

## Review Article

# *Wilson Harris: Writing Against the Grain*

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TWO RECENT COMPILATIONS supply what may be regarded, respectively, as the distillation of Wilson Harris's thought and art and of the critical responses of an élite corps of Harrisians, devotees, and unravellers of his works during the years 1969-90. *The Radical Imagination* gathers his lectures and talks in the years 1989-91, including his Smuts Memorial Fund Commonwealth lectures at the University of Cambridge in 1990, "Cross-Cultural Crisis: Imagery, Language and the Intuitive Imagination." *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination*, whose purpose is to laud him on his 70th birthday in 1991, is both fittingly celebrating and, in parts, bracingly critical. Together, these volumes provide occasion, as Harris's work has constantly done, for re-evaluating the possibilities of literary creation.

Towards the close of his first Smuts lecture, "The Fabric of the Imagination," Harris writes:

When the human animal understands his genius, he roots it in the creature, in the forest, in the trees, in other words in the language which we *are* and which we acquired, not only from our mother's lips but also from the sound of the rain falling, from the sigh of the leaves, from the music of the earth as we pressed on it, what crackled under our feet. All those sounds are threaded into the language of the imagination that incarnates or realises itself through diverse cradles into the birth and mystery of creativity. And that is what you have there—the fossil, and the presence. (*Radical Imagination* 78)

Progressive realism, driven by technology, urbanized, has lost touch with this "genius." Harris has not: he discovered it in the heartland of Guyana and it remains with him. When he speaks, as he does *verbatim* in the lectures and interviews printed in these volumes, an integral world is re-created (although the printed

page cannot capture the magic of his speech, often spun from a mere card of notes, for an hour's seamless re-visioning of cross-cultural connections).<sup>2</sup> The speech, the presence, cast a spell, as does each densely wrought novel, each "a quest for original value, original spirit, in a dangerous world" (*Infinite Rehearsal* 17).

Ever since the self-consciously sacerdotal Arnoldian critic came into being, to mitigate the recession of the transcendent, we have sought salvation in the scripture of our literature. A renewal of spiritual vision is, if not impossible, extremely difficult, as T. S. Eliot taught; and Harris treads in the prints of "one of the truly great poets of the century" (*Radical Imagination* 75), re-allegorizing Dante (most explicitly in *Carnival*), the seer Tiresias, the sacred wood, re-assembling the waste land's fragments, but he goes further. Eliot's vision was edited, exclusive: Harris attempts the utmost inclusiveness, "a quantum immediacy" (*Radical Imagination* 81), in his cross-culturalism differing most conspicuously from an Eliot who feared diversity, Eurocentric despite the Asiatic gestures of "What the Thunder Said." Harris's religious, intuitive, inspirational sense is stronger—a veritable Tiresias, who is no mere trope in a fiction [that] fictionalizes author and characters alike" (*Infinite Rehearsal* 48).

For those who cling to Arnoldian positivism, in some sense, Harris champions a "therapeutic" art directed against not only the determinism of "progressive realism" and its "linear bias" (*Radical Imagination* 72) but the "betrayal" (22) of the "post-modernist game" (58) or "nihilism" (Maes-Jelinek 47), which denies "reality" depth and even its very existence. Again, like Eliot, he embraces tradition, but from a perspective more relevant to our time. His stress is upon uncovering the "common inheritance" (*Radical Imagination* 12) discernible in "a language riddled with the colonial legacy" (14), beneath which and infusing which is the "world's unconscious" (25), a phrase he prefers to the maligned "universal," although he is not afraid to use that word. As it is imperative for those who claim the imperial language as their own to acknowledge its abuse, so must those who resent its imposition go beyond cries of "self-righteous deprivation" (*Radical Imagination* 36, 99) to collaborate in a "continually regenerative hybridisation" (13).

On so many issues that perturb us, Harris speaks, as a critic, finely and justly: Stephen Slemon rightly comments, at the close of a tightly argued contribution on Harris's deconstruction of "realism," on "the enormous importance of the *questions* that his writing so consistently seeks to address" (Maes-Jelinek 82), urging that we pay the criticism no less intense attention than that which the works receive. Our rape of nature, our massive pollution, cannot be corrected merely by technological "adjustment" (*Radical Imagination* 73), if at all; our abuse of de-sacralized animal life is a break with a long past in which we saw ourselves, with some humility, as the human animal. Where do such recognitions lead us?

Harris's vision is animated by "religious hope" (*Radical Imagination* 58), a hope grounded "in the imagination, in creativity and in the intuitive element in human beings" (102). His quests are purposeful, like Bunyan's or Dante's, inspired like Blake's, his intuitive theatre of the imagination rehearses its dramas, not only "of humanity" but also "of divinity" (*Infinite Rehearsal* vii). His first novel closes in what he hoped was "a kind of Christian epiphany" (Harris, Interview 103). We are engaged, in seeking to understand him, not only in the kind of fascinating academic exegeses gathered in the *Festschrift*, but in the pursuit of ultimate meaning. The Guyanese Michael N. Jagessar, in his "Theological Perspective" upon *The Infinite Rehearsal*, observes: "It is important. . . to examine Harris's understanding of God" (Maes-Jelinek 225). He discerns in Harris an androgynous sense of God as involved in "a genuinely interdependent relationship" with the World "rather than a merely authoritarian one" (225). Inevitably, he associates God with such forces as that which "guide" da Silva's art (Harris, *Da Silva* 32), analogous to the claim Harris himself reiterates, that he is merely the agent of the text's "intention," "delegated by some mysterious power" (94). As Jagessar notes, few of Harris's critics, apart from Hena Maes-Jelinek, have paid this aspect much attention; yet it seems absolutely central: Harris is a religious visionary. This is at the core of his work. A clearer statement of this may be found outside these two collections, in the affirmation of religious "hope" we find in "Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View," where his crucial question is

how to perceive through the lineaments of a terrifying global masquerade some other caring presence, some measure of hope and ecstasy. . . . Herein lies the annunciation of the deepest, carnival comedy, the comedy of the divine. The angel that brings good news, news that we can scarcely bear and digest, news of an Incarnation that seems impossible and absurd, news of immeasurable hope and joy, provokes a response in masks of terror. (139)<sup>3</sup>

This is not the stance of the “modern” as we understand it, that places at best an anguished stress upon the loss of God, as George Steiner, in his *Real Presences*, where he re-asserts art’s access to transcendent insight, suggests: “It is this absent ‘thereness,’ in the death-camps, in the laying waste of a grimed planet, which is articulate in the master-texts of our age. It lies in Kafka’s parables, in the viewings of Golgotha in Beckett’s *Endgame*, in the Psalms to No-one of Paul Celan” (230). The most that a quintessential (post)modern philosophical novelist, Milan Kundera, dares claim for fiction is “the wisdom of uncertainty” (*Art* 7) upon a “planet . . . moving through the void without any master” (41). Nor is Kundera’s form or quest simplistic, straitened by the linear realism Harris rejects: it is dense, meditative, exploratory, “an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become” (26), with resilient wit—“not,” to quote Steiner again, “at peace in a sceptical rationality” (229). Kundera, understanding what we have lost, comprehends also our yearning for the absent “weight” of significant history or revealed truth.

