, class and its ramifications might be cited as another defining feature of his work.

Le Carré's obsession with the subject can be explained by his own unusual upbringing, which he candidly documented in his memoir *The Pigeon Tunnel*. He wrote there that, “Englishmen... are branded on the tongue” and he documents his own class transformation and progression through his privileged education at private school (Sherborne) and Oxford University. This education allowed him to “jump” classes, becoming educated middle-class and leaving his lower-class father – a jailed felon, philanderer and a bankrupt as well as a sometime millionaire – marooned on the other side of the class barrier, unable to join his son. On another more profound and non-autobiographical level, Le Carré understands that almost everything about the English, and therefore the British, has a class element attached to it and may be analysed through a class-lens. It can be a very revealing picture.

Omniscience

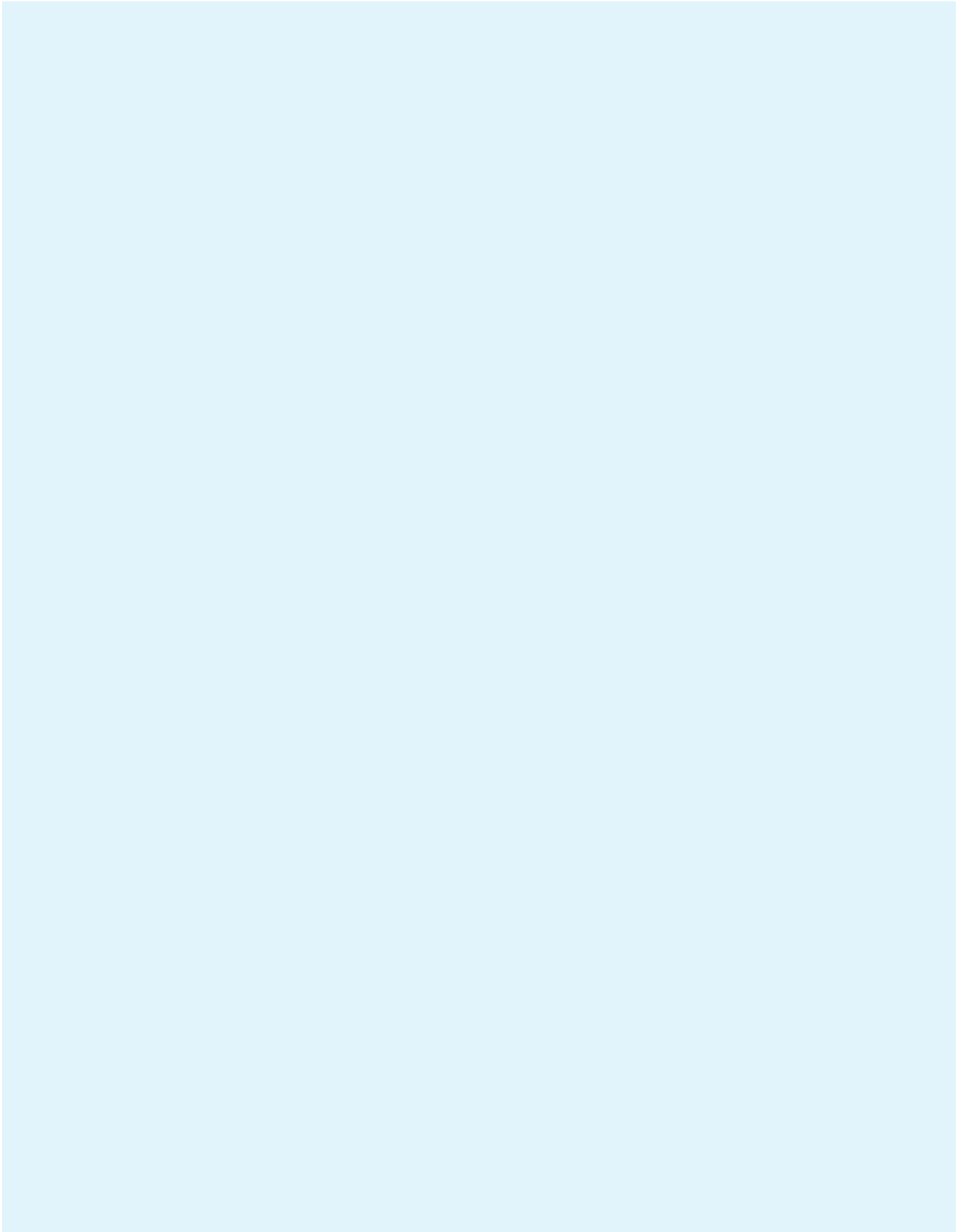
In analysing any novel – in stripping it down to reveal its working parts – the first question to ask yourself is: what is the point of view? It's usually instantly revealed by the choice of pronoun – first person singular or third. But point of view can be more subtle. It can shift from first to third (and occasionally second) and back again. It can be objective and restricted. Or it can be omniscient.

The omniscient narrator was the staple of the great 19th-century British novelists – Austen, Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray – where the authorial presence in the novel, the guiding hand and decision-maker, was overtly revealed. The reader was even occasionally addressed directly – the “Dear Reader” trope – or the author broke away from the novel to add some personal, political or social observation: the “apostrophe”, as it's known. It is a far rarer narrative form today, however, and because of its heritage it can, when chosen, give an unwitting old-fashioned tone to the prose.

Le Carré would reject the advice given by those two great originators of the modern novel, Gustave Flaubert and James Joyce, that the novelist should remain “invisible, refined out of existence” (Joyce), or, “like God in the universe, present everywhere but visible nowhere” (Flaubert). Le Carré, by contrast, is visible on almost every page.

Both *The Honourable Schoolboy* and *A Delicate Truth* deploy omniscient narrators. Interestingly, omniscience is virtually Le Carré's default form of narrative method and he will even resort to Dickensian apostrophising, from time to time. Without doubt, the subliminal effect of hearing the authorial voice in a Le Carré novel is perhaps the most signal feature of his style. For example, this is how *A Delicate Truth* begins:

On the second floor of a characterless hotel in the British crown Colony of Gibraltar, a lithe, agile man in his late fifties restlessly paced his bedroom... Certainly it would not have occurred to many people, even in their most fanciful dreams, that he was a middle-ranking ▶



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Caption single line in here

British civil servant... dispatched on a top-secret mission of acute sensitivity.

The opening of this 21st-century novel could have been written in the 19th. The omniscient narrator informs the reader of the key fact on page one: the “top-secret mission of acute sensitivity”. It is a confident, almost brazen, rupturing of the modern literary injunction to “show, not tell”. John Le Carré is telling us this story, not showing it, and he has all the information.

And here lies another narrative problem, especially in an espionage novel. If you choose the omniscient form, if you comment directly to the reader, then the act of deliberately withholding information becomes a form of literary subterfuge, at best; malpractice, at worst. In theory, you cannot have your cake and eat it when you use omniscience – particularly in a genre like the spy novel where obfuscation, bafflement and mystery are key to the success of the novel. But Le Carré does have his cake and eats it all the time. He will tell you the facts he wants you to know and then he will deliberately withhold information. A significant part of the famous complexity of Le Carré’s fiction comes from the adroit manipulation of these double standards.

One instance will have to suffice. In *The Honourable Schoolboy* there is a classic example of this withholding technique. Half way through this long novel (by far Le Carré’s longest) George Smiley receives a report from an agent named Craw about a key target’s movements in and out of mainland China. This report gives Smiley “a rare

This is a genuine Le Carré device – almost his trademark. The immediate consequence of this is that readers feel a bit stupid; they urge themselves to pay more attention; to read more closely – but there’s nothing they can do. In fact Le Carré, if he is to play by the strict rules of omniscient narration, shouldn’t be indulging in this. He could easily tell us what the significance of Craw’s report is, but in this instance he chooses not to. This pointed withholding is an illicit trick, in literary terms, but very, very effective in a novel of espionage. “God” in this instance is the novelist, and Le Carré has just cut the lines of communication.

