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Postmodernism and Its Others:

Cross-cultural Counterpoints in British Fiction[1]

Since the Second World War the death of the novel has been frequently announced by apparently authoritative prophets of ill omen, although to judge from the profusion of fiction published and selling nowadays one would think that the reverse is true and that the genre is far from being exhausted. The death sentence applies mainly to sophisticated or literary fiction which, if we are to believe some recent commentators, offers no work of great stature, at least in British fiction, though, as we shall see, the very notion of Britishness has changed considerably. In a *T.L.S.* enquiry on "The State of Fiction" V.S. Naipaul, himself a reputed novelist, declared : "the novel form has done its work . . . I don't see how you can write about England without falling into parody, without competing with what you've read. . . ."[2] He nevertheless acknowledges, implicitly at least, that he has been working within a conventional tradition, meeting conventional expectations, and that his own novels have developed towards a mixture of fact and fiction, which, apart from a changing conception of narrative, might suggest a lessening of imaginative power. George Steiner, on the other hand, argues that no great work of fiction is forthcoming because talent is to be found elsewhere, in other media, in science and new technologies. It is no tragedy, however, if virtual reality marks the end of the literary imagination. One must accept that genres rise and fall.[3]

My purpose is not to enter this debate but simply to suggest at this stage that such scepticism towards the future and the possibilities of the novel is inspired by a limited conception of the genre. It is a commonplace to say that "the novel is inseparable from the triumph of the middle classes"[4] and even that its growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries paralleled the imperialism which contributed to their wealth (a point I shall come back to).[5] But the rise of other modes of expression has not necessarily deprived fiction of the power to change perception, stimulate and transform imagination, nor of its capacity to express the moral choices of society. If, as Steiner acknowledges, great novels today "are coming from the far rim, from India, from the Caribbean, from Latin America,"[6] it is not merely because these

1 This paper was read on 1 August 1995 at the conference of the International Association of University Professors of English which took place at the University of Copenhagen.

2 "Delivering the Truth", an Interview with V.S. Naipaul by Aamer Hussein, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2 September 1994, pp. 3-4.

3 George Steiner, "Talent and Technology", *Prospect* (May 1996), pp. 30-33.

4 Steiner, op. cit., p. 32.

5 On this subject see Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967) and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).

6 Steiner, op. cit., p.33.

countries are in an earlier stage of bourgeois development, though this may be an important factor. The adaptability of the genre must also be taken into account as well as an expanding and evolving readership.[7]

From its rise in the early eighteenth century the English fictional tradition has been predominantly realistic, a mode of writing which developed in harmony with the values of the society it portrayed, the desire to perpetuate them and to represent Englishness in both individual and community. From the beginning, however, the "Great Tradition" was challenged by novels later called experimental, exceptions to the conventions of Realism until the end of the nineteenth century and the modernist breakthrough in the early twentieth century. Even then the realistic tradition overshadowed the work of more innovative novelists, as the popularity of H.G. Wells shows, which Henry James, a precursor of Modernism, understandably resented. When Postmodernism emerged and required definition later in the century, the critical debate which had consistently focused on the opposition between Realism and experiment shifted to "Modernism versus Postmodernism." For some time now it has focused on Realism **and** rather than **versus** Postmodernism, with the consequence that the host of oppositional definitions and re-definitions of both terms it elicited at some stage frequently settles for an attempt at conciliation. It was already evident in Linda Hutcheon's summing up of Postmodernism's major characteristics as "realism redefined"[8] some fifteen years ago. There have been many claims since then to a similar reconciliation. A clear exponent of Postmodernism, Hutcheