Another Future for Post-Colonial Studies?:

Wilson Harris' Post-Colonial Philosophy and the 'Savage Mind'

Hena Maes-Jelinek

Wilson Harris often says that his criticism is a long extended footnote to his fiction. Footnotes cannot exist without the text they refer to, and their usual function is to throw a helpful though not indispensable light on it. Harris's comment makes it clear that, in his own mind at least, fiction is the more important genre he practices and that his criticism cannot be dissociated from it. Indeed, his critical writing has grown in the wake of, or in parallel with, his fiction; each new essay developing and making explicit concepts which, as Eliot commenting on Donne put it, have first been sensuously apprehended and experienced in his creative writing. In recent years, however, Harris's fiction and criticism have increasingly intertwined as his fiction was beginning to include discursive and meditative passages and his essays more frequently resorted to his own novels to provide metaphorical illustrations of abstract arguments. They are therefore complementary, mutually enlightening, and present together a profound and original analysis of the nature of colonialism and post-colonialism, their many insidious forms and their effects on the psyche of both colonized and colonizers as individuals and communities. It may be this emphasis on the deeper psychology of people(s) rather than commitment to a political ideology (though his writing does have a political dimension) which explains the comparatively small impact of his essays on academic criticism apart from a few exceptions. Significantly, Harris is not mentioned in the Williams and Chrisman Reader on Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory nor, judging from the announced table of contents, in the forthcoming Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature. He is altogether ignored by Edward Said, though he anticipates by some twenty years some of the analytical statements and recommendations in Culture and Imperialism.

Tradition, the Writer and Society (1967) remains a major formulation of Harris's continuing twofold concern with the eclipsed traditions of colonized peoples and the nature of fiction just as he expressed in that first small volume the correlation he saw between imperialism and the English realistic novel or, as he called it, the 'novel of persuasion', which he was later to associate with the 'Romantic certitudes of the nation-state'. It also offers one of the earliest definitions of a specifically West Indian sensibility to come out after Lamming's very different analysis in The Pleasures of Exile (1960), while it also lays the foundation of a Caribbean aesthetic (Rohlehr & Maes-Jelinek). Harris's obsession with the need to retrieve a buried native cultural tradition that is also the source of his perception of Caribbean man as 'the latent ground of old and new personalitics', takes many different forms and gradually became the rationale of all his later explorations of the imprints of conquest on post-colonial man in general. Apart from further investigating various aspects of tradition, the essays written between 1968 and 1981 and collected in Explorations (1981) analyse the nature of myth and, as I hope to show, its role as a dynamic agent of transformation.

The Womb of Space (1983) explores the deeper, in his eyes 'universal', cross-cultural resources of eclipsed tradition in order to stimulate and capture a ceaseless dialogue 'between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness'. One should note here that from his first formulations of cross-culturalism, Harris saw it as a mutuality not between different peoples and cultures in the modern world but between established or self-assertive people(s) and 'silent or eclipsed voices'. Quite unlike influential post-colonial critics who claim the right to appropriate Western intellectual models and their 'frame of power', especially in the field of theory in order to turn them against the West itself, Harris has drawn attention with unflinching constancy to the limitations and one-sidedness of Western intellectual approaches which developed from the enlightenment to the present-day. He deems their excessive rationalism incapable of apprehending the 'phenomenal legacy' (the silent Amerindian presence) of the conquered and the 'alternative realities' which may grow out of a genuine confrontation with the 'ruin' of their 'psychological premises'. His insistence on the importance of the 'intuitive archetypal imagination' superseded and discarded after the Renaissance is no nostalgia for cultural primitivism; nor am I suggesting that he penetrates the 'primitive' mind. Involvement with the Amerindian past, he says, is not an involvement with these Aborigines as such, but with the aboriginal fact of conquest, and through this with the perennial, essentially human or natural fact of obscure, sometimes catastrophic change. Nor does he idealize the Amerindian in a new version of the eighteenth-century 'good savage' but repeatedly warns against such an idealization.
which, just as much as the reduction of the primitive to a lower creature, confines him to a fallacious uniform model since we are not in a position to fathom his mind or motivations.13

The Guyanese critic Gordon Rohlehr writes that the ghost of [the] legacy of guilt, materialism, brutality and psychic crippledom [in plural, self-divided Guyana] cannot be laid by amnesia or evasion, but by confrontation and atonement, and since the crippledom exists within the psyche and has been maintained by ex-colonial peoples long after the physical withdrawal of the colonizers, then confrontation and atonement have to occur within the psyche.14 All Harris’s protagonists are immersed at one stage in ‘the terrifying legacies of the past’, an immersion at once concrete (the Guyanese interior), psychological and moral (the inner self) and creative (‘Interior of the Novel’). The ‘womb of space’ is Harris’s metaphor for the psyche as inner spatial ground of exploration, in which the dialectical relationship between so-called savage and so-called civilized is a way of restoring a psychological balance lost with the conquest. In contradistinction to the prevailing post-colonial need to assert a distinct, usually ‘national’ identity, contrary also to the human tendency to feel secure in stable homogeneous groups, the basic principle of Harris’s anti-colonialism and, more generally, of his philosophy of existence is his conviction that all human perceptions, positions, achievement of any kind or ‘images’ are ‘partial structures masquerading as totality’,15 while wholeness, even if it exists, remains inaccessible to man. Therefore will-to-power, any kind of sovereignty, hubris, or natural human tendency to consolidate material and immaterial hegemony whether through institutions, possessions or one-directional thought are necessarily inspired by an illusory and self-deceptive sense of superiority and assurance. Viewed in this light, colonialism holds sway over all human activities, and the only way to escape its strictures is by breaking down its homogeneous authoritarianism. This sounds commonplace enough in post-colonial criticism. What distinguishes Harris’s view from that of other post-colonial critics is that he does not discard one politically inspired world view for another, does not present man as a social and political being only but as also part of an unending natural and cosmic process of separation, reunion, interweaving or overlapping of fragments - not mere hybridity - which the disruption of uniformity or apparently stable plane of existence brings to light. It is important to keep in mind that all forms of life, physical and psychical, partake of that process to understand the two-way movement that informs the concept of creativity discussed in his essays and shaping his fiction: the ‘voyaging imagination’ travelling towards a reality whose very livingness makes it erupt of itself, ‘the sap of life ris[ing] anew’.16

In ‘The Quest for Form’ (1983) Harris presents his ‘philosophy’ as an ‘evolving metaphysic of the imagination’.17 rooted in his post-colonial vision. His conception of evolution (paradoxically synchronic rather than diachronic) is very different from Darwin’s theory of ‘remorseless progressions’,18 comparable to what he calls ‘progressive realism’ in both life and fiction. His own vision is of a ceaseless cyclical motion, an alternation of light and darkness or any kind of opposites, simultaneously involved in a transformative movement towards each other. There is no standing still, no ‘stasis of divine comedy of existence’.19 ‘Divine comedy’ naturally calls up Dante, whose work Harris greatly admires while also objecting to the persistence of his totalizing vision of eternity, part of the medieval context beyond which modern man should have moved. Eternity evokes both terror and beauty. It is an absolute and ‘implacable riddle since [it] is an extinction of birth and death in creative human terms’.20 The function of art is ‘to penetrate and make fissures in eternity’.21 This is where eternity and the idealistic face of colonialism come together since the latter is informed by a longing for infinity, a need to exercise tyranny ‘as insane continuity or lust for infinity - endless progression, endless logic that consumes and despoils’.22 The role of the imagination, both creative faculty and process, is to fissure a permanence sustained by that desire for an unchanging infinite in order ‘to transform “unbearable” heavens and hells’.23 To a static infinity Harris opposes a contrapuntal ceaselessly self-revising one, a counterpoint (a recurring concept in his essays) of variable images or other kinetic forms of art such as music. In The Four Banks of the River of Space the protagonist sculpts an Amerindian woodman in his ‘book of dreams’:

... it was authentic comedy or retrace of unimaginable genesis I sought ... to infuse into the arts of life as a moral counterpoint to civilisation’s addiction to technology.24 (italics mine)

Among the many essays Harris wrote on the nature of imagination, after 1982, as so many partial approaches to a faculty and process parallel with, and partaking of, the world in the making, two of them, similarly entitled 'The Fabric of the Imagination', and a third, 'The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination', explain a conceptualization of creativeness metaphorized in The Four Banks of the River of Space as Penelope’s weaving and unwaving of ‘the coat of tradition’,25 itself a metaphor for the surfacing of art from the experience of the lost. In keeping with his belief in the partiality of all structures and the inherent plurality at all levels of human nature and experience, the central dynamic informing Harris’s post-colonial philosophy and creative canvas could be summed up as ‘break up [whatever tends to solidify in institutional or intellectual activity] and re-vision’. Significantly, the first essay opens by stating that ‘fabric’ implies that ‘somewhere within the interstices of unrecorded
that only a lucid confrontation of the past, however abysmal,
conviction that no human experience is ever completely lost,
the sacred, a point I shall come back to presently. My intention
quotation also makes it clear that he associates the other with
partakes of the ceaselessly evolving existential movement and
can gradually alter its once catastrophic effect and shape a

Though it is not the subject of this essay, it is worth pointing
at this stage is to draw attention to the many corresponding or
or attempts to renounce) his authority as narrator and is
therefore a 'vessel'. 'The other and stranger god' in the above
(Quetzalcoatl’s emblematic figure of heaven and earth,
variegated human and animal Mexican sculptures) sustaining
visualizations of his internationalism and multi-racialism.
Increasingly outspoken in their criticism of nationalism, ethnic
purity and ‘cleansing’, his latest essays are also more insistently
on the need for contemporary man to integrate his natural and
aboriginal heritage into a vision of the future.

Harris sees this integration as one of the means to alter a
terrifying historical past and, in conjunction with it, the
perceiving consciousness. Alteration also derives in part from
a capacity to distinguish between the contrasting, though
apparently similar, possibilities arising in any given situation.
Among the examples he frequently puts forward is a
distinction between violence as an agent of destructiveness and
genenerative force, which may look alike as the sexual act of
the rapist resembles that of the genuine lover, as fire destroys
or purifies, or at a much further remove, an ambivalent deity
(creative/perverse) within ourselves impels us to respond
creatively to multifariousness in all men, ‘all species,
landscapes, riverscapes, skyscapes’ or, on the contrary,
consents to what he sees as socially organized incest in applied
ideologies of racial purity. Awareness of such dual
possibilities within each action or phenomenon enables the
discriminating consciousness to discover the other face of
catastrophe and the seed of renewal it contains. Catastrophe,
says Harris, ‘is part and parcel of the difficult transformation
of habits of power and fixtures of greed’. Hence the ‘re-
visionary potential’ in terrifying disruptions and his assertion
that ‘the reality of the abyss [is] a true goal to the psyche of
innovative imagination’.

In this re-visionary exploration of historical and
individual past Harris sees the need for ways of reading reality
that counter the hegemony of reason and the normally
accepted logic of causality, trusting to intuition, the senses,
images and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.

and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the
Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing
visions of his internationalism and multi-racialism.
emotions and motivations), towards the abyss (the ground of lost populations) as well as towards the sacred other and active archetypes in both universal and individual unconscious. It is thus also a mystical descent, one might say a mysticism in reverse towards inner transcendence, a 'transcendence within immanence', as opposed to a transcendence external to man and beyond his normal experience. But again, this descent would itself be in search of an infinite absolute were it not counterpointed by the emergence of the plural otherness ('strangers in the self') it seeks to meet, thereby transcending the limits of the individual self. Adumbrated in *Palace of the Peacock*, the pursuit of an invisible native presence and spiritual ancestry in the apparent void of Caribbean history has deepened, through an increasingly mythical and archetypal vision, into an attempted confrontation with the plural divinities - demonic and angelic - vying for precedence in man's unconscious.