Dialogue and monologue

On the whole Le Carré writes exceptionally good dialogue. His ear is acute, especially for the nuances and verbal mannerisms of the English middle- and upper-classes. He gets their phraseology, their clipped innuendos, absolutely perfectly. An example from *A Delicate Truth*:

“There’s a creep around called Crispin,” Matti murmurs under the clamour.
“Ever heard of him?” “No.” “Well, I haven’t either, so I’ll thank you to remember that. Crispin. Dodgy bastard. Avoid.” “Any reason given?”
“Not specific.”

But he then undermines this marvellous facility in over-relying on monologue to convey information and exposition. He has characters speak for pages and pages – with

Le Carré’s ear is acute, especially for the nuances and mannerisms of the English middle- and upper-classes

moment of pleasure”. Clearly, Smiley has spotted a solution to a vital mystery.

“But don’t you see?” [Smiley] protested to Guillam... “Don’t you understand, Peter?” – shoving Craw’s dates under his nose... “Oh, you are a dunce.”
“I’m nothing of the kind,” Guillam retorted. “I just don’t happen to have a direct line to God, that’s all.”

Here is the situation. Le Carré, the novelist, knows the significance of Craw’s report – obviously. So does George Smiley, a character in the novel. But Peter Guillam, another character, doesn’t know. And, of course, neither does the reader. This feeling of not wholly understanding what’s going on, of missing the point, is something Le Carré finesses regularly, with great skill.

the odd interpolation from listeners. In the middle of *The Honourable Schoolboy* there is a 20-page sequence of monologue with interjections – between the characters Di Salis, Hibbert and Connie Sachs – that could have been achieved by a few paragraphs of reported speech. It’s heavy going. Nobody really converses in this way. In the world of American TV soap-operas, overt narrative exposition in monologue and dialogue is known as “laying pipe”. Le Carré uses monologue to “lay pipe” time and again, seemingly reluctant to turn to the handy ready-made device of reported speech. It is almost as if he’s become enamoured of the speaking voices of his characters and is happy to give them too much free rein, let them rabbit on for pages.

Action

There’s usually very little action in a Le Carré novel. The narrative is cerebral, intellectual. People in rooms, meeting, talking, thinking. Conflicts that are all subtext, implicit. In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, however, there is a splendid action sequence in Cambodia that almost hints at another Le Carré. Jerry Westerby – the “Schoolboy” of the title – gets caught in a firefight:

Ahead of them, Jerry could hear the sound of automatic fire, M16s and AK47s mixed. A jeep raced at them out of the trees, and at the last second veered, banging and tripping over the ruts. At the same moment the sunshine went out. Till now they had accepted it as their right, a liquid, vivid light washed by the rainstorms. This was March and... this was Cambodia, where war, like cricket, was played in decent weather. But now black clouds collected, the trees closed round them like winter and the wooden houses pulled into the dark.

The combination of the terseness and the precision of the word choice – “banging and tripping”, “a liquid, vivid light washed by the rainstorms” – makes one wish there were more action sequences in the novels. Clearly, Le Carré could write them very well.

Whimsy

Elsewhere, I have described whimsy as the “English disease”. It is often present in attempts at comedy: issues of sentimentality, smugness, over-elaboration – going for the easy, knowing laugh – define it. Le Carré has a tendency to lapse into it, or something close to it, from time to time, and it can colour his prose as much as complex allusiveness does.

In Le Carré’s case this form of humour edges into what I would call “pantomime”, where the mood becomes over-the-top, fantastical and unlikely, often indicated by over-writing. In *Schoolboy*, Jerry Westerby and his mother are going through some family papers late one night and find a copy of his late father’s will.

“Bit of a turn-up that one,” Jerry muttered uncomfortably, when it was too late to re-bury the envelope in the mountain [of documents]. “Reckon we could bung it down the old what-not, don’t you, sport?”

Her boot-button eyes glowed furiously.

“Aloud,” she ordered, in a booming theatrical voice...

