

Fictional Breakthrough and the Unveiling of 'unspeakable rites' in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Wilson Harris's *Yurokon*

My intention in this paper is first to present and very briefly substantiate Wilson Harris's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, then move on to Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Harris's story *Yurokon* to show how these authors' treatment of cannibalism suggests a clear progress on Conrad's approach to primitive people.

Harris sees *Heart of Darkness* as an important landmark in the history of fiction because it moves towards a recognition of otherness that he deems an essential element in the modern novel. He thinks that a truly imaginative narrative must acknowledge the heterogeneous make-up of both individual and society. In his critical essays he often points to a connection between imperialism in life and in art and insists on the need to break down homogeneous and cultural monoliths to be genuinely creative. In 'The Phenomenal Legacy', for example, he writes that one must

enter upon those *alternative realities* ... which may lead to a new scale or illumination of the meaning of 'community'. Such a willingness to participate imaginatively borders upon a *confession of weakness*, and this, therefore, paradoxically, supplies the creative wisdom or potential to draw upon strange reserves and perspectives one would otherwise overlook or reject, detached as we feel we are within an *absolute* tower of strength (false tower of strength).¹

Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* does 'enter upon those alternative realities' and his discovery of them is paralleled with a 'confession of weakness', a

temporary acknowledgement of the white man's limitations and a crumbling of his self-assurance and sense of superiority. At the end of the novel, however, he agrees to sustain in Kurtz's *Intended* the 'absolute' and 'false tower of strength' he had so consistently undermined in the course of the narrative. Harris writes about it in an essay entitled 'The Complexity of Freedom':

Conrad's achievement ... in *Heart of Darkness* was to arrive upon a frontier of imagination which its doomed characters, obsessed with *nigredo* or blackness, never crossed. A frontier nevertheless that was an extraordinary achievement at the beginning of the twentieth century.²

Harris also points out that although Conrad 'break(s) with uniform prejudice' his novel is still 'shrouded by the conditions of his age and by the tool of narrative he had inherited from the English homogeneous novel of the 18th and 19th centuries'. Indeed Marlow's attitude to the Africans is not devoid of paternalism, though, on the whole, his alternative representation of blacks and whites makes for an almost systematic exposure of the shortcomings and deceptions of white civilization. Admittedly, Conrad has an evolutionary view of history which makes him see the African as the ancestor of so-called civilized man. On the other hand, he clearly suggests that civilization is largely a varnish hiding the darkness that subsists at the heart of all men.

Marlow's awareness that Africa and its peoples remain an enigma to him contrasts with the prejudices of the time and is an indication of his imaginative response to both. The most eloquent expression of it is to be found in his admiration for the cannibals' restraint and the realization that their intended cannibalism calls for an attitude other than mere prejudice: 'I would no doubt have been properly horrified', says Marlow, 'had it not occurred to me that the headman and his chaps must be very hungry'.³ By contrast, Kurtz's unrestrained material cannibalism suggested in his 'weirdly voracious aspect' and in 'his mouth opening voraciously as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind',⁴ comes in for heavy moral condemnation.

Conrad reaches the frontier of imagination which might have opened on a fuller acceptance of otherness balanced by a recognition of the white man's shortcomings when Marlow reads the postscript to Kurtz's report: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'. This, on Conrad's part, expresses the 'confession of weakness' Harris alludes to, for it acknowledges implicitly the total failure of white civilization to put its ideals into practice. Marlow is fully aware of this failure. Yet by lying to Kurtz's *Intended* at the end of

the novel, thereby supporting the self-deceptive idealism which takes the superiority of one civilization for granted, there is a sense in which he denies the reality of the natives and the significance of his experience. Harris, who equates language with experience, sees this denial as an 'eclipse of the word', a limitation imposed on the narrative by Conrad's despair as a result of the prevailing outlook of his time. Harris writes:

A narrative tool or habit of command that exercises itself as perfectly natural, perfectly beautiful and normal with a *homogeneous* cultural imperative, where it is rooted in consenting classes and common values, builds into itself an equation of inner eclipse as it generates the suppression of others in a *heterogeneous* situation. That was the frontier of paradox between Europe and Africa that *Heart of Darkness* achieved. Conrad went no further ... and inner eclipse stops short of inner space or transformed narrative tool and medium of consciousness.⁵

I should now like to apply Harris's approach to fiction to *A Fringe of Leaves* and see how much further than *Heart of Darkness* it goes in its recognition and continuing acceptance of otherness, for White's novel, published three quarters of a century later than Conrad's, brings it inevitably to mind and presents some similarities with it.

It seems to me that from the very beginning until Ellen Roxburgh's departure from Moreton Bay at the end of the novel White presents what Harris calls a 'heterogeneous situation', in this case a juxtaposition of two worlds or rather of two realities within one world: that of respectable middle class settlers or visitors to colonial Australia, and that of all who do not belong to this class including Ellen herself, the convicts and the aborigines. Australia, as has often been pointed out, is in this novel as in *Voss*, a country of self-discovery, the equivalent of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*. I would not say, as one critic puts it, that 'it gives back the reflection of our own human and social evil'⁶ because this is to assume that only evil is to be discovered in the interior and is associated with the rejected element of society. White's approach is more complex than this simple distribution of good and evil would suggest. As with Conrad, his main emphasis, is on our erroneous conception of evil and on what we share with those excluded from society. Rather in Austin Roxburgh's words Australia is 'the country beyond'⁷ where Ellen discovers unsuspected depths of both good and evil and achieves fulfilment through her alliance with men alien to her, aborigines and a convict.

Ellen too is presented as alien. She is from Cornwall, 'a *remote* county ... of dark people' (12). She arouses suspicion even in Australia where any kind of difference is feared and abhorred, as witnesses Mrs

Merivale's attitude in the opening chapter not only towards Ellen but towards an emancipist and the aborigines whom she calls 'loathsome savages' (20). The darker side of Ellen, however, is associated with possibilities of fulfilment which contradict Miss Scrimshaw's assertion that 'there was nothing spiritual in Mrs Roxburgh' (14). For all her earthliness and repressed sensuality, one senses in her a yearning first satisfied by her immersion in St Hya's pool and sustained by her dream of Tintagel which symbolizes the magic she needs to believe in. Ellen is not the equivalent of Marlow but of Kurtz and is therefore directly involved in the reality she discovers. That, unlike Kurtz, we should see her from the inside is already an advance on Conrad. In Van Diemen's Land she becomes aware that her as yet undefined need and its fulfilment might take shape in the country. She writes in her diary:

I begin to feel closer to the country than to any human being. Reason ... tells me I'm wrong in thinking thus, but my instincts hanker after something deeper.... (92)

Reason is systematically undermined in the novel in the person of Austin Roxburgh and as a very inadequate tool to help Ellen suppress the irrational in herself. As in *Heart of Darkness*, reason as a token of civilization proves extremely vulnerable and is even shown to have a relative meaning: Ellen's single-minded search for food in the bush, which from the safety of civilized life would seem purely instinctive, is called 'the only rational behaviour' (227). In fact one of the interesting aspects of the narrative is the unobtrusive though constant way in which it questions the accepted version of reality by offering an alternative understanding of values and of people. So Jack Chance, the escaped convict and necessarily a 'miscreant' in Garnet Roxburgh's words is, as Ellen acknowledges, full of 'delicacy' (288) and 'a decent man at heart' (268) whereas the respectable Garnet is at bottom definitely a miscreant. On the whole in Van Diemen's Land evil is associated with the free citizens rather than the convicts. Ellen's hard upbringing but also her moral uncertainty and lack of self-righteousness help her see how thin the barrier is between the so-called good and the evil. So that even before her experience in the interior she is able to see some of the convicts at least as victims of the established order while considering herself lucky to be 'on the winning side' (95). On the other side, that of the eclipsed as Harris would say, are not only the convicts but the aborigines who early in the novel are lumped together by Pilcher, the second mate of the *Bristol Maid*, as the only inhabitants of the dark interior: 'only dirty blacks ... and a few poor

beggars in stripes who've bolted from one hell to another' (135).

In White's treatment of the aborigines we get a juxtaposition of the stereotyped view which dismisses them as 'loathsome savages' and 'dirty blacks' and, on the other hand, an unprejudiced apprehension of the characteristics of an alien people. The unprejudiced view prevails gradually as Ellen comes to recognize in her aboriginal mentors behavioural features very similar to individual or social attitudes she had experienced in the civilized world. White does not force the point on his readers but subtly conveys the commonness of basic human reactions such as fear or vanity when, for example, Ellen is being adorned for display by an old aboriginal woman and thinks: 'it might have been old Mrs Roxburgh adding or subtracting some jewel or feather in preparation for a dinner or ball' (240). More importantly, White evokes in a masterful way the nomadic life of the aborigines, determined by their necessary quest for food. He presents their behaviour and customs as inherent in their poverty-stricken condition. Naturally, great progress has been made in anthropology since Conrad wrote; White's presentation of native people is more perceptive than Conrad's for whom the Africans necessarily remained a complete enigma. By comparison with the aborigines Ellen who, together with her clothes, has lost the veneer of civilization often seems brutish and unrestrained in her haste to devour whatever food she can lay hands on. Her hardihood when snatching food from her masters or her ecstasy when she devours snakeflesh remind us of Marlow's assertion in *Heart of Darkness* that 'No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is. And as to ... beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze'.⁸

Ellen's culminating experience in the bush is her participation in rites of cannibalism. This, as the narrator insists, satisfies both her physical and her spiritual hunger, a spiritual hunger which she felt long before her stay with the aborigines. It is a little surprising that the novel should have been approved of because it supposedly resists the mystical trend to be found in White's earlier fiction. For the scene of cannibalism, which is also a climax in the novel, is obviously given a mystical significance. Ellen eats human flesh as one partakes in a sacrament and the mystical union achieved is crucial in White's exploration of the possible cross-fertilization of opposite worlds.

Ironically, cannibalism is first mentioned in the novel not in connection with primitive tribes but as it crosses the mind of Austin Roxburgh, the rationalist, who thinks that the dead steward on the boat 'had he not

been such an unappetizing morsel, might have contributed appreciably to an exhausted larder' (206). We immediately recall Marlow's hope in *Heart of Darkness* that he is not so unappetizing as the faithless pilgrims. Austin's boundless self-disgust reminds us that cannibalism is probably the most misunderstood and least acceptable feature of otherness in alien peoples. In spite of White's strong irony in reporting Austin's thought, cannibalism is presented as an experience which, as with Ellen, might gratify a spiritual need when he hears the words:

This is the body of Spurgeon which I have reserved for thee, take eat, and give thanks for a boil which was spiritual matter ... Austin Roxburgh was not only ravenous for the living flesh, but found himself anxiously licking the corners of his mouth to prevent any overflow of precious blood. (267)

The idea of a redeeming sacrifice serving as spiritual nourishment seems to me central to this passage which clearly prefigures Ellen's experience in the bush. The notion of sacrifice also prevails when Ellen first comes upon the probable remnants of a cannibalistic ritual, discovers the remains of the first mate and sees that in his grimacing skull 'the mouth atoned for all that is fiendish by its resignation to suffering' (229). Sacrifice, of a human and divine nature, is indirectly suggested when Ellen arrives on the scene of a cannibalistic feast and thinks that the participants are like 'communicants coming out of church looking bland and forgiven after the early service' (243). The rites in which she then takes part no doubt belong to the category Marlow calls 'unspeakable', and indeed White points out that 'in the light of Christian morality' her behaviour amounts to an 'abomination', a term also used by Marlow. But we see how much further than Conrad White is able to go in his imaginative understanding of alienness by presenting cannibalism from the point of view of those who practised it. As Geoffrey Blainey writes in *Triumph of the Nomads*:

In the 19th century cannibalism was often regarded as the greatest depravity, the antithesis of civilization, and was so viewed by many who regularly took holy communion and believed they were thereby eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. In fact, many aboriginals ate human flesh in the same spirit, believing that they thus acquired some of the strength of those who had died.⁹

While presenting Ellen's cannibalism as a participation in a sacrament nourishing 'some darker need of the human spirit' (245) White's allusion to the reproof by Christian morality points to the self-deception of 19th-

century Christians. This is ironically illustrated by Ellen's disgust and pity for those she calls 'starving and ignorant savages' (244) though immediately afterwards she picks up a human bone and chews the flesh clinging to it. Nevertheless, her experience is predominantly mystical, its parallel with the communion suggesting a union not with Christ in particular but with all suffering men. After her return from the bush Ellen does not say like Conrad's Marlow 'It was my imagination that wanted soothing'¹⁰ but 'I never understood so deeply ... as then ... For me too (it was) a kind of communion' (328-9).

We can say that at this point the narrative has become in Harris's words a 'transformed ... medium of consciousness'.¹¹ The dialogue between opposites which he sees as an essential need in modern fiction is illustrated in Ellen's new capacity to unite, if only momentarily with the land and its people. Whereas earlier in the novel 'the spirits of place were not hers to conjure up' (222), soon after her communion through cannibalism she joins the aborigines in their 'supplication or lament' (246) and for the first time 'the spirit of the place ... took possession of her' (246). Soon also she takes part in a corroboree which becomes identified in her mind with a Cornish festival, and this is a way of bridging the gap between alien cultures. At this corroboree she meets Jack Chance, the escaped convict who has been living for years with the aborigines. While he dances 'her lips parted to receive — the burnt sacrifice? the bread and wine?' (255). Clearly, the dance is a manifestation of spiritual life and is given added significance through the fact that in Jack merge the aboriginal and the convict, the sacrificial victim with whom Ellen at this moment is prepared to commune. In this she shows the 'susceptibility to otherness' Harris mentions in 'The Complexity of Freedom'. Through her individual experience of cannibal rites and the corroboree, the essential relatedness of two peoples is revealed as well as a fundamental kinship between their myths. As Michael Cotter writes, 'Ellen's cannibalism ... is the relocation of the values of one culture into the symbolic forms of another'.¹² It could also be argued that White presents cannibalism as a universal phenomenon for there are other forms of it in the novel.

We may now wonder whether the assertion of kinship and the self-knowledge Ellen gains from her experience are sustained or betrayed by the rest of the novel. While satisfying her own need for a human and sensual love, her relationship with Jack Chance is, of course, another example of a union with 'the other' although she oscillates all through

between attraction and repulsion, total commitment and callous or guilty rejection until they reach Moreton Bay and her silent yet eloquent reticence frightens him into running back into the bush. It seems to me that her essential ambivalence both before and after her final rescue while she stays with the Lovells at Moreton Bay is the main strength of the narrative. Though she says 'I am responsible ... to all those who have been rejected' (317), White does not fall into the trap of suggesting a final identification that would entail complete self-denial. Her stay at Moreton Bay is repeatedly described in terms of a social imprisonment that she helplessly accepts. But she also seeks and achieves a fleeting union with men (334) and women convicts (336) and experiences a moment of beatitude under Pilcher's inscription GOD IS LOVE. She sees the danger of revealing the full extent of her self-knowledge but cannot repress nor refrain from expressing her guilt and remorse at her betrayal of Jack or that 'sudden cry of pain' that escapes her as they leave Moreton Bay. To the end White juxtaposes two opposite realities in her consciousness, and what she thinks on the morrow of her arrival at Moreton Bay remains largely true when she leaves it:

It saddened her to think she might never become acceptable to either of the two incompatible worlds even as they might never accept to merge. (335)

The conclusion of the novel and the possibility that the heroine might once again find refuge in a bourgeois marriage has given rise to many contradictory interpretations, some looking with approval upon Ellen's return to the civilized world, others seeing in it a sure sign that she will lose the benefit of self-realization, others yet suggesting that nothing is more unlikely than that she will allow the steely circle of bourgeois life to close upon her. On the other hand, the large critical consensus of approval at Ellen's return to normality is rather alarming and denies the significance of her experience. It doesn't seem to me that White optimistically suggests that Ellen will find fulfilment in a return to conventional society and marriage. Thinking of Mr Jevons, she reminds herself 'that the solid is not unrelated to the complacent and that (he) might assert rights she would not wish to grant' (364). In spite of the small incident that brings them together, the end is ambiguous and therefore essentially open-ended. Ellen's imaginative understanding of the 'other' is not denied but neither is her capacity to relapse into callousness at any moment. She remains human, i.e. capable of the best and the worst, and what is important is that her quest should remain unfinished. It is her

continuing ambivalence and the subtlety with which it is conveyed that seem to me to mark a distinct advance on Conrad's narrative.

There appears at first sight to be very little in common between *A Fringe of Leaves* and Harris's novella *Yurokon*, whose poetic terseness and intricate metaphorical fabric are at the opposite pole of White's long and fairly traditional narrative. Moreover, the exploring consciousness in *Yurokon* is not as in White's novel or Conrad's that of a European confronted with an alien reality but that of a Carib Indian boy. This shows a great imaginative boldness since Harris does not hesitate to probe into what is usually termed the 'primitive mind', and presents this as a necessary process to achieve a native or host consciousness.

I cannot analyse Harris's story here but would like to suggest briefly how it compares with White's novel. The similarity between the two works lies in their dualistic presentation of cannibalism seen both in the light of the conventional reactions it arouses and as a means of uniting with the 'other', which in Harris's terms amounts to a 'digestion and liberation of contrasting spaces'. In White's novel, however, the two moral approaches coexist and even in Ellen are not easily reconcilable. In Harris's story *Yurokon*'s shocked awareness of his ancestor's cannibalism is transformed into a rebirth of sensibility.

For the Caribs as for the Aborigines cannibalism had a spiritual significance and Michael Swan calls it 'a kind of transubstantiation in reverse: the flesh or the powdered bone (that the Caribs would mix with their drink) contains the living spirit of the dead'.¹³ After eating a ritual morsel of their enemies, the Caribs would also fashion flutes out of their bones, thus transforming these human bones into music. Harris merges this custom with the myth of *Yurokon* which tells of bush baby spectres arising from the Caribs' pots and is linked with a strong sense of guilt among them for it told how a woman threw the baby *Yurokon* into her pot, as a result of which its mother brought pain, misery and death into the world. But Harris suggests that the emergence of bush baby spectres from the Caribs' pots was an indication that their homogeneity and proud psychological landscape had begun to erode, for the Caribs were themselves fierce conquerors before being conquered by Spain. The spectres were an inner omen diverging from their conquering posture and therefore implied the possibility of a new consciousness. The flute and song made out of bone have the same significance as the *Yurokon* baby arising in twine-like smoke from the pot. Both are the expression of what Harris calls in his story a 'transubstantiation of species'.¹⁴

The theme of the story is the encounter between Caribs and Spaniards and the clash between their equally cannibalistic behaviour, whether in a literal or a materialistic sense, amidst elements which are also at war with one another and a source of disruption so that cannibalism is given a cosmic dimension. It is, to begin with, a metaphor for conquest. As Harris writes in 'The Native Phenomenon', 'conquest is a berserk or cannibal realism'.¹⁵ Then it also becomes a sacrament, not through the mere absorption of a sacrificial other but because in the Caribs' case it went together with a breakdown and an erosion of their homogeneous personality and finally led to the 'confession of weakness' which, as mentioned above, can entail a new conception of community.

'Here I am,' says Yurokon, 'no one and nothing, yet here I stand.... Whose spirit is it that will not — *cannot* — die?' (69)

We find in this declaration the usual paradox in Harris's fiction of a nothingness which is yet the dawn of a renaissance, of ruin which is also origin and is symbolized by the flute of bone and the native symphony one character dreams of.

To conclude I should like to submit the following quotation for your consideration. It sums up the tragic transformation of the Caribs from fierce conquerors into an extinct people. But in the dream of a twentieth-century exploring consciousness it points to the essential unity between conquerors and conquered, a unity which, as the narrator suggests, the Caribs had not foreseen when they appointed themselves 'cannibals or ogre of place' (71). The passage also presents the juxtaposition of contraries which illustrates in the very texture of the narrative the 'capacity to sustain contrasts' I have discussed:

As the Caribs withdrew across the ridge of the land and began to descend into a continent of shadow, each knot of ash linked them to the enemy. And Yurokon was the scarred urchin of dreams, victor-in-victim; over the centuries he remained unageing (ageless) as a legend, a curious symptom or holocaust of memory, whose burnt-out stations were equally embryonic as a cradle, fugue of man, unchained chain of fires.

It was this that drew the Caribs to the end of their age. They ceased to fret about names since namelessness was a sea of names. They ceased, too, to care about dwindling numbers since numberlessness was native to heaven, stars beyond reckoning. (75)

NOTES

1. Wilson Harris, 'The Phenomenal Legacy', *The Literary Half-Yearly*, XI, 2 (July 1980), 3; italics mine.
2. Wilson Harris, 'The Complexity of Freedom', *Explorations*, a collection of Wilson Harris's Essays (Aarhus, 1980).
3. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 58.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 85 and 105.
5. 'The Complexity of Freedom'.
6. Veronica Brady, 'A Fringe of Leaves: Civilization by the Skin of our Teeth', *Southerly*, 2 (1977), 125.
7. Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, first published in 1976 (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 137. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.
8. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 60.
9. Geoffrey Blainey, *Triumph of the Nomads, A History of Ancient Australia* (Melbourne, 1975), p. 112.
10. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 102.
11. 'The Complexity of Freedom'.
12. Michael Cotter, 'Fragmentation, Reconstitution and the Colonial Experience: the Aborigine in White's Fiction', *South Pacific Images*, edited by Chris Tiffin (South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, 1978), p. 176.
13. Michael Suran, *The Marches of El Dorado* (London, 1958), p. 285.
14. 'Yurokon', in *The Sleepers of Roraima* (London, 1970), p. 67. All references are to this edition and given in the text.
15. Wilson Harris, 'The Native Phenomenon', in *COMMON WEALTH*, edited by Anna Rutherford (Aarhus, 1972), p. 148.