Does Harris, by contrast, draw us out of disgust with our deterministic disillusion, our nostalgic wish for a lost holistic vision? Is Harris’s imagination, in this respect, seductively conservative? How, it may be demanded, can Dantesque allegorical strategies, oblique and opaque, address the problems of our “tormented age” (Harris, *Radical Imagination* 110)? How can the “genesis of love” (111) Harris adumbrates relate to “the army of humanity” (111) living in the Inferno? What claims to this end may confidently be made by the materially comfortable First World critic (or writer)? Immune from material deprivation, does he resolve the infernal dilemma in the self-gratifying realm of the imagination? Perhaps so, but one does not suspect this of Harris himself:

We have to face the fact that we live in a tormented age and that there are many who are buried in famine or who are buried in various kinds

of distress. . . . we cannot ignore the fact that these exist, whatever may be our own situation, our security. (*Radical Imagination* 110)

Harris faces it, undoubtedly; in answering a questioner after his lecture "Originality and Tradition" at Liège (1991), he confesses to feeling "almost total despair" in thinking of the Holocaust (132). Yet such an event, doubtless a contributory cause of the "pervasive and uniform despair" (Maes-Jelinek 30; Harris, *Radical Imagination* 124) he resists, can only be overcome—at least to the extent that it may be seen as "partial," not total human reality—with the aid of "some mysterious power" or "stranger." Potentially, we are all, he affirms, "Vicars of Truth" (*Radical Imagination* 94), agents of a pervasive, counteracting love that unites us, or would, if we had faith enough: this has been a constant concern since *Palace of the Peacock*, where Donne experiences "a terrifying vision of his incapacity to exercise love in an age of conquest" (Harris, "Comedy" 129).

"We must love one another or die"—these famous words from "September 1, 1939" came to embarrass Auden, and he repudiated them. One wonders how many Harrisians could put into practice what Harris really urges. We are on safer contemporary ground with intellectual argument and pleas for tolerance and mutual understanding, such as the moderate E. M. Forster advocated when he wrote, "We are all of us mongrels, dark haired and light haired, who must learn not to bite one another" (31). Harris demands much more, but can be followed to differing levels. In a lively essay, "Sustaining the Vision: Wilson Harris and the Uncompromising Imagination," the Guyanese critic Desmond Hamlet draws attention to Harris's singular, urgent preoccupation, since *Da Silva Da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, with our need to nurture the cross-cultural imagination, "to convert rooted deprivation into complex parables of freedom and truth" (*Harris, The Womb of Space* 137). In this endeavour Harris has focussed upon colonial deprivation in Central and South America and the Caribbean, upon those regions' violent historical commerce with Europe, seeking to dissolve biases of domination and deprivation in a visionary, imaginative expedition. He attests that a "healthy and creative conflict sometimes erupts in me between my South American/Caribbean roots and the sensation

of being European" (Maes-Jelinek 47)—a rare sensation that, in our time, "Third World" writers are liable to judge heretical. By implication, the huge, impossible "burden" Harris's effort entails must be shared and extended, involving Yeats's "Asiatic immensities" (Harris was repelled by Raja Rao's attachment to karma) and the torn continent of Africa; and what of the growing empire of Islam, which persecutes difference, arguably the most threatening example of "the moribund principle" of an "absolute regime" (*Carnival* 14)? While we may find kin to Harris in such Caribbean writers as Derek Walcott and Latin American magic realists such as Carpentier, or in Toni Morrison of the United States, or in Australia's Patrick White and New Zealand's Janet Frame, the difficulty of working "against the grain" of the time (*Radical Imagination* 131) was perfectly illustrated by Harris's disagreement with Chinua Achebe over the significance of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Harris's "The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," reacting to Achebe's indictment of Conrad as a "bloody racist" in "An Image of Africa," rebukes a writer, with whom he nevertheless deeply sympathizes, for his failure to look beyond the colonial hurt and envision "the crucial parody of the proprieties of established order that mask corruption in all societies, black and white" (88-89).<sup>4</sup> Conversely, in "Comedy and Modern Allegory," Harris asserts—what he has practised in his recent fiction—that "Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe are as much the heritage of black men and women as of white men and women because the triggers of conflicting tradition—whether Dante's Virgil, Shakespeare's Caliban, or Goethe's Faust—lie in, and need to be reactivated through, the cross-cultural psyche of humanity . . ." (137).<sup>5</sup> Yet if an Achebe cannot rise to the cross-cultural vision, what is the price of that vision against discourse dominated by Said's *Orientalism* or such intelligent but, in Harris's terms, "partial" exercises in Western self-flagellation as Robert Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*? This study, correctly postcolonial, does not even glance at cross-culturalism or, for that matter, such writers as Harris, Achebe, and Conrad. Postmodernly, although its author teaches English at Oxford, it privileges theory and feeds upon theoretical texts, ignoring the

insights and intuitions of contemporary imaginative literature. Young's study subscribes typically to the First World academic obsession pinpointed by Mark Williams and Alan Riach in their refreshing "Reading Wilson Harris" as "a Manichean view of social experience in which colonialism and its legacy is [*sic*] utterly evil and all those who are in some ways victims of this legacy are wholly righteous" (Maes-Jelinek 52). Gareth Griffiths, in "Wilson Harris and Caribbean Criticism," deplors the focus in postcolonial criticism on academic theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha at the expense of ignoring writer-critics such as Harris, Walcott, Soyinka, and Awoonor (Maes-Jelinek 69).

I have attempted to concentrate here upon Harris's status and work as a critic (which Stephen Slemon urges the *Festschrift* should "also" celebrate): indeed, considering the notorious "difficulty" of his fiction, his criticism may be or may become the principal source of his influence, combined perhaps with those critiques, such as Maes-Jelinek's, that most lucidly elicit the meaning and purpose of his creative work.<sup>6</sup> However this may be, Harris's cross-cultural leadership is an example of salutary integrity and courageous independence. His underlying belief that "if language is simply a man-made story, we are doomed, we are lost" (*Radical Imagination* 26), whether one shares it or not, does not detract from that example.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See *The Radical Imagination*, where in answer to a questioner Harris cites English novelists he admires "who have written against the grain" (131)—Golding, Peake, Woolf.
- <sup>2</sup> In a poem I contributed to the *Festschrift*, written after I met him and heard him address the Mysore Literary Society in 1978, on a hotel rooftop above a clamorous city, I paid tribute to this power.
- <sup>3</sup> Not very revealingly, Harris describes himself to Alan Riach as "a kind of Christian Gnostic" (*Radical Imagination* 57): this seems unlikely to signify adherence to any particular gnostic sect, but rather to express a conviction in Christian truth, centred upon Christ's paramount importance, with an openness to broader mythological rather than canonical modes of revelation.
- <sup>4</sup> This insight is shared, however, by Wole Soyinka, whose play "A Dance of the Forests" (1960) exposes black corruption, of both present and past, recognizing the endemic slavery already entrenched in the medieval despotisms of his own Yorubaland, as it was in Dahomey and Ashanti. To glorify those black empires would be inconsistent with righteous denunciation of their white successors. Harris's reiterated stress on the dangers of expressing "righteous deprivation"

- makes it inappropriate to align him too closely with "oppositional voices." (Cf. *Decolonising Fictions*, 28-33).
- <sup>5</sup> Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and Goethe's *Faust* are "re-written" in the trilogy *Carnival* (1985), *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987), and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990); epigraphs from Homer and Goethe occur in his earliest work, with some Homeric poems set in Guyana, in the privately printed poems *Eternity to Season* (1954; rpt. New Beacon Books, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> Citing Slemmon's view, Brydon and Tiffin see Harris's "novels" as "the finest example" of a Caribbean writer "[transgressing] the boundaries between the discourses of the 'literary' and the theoretical-critical" (*Decolonising Fictions* 145). This may be viewed differently: A. J. Seymour, introducing the original edition of *Eternity to Season*, noted that a weakness of the style "may be the way the beauty of the imagery is overlaid by the flux of philosophical correlation" (54). This has been a recurrent feature of the fiction (with some exceptions) and one may ascribe it to Harris's critical urgency, even anxiety, to ensure his message is grasped.

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