Boot-button eyes glow furiously. Le Carré’s mimicking of Jerry’s dated clubman’s

everyone around you was flogging *arms*, you were peddling raw *intelligence*: straight from the shelf, direct to *buyer*. No stops between. *Unspun*, *untested*, *unpasteurised* and above all untouched by bureaucratic hands. . .”

There are nine italicised words in that paragraph. It’s not untypical of the way Le Carré uses emphasis.

3 Rhetorical questions. Le Carré will often provide a list, a volley of unanswered questions. This is also part of his skilful obfuscation technique. The reader is powerless to provide answers as the questions accumulate and feels very much in the dark, suffering from helpless ignorance. But it is done too frequently simply to achieve that discomfort. It is almost as if Le Carré is improvising the narrative, himself, waiting for events to unfold, for answers to be revealed. Which of course he isn’t. For example, from *A Delicate Truth*:

But why had Kit’s otherwise fairly well-regulated instincts gone into anarchic, totally irrational denial? And why did the name Jeb, now that he consented to acknowledge it, strike him as the most outrageous, the most irresponsible breach of the Official Secrets Act that had ever crossed his desk?

And this from *Schoolboy*:

There remains the mystery of the telephone transcripts. Did Jerry ring Lizzie from the Constellation or not? And if he did ring her, did he mean to talk to her, or only to listen to her voice? And if he intended to talk to her, then what did he propose to say? Or was the very act of making the phone call . . . in itself sufficient catharsis to hold him back from the reality?

These questions are all posed by the omniscient narrator. To which, once again, only he has the answers. A paradox.

4 Staccato. Le Carré will often leave out words in a sentence. Sometimes this is for suspense reasons – the pace quickens. Sometimes it is a useful narrative shorthand. Here are examples from one page of *A Delicate Truth*:

“Preparatory honking of ministerial throat.”

“Squeak of leather as he lowers himself into his executive throne.”

“Footsteps approaching, faint but getting louder. Party the first is arriving.”

“The footsteps approaching the anteroom. One pair only. Hard soles. Leisured, nothing stealthy.”

This device – like the italics – seems to be increasing in late Le Carré. ▶

Caption to in here

dialogue adds to the pantomime effect. The tone becomes arch, a bit bogus. But the same tone is present in *A Delicate Truth*:

“Happy as a sandboy, Elliot. Couldn’t be happier. Totally out of my element, whole thing like a dream, but with you all the way.” But then, noticing that Elliot looks a bit put out and fearing that the briefing he is about to receive will kick off on a bad note, he goes for a bit of bonding.

“So where does a highly qualified chap like you fit into the scheme of things, if I may ask without being intrusive, Elliot?”

It may be argued that this is the way the English mandarin class speak and think, but the tone is widespread in Le Carré’s work. This Pall Mall clubman’s patois – a characteristic of his dialogue – also appears in the *mise en scène*. There is a familiar, conversational aspect to the prose in these passages that makes them occasionally verge on cliché, with characters served up from central casting. Stubbs, in *Schoolboy*, is representative:

Pressmen, like other travelling people, make the same mess everywhere and Stubbs, as the group’s managing director, was no exception. His desk was littered with tea-stained proofs and ink-stained cups and the remains of a ham sandwich that had died of old age. . . Stubbs made all the weary jokes about editors come true. He was a resentful man with heavy grey jowls and heavy eyelids that looked as if they had been rubbed with soot.

Advertising a portrait as a cliché doesn’t

save it from cliché. This is not so much reach-me-down Dickens as JB Priestley. It’s in passages like this that Le Carré’s normally bright eye dims.

Tics

All writers have their foibles, devices and mannerisms, favourite words, tricks of the trade. Here are some of Le Carré’s.

1 He tries not to use “he said”, “she said” all the time as if reluctant to employ something so prosaic. In the example above we can see a “muttered uncomfortably” and a “she ordered”. Here are examples taken at random from both novels: “asks sociably”, “they announce”, “he continued affably”, “Guillam cried”, “he remarked”, “she hissed”, “cried involuntarily”, “she whispered”, “Lacon pursued”. And so on. People bawl, murmur, repeat, growl, intone, mutter, retort, demand, yell, drawl, insist and protest as if there is some injunction against the efficient verb “to say”.

2 Use of italics for emphasis in dialogue. The employment of this device has increased considerably over time based on the evidence of these two novels. It’s a reflection of Le Carré’s excellent ear, of course; his urge to reproduce the cadences of an individual voice. But it is so current in *A Delicate Truth* as to become intrusive. For example:

“I’ll tell you what you *did*,” you evil man,” – as if Toby himself is Crispin, now – “you set up your own *spy shop*. Right there inside the ministry. While

All these elements contribute to the Le Carré style: that vivid fingerprint, that tone of voice that so characterises his novels. And it is very much a “voice” because of the favoured technique of omniscient narration. In a Le Carré novel, you are almost always aware of the author’s voice – or that of his chosen narrator – in your ear. But there are larger issues other than technical ones that contribute to the Le Carré-esque.

There is a worldly cynicism about the way nations and their security apparatus work. The focus on betrayal, while a preoccupation of the espionage novel genre, is particularly intense in Le Carré’s work, probably because he himself was in the British secret service at the time of the devastating revelations of Kim Philby’s role as a Soviet master-spy. Philby’s long shadow darkens Le Carré’s greatest novels. Furthermore there is an underlying theme that human emotion (usually love) is often the factor – the flaw in the spy – that brings about tragedy or fatality. This is true of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *The Honourable Schoolboy*. The human factor is often the immovable spanner in the works of the intelligence machine. These great themes in the Le Carré canon elevate the novels.

Henry James described the novel as a “loose, baggy monster”. By this he meant that the form was unbelievably generous: it contained multitudes and could accommodate just about any variety of novel, and still function as the best means we have – the best art-form – for trying to understand the human condition.

Le Carré is a particularly interesting example of this generosity. He can be defined as a strange mixture of oppositions. He’s at once old-fashioned and highly sophisticated. He is an accomplished writer of eloquent prose who flouts the basic rules of narrative method. He is a hugely successful novelist who sometimes writes as if he is unaware of how a novel’s moving parts intersect. He is a masterful plotter who also uses a conscious, feigned ignorance of his own plots in order to deliberately baffle and confuse the reader.

The novels are – in purely literary terms – eccentric. Slightly unwieldy 19th-century narrative methods conjoin with a modern, shrewd and complicated intellectual understanding of how the world and its denizens work. Paradoxically, this unique, Le Carré eccentricity, this crucial tension between literary method and world-view, may explain something of the secret of his novels’ real value – and what makes them memorable. Now that the Le Carré canon has reached its end this factor may be the vital contribution to the great novels’ enduring renown.

William’s Boyd’s most recent novel is “Trio” (Viking)

THE NS POEM

Revolution

Ben Okri

they live as if everything
is settled in the world.
but nothing is settled.
not our dreams, nor our fears,
nor the boundary between things.
the land isn’t settled, nor the realm of sleep.
nor the deep mines where our fathers weep.
nor the deep wells where
mothers call out our names.
those walls of steel never kept out
the eyes of hunger that wander the world
like thunder. those stony eyes that devour
the poor with a cold gaze,
those tower blocks, those men who live
on dust and sleep on stones,
those mothers with their teeth
falling out from mercury in their food,
those children whose lungs will
not carry them through life
what do they know of boundaries,
what do they know of the gods
of the street, the gods of hunger.

nothing is settled. not our place
in the world nor our place among the dead.
the rich have not locked up all the dreams
or the power that grows in rage.
generations live on dust and debris
and are pale as ghosts but the god
of hunger powers their bodies with the secret
electricity that drives galaxies.
on the city’s edge they swell and grow.
their only education is the text of truth
which the world delivers without humour.

nothing is settled. those who think they will
inherit the earth because they’ve mortgaged
the sun will find on the eve of their usurpation
that the grim horsemen are on the horizon.
the earth shifts and howls. the sands have
turned into people. the graves speak
lucid prophecies. there’s nothing
to inherit, because nothing is settled,
except the thunder after sleep.

Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist. His latest book of poems, *A Fire In My Head*, is published by Head of Zeus.