Art is a Journey
Metaphor in Ben Okri’s *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love*

‘I’m like a painter that’s got so many hidden secrets’, Ben Okri once said about himself in an interview. This observation was meant to underline the fact that his work contained ‘details, many of which you are not going to see the first three times you read it’ (2012a: 106). But anyone acquainted with the Nigerian author’s writing will recognize the wider significance of the comparison too. The connections between Okri’s work and the art of painting are indeed numerous. To cite but a few, his 2002 novel, *In Arcadia*, features as a central motif Nicolas Poussin’s oil on canvas *Les Bergers d’Arcadie*, an image used as a stepping-stone to the exploration of wider themes such as man’s everlasting quest for happiness. His 2012 collection of poems *Wild* contains a piece written ‘After Velasquez’ (2012b: 75), which more specifically muses on the Spanish artist’s painting of Venus gazing into a mirror. Even more recently, in 2013, Okri wrote a poem entitled ‘Diallo’s Testament’, commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in London and inspired by William Hoare’s painting of the former slave Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (Okri, 2013).

Long before all these achievements, at the age of 14, the young Ben Okri took a piece of paper and painstakingly attempted to draw the objects found on the mantelpiece at his family home. Once he had finished the drawing, he wrote a poem. He comments: ‘I looked at the drawing and it was terrible and I read the poem and it was alright. And that day I decided I was going to be a writer rather than a painter’ (2011a). A decisive choice was made then, but it was only a few years before the two art forms met again in Okri’s creative quest, in the shape of his second novel, *The Landscapes Within* (1981),
which focused on the life and artistic aspirations of Omovo, a young painter residing in Lagos. To the author, this early book remained much like an unfinished sketch, which he decided to revisit by rewriting the narrative under the title *Dangerous Love* in 1996. In an ‘Author’s Note’ included at the end of this revised version, Okri expressed the hope that he had been able to ‘redeem’ his early work for, by his own admission, ‘[t]he many things [he] wanted to accomplish [in *The Landscapes Within*] were too ambitious for [his] craft at the time’ (1996: 325).

A superficial reading of the two novels rapidly shows that *Dangerous Love* is broadly similar to *The Landscapes Within* at the level of the plot: the characters involved are the same, and the chronology of events is almost identical. More thorough comparative analyses have revealed that the fundamental differences between the two books more markedly lie in the addition or recasting of certain statements made by the narrator or the characters, in the precision of some theoretical considerations about art, and in the protagonist’s awareness of his social responsibility as an artist (see e.g. Costantini, 2002: 95–126; 2005; Fraser, 2002: 30–6; Tunca, 2004; O’Connor, 2008: 38–49). Importantly, however, the significance of the rewritten opus lies not only in these conspicuous changes, but also in some ‘hidden secrets’ that need to be unearthed from the text. This chapter will revolve around one such concealed element, namely the use of metaphor in the two novels, and will be divided into three main parts. First, by way of introduction, I will outline some of the significant changes that have taken place between *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love*, starting with the books’ titles, so as to contextualize the points to be raised later. Then, moving on to the central, stylistic section of the chapter, I will briefly introduce conceptual metaphor theory, on which the linguistic part of the analysis will rely, and which is generally acknowledged to be ‘the most influential and widely used theory of metaphor’ today (Kövecses, 2010: vii). I will undertake a comparative study of specific metaphors in the two novels and show how, while the books share common ground, the second version exploits the device more creatively, and more consistently, than the first. Following this, I will attempt to demonstrate that the variations in Okri’s treatment of metaphor bear considerable relevance to the understanding of a major theme in the novels: the conceptualization of the artistic process. In the final part of the study, I will try to build on these findings and consider how the