This may be an inadequate (because linear and inevitably simplifying) way of describing a process which, even in his essays, Harris refuses to enclose within a 'logical' frame precisely because it resists a rational conceptual formulation and perpetually deconstructs, 'breaks down', a vision of the world which Western thinkers have generally assumed to be wholly intelligible, even though its origins and future remain unfathomable and science itself repeatedly revises its earlier 'partial' views. As opposed to modern Western philosophy, mythical thought is attuned to the natural and cosmic worlds, to their rhythms and metamorphoses. It captures forms of the subterranean tradition Harris repeatedly probes, which finds expression in what Lévi-Strauss calls a 'logic of sense perception' and a language of dynamic imagery. In his many essays on myth Harris avoids abstract definitions and makes a distinction between what he calls the mimicry of fact (history in its conventional sense) and the originality of myth. The one traditional feature of myth he pinpoints is creative capacity rather than mere narrative function to account for creation. However, he conceives of creativity as alteration rather than arousal out of nothingness unless that nothingness is also somethingness breaking into the world or into consciousness. Moreover, mythical thought ignores barriers between categories of being, animal, human, divine. Subject to the same 'partiality', imprisoning biases and creative potential specific to human perspectives, myth, for Harris, is both event and 'untamable force', a 'medium of transformation' through which the dialogue between unconscious psyche and conscious mind gives momentum to creativeness. It is his emphasis on myth as 'rooted in catastrophe' yet capable of altering it, which makes him read the limbo dance as a myth re-enacting the catastrophic dismemberment of slaves in the Middle Passage while re-activating resources of creativity as it bridges past experience in Africa with potential new being in the West Indies ("History, Fable and Myth"). Similarly, he interprets the ending of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the light of an Amerindian creation myth which tells of Arawaks pursued by Caribs and seeking refuge in a tree to which the Caribs then set fire, and the Arawaks are converted first into sparks, then into the Pleiades in the sky.

Harris thus finds in the mythical and archetypal imagination a way of coming to terms with the irrational forces which modern man tends to ignore or repress at his cost when they explode and destroy, as well as a means of altering these forces into a creative current. In his latest essays he denounces with increasing moral urgency new forms of violence and tyranny in the post-colonial era:

conflicts between genders, between races and cultures, between technology and nature, are looming more critically and terrifyingly perhaps than ever before within the frontiers of history and the traffic of refugees of body and spirit everywhere.

To understand the form recently taken by his plea for transformative renewal, one should remember the crucial role of women in his fiction as both abused, raped, subject to all kinds of violation, yet unique vessels of the seed of renewal, as the womb metaphor in all its applications (to the cosmos, nature, reality, space, time) clearly shows. Woman, however, is both a life-giving agent of compassion and cosmic love and a dread-inspiring death goddess. Interestingly, Harris sees the death goddess, the dreaded sirens and furies (revenge goddesses who in ancient mythology pursued the doers of unavenged crimes), as embodiments of the spirit of revenge which tears the world apart in horrendous conflicts. They appear in the popular mass media in such films as *Fatal Attraction, Black Widow* and *Play Misty for Me*, though these are not directly related to world conflicts but unwittingly express a similar 'revenge-syndrome nursed by those who see themselves as despoiled, raped or injured'. However, just as in his *Carnival Trilogy* the traditional face of Ulysses is broken into plural masks and generates a transmutation of implacable Homeric vengeance into a movement towards forgiveness, so dread-arousing female archetypes are broken and from killing goddesses turn into 'blessed furies' or vessels of cosmic love.

With the benefit of hindsight Harris himself sees the partly 'daemonic' old Arawak woman in *Palace of the Peacock* transfigured near the end into a blessed fury or, as he says of the Arawak virgin dressed in her hair, a 'broken virgin-archetype'. He also frequently recalls that after completing *Carnival* he came upon Norman O'Brown's *Love's Body* in which an ancient myth tells of 'the wanderings of the soul after death [as] pre-natal adventures, a journey by water in a ship which is itself a goddess, to the gates of rebirth'. The myth, he feels, validates retrospectively his own use of the ship metaphor, from *Palace* on, as the vessel of the 'voyaging imagination' as well as a composite image of the mother.
goddess, a protean figure equally susceptible of giving life as of manacling her offspring to her mast (body) in a paralysing embrace.

In his latest novel Jonestown the ship goddess blends with the virgin archetype into the 'virgin ship' in which the protagonist travels back and forth from his childhood and his mother's death in a Georgetown suburb to the actual Jonestown massacre in the Guayanese forest in November 1978. The massacre is one of the many climactic holocausts into which the colonialist spirit has degenerated in the twentieth century. Francisco Bone, who was one of Jones's followers, meditates on the possibility of translating the terrible violence unleashed by ideological absolutes into broken energizing sources of renewed imagination 'beyond all cults, or closures, or frames'.

Regeneration through Virgin Sirens.

How strange to entertain the regeneration of oneself through the furies one has long feared. How steeped has one been - without quite knowing it - in uncanny dread of the masks one's dead mother wears, or has worn, across centuries and generations, the mystical wilds or wildernesses, the mystical brides? How profound is the fall in one's faint body at the heart of Carnival, one's fall that breaks such charisma, one's fall into a new birth of consciousness?

NOTES

1. In spite of this allusion to Lévi-Strauss, I must point out that Harris dissociates himself from structuralism (Explorations, p.132). Nevertheless, there is an obvious affinity between some aspects of myth he describes and the Lévi-Strauss of Mythologiques.

2. e.g. 'Faulkner's Orphans', (Talk given at the South Bank Centre in London on 7 April 1994) & Letter to Hena Maes-Jelinek, (28 April 1996).


7. ibid. p.xix


9. For a comparison of Harris's critical views with post-modernism and post-colonialism, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Numinous Proportions": Wilson Harris's Alternative to All "Posts", in Past the Last Post, Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism, ed. by Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp.47-64


11. ibid p.99

12. ibid p.44

13. ibid p.44

14. Gordon Rohlehr, My Strangled City and Other Essays (Port-of-Spain, Longman Trinidad, 1992) p.10

15. Womb op cit p.50


18. ibid

19. ibid p.27

20. ibid p.22

21. ibid

22. ibid p.23

23. ibid p.26


25. ibid p.54

26. 'The Fabric of the Imagination' 1, in The Radical Imagination, Lectures and Talks , eds Alan Riach and Marc Williams (Université de Liège, L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1992)p.175


28. 'Fabric', op cit p.179

29. ibid p.176

30. ibid p.177

31. 'The Fabric of the Imagination' 2, in The Radical Imagination, Lectures and Talks, eds Alan Riach and Marc Williams (Université de Liège, L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1992)p.76

32. 'Profiles' p.79

33. see ibid

34. ibid p.80

35. ibid

36. Explorations op cit p.98

37. 'Fabric' 1, op cit p.181

38. 'Fabric' 2, op cit p.69

39. 'Profiles' p.83

40. Emmanuell Lévinas, Humanisme de l'autre homme (Paris, Fata Morgana, 1972), p.106; Luc Ferry, L'homme-Dieu ou le Sns de la Vie (Paris, Grasset,
42. *Explorations, op cit* p.100
43. *Explorations, op cit* p.125
44. *ibid*
45. *ibid* p.127
46. 'Apprenticeship to the Furies', forthcoming in *River City* (University of Memphis)p.10
47. *ibid* p.3
48. *ibid* p.9
50. Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London, Faber and Faber, 1996)p.8
51. *ibid* p.40

REFERENCES
HARRIS, Wilson:
*Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).
*Jonestown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)

'The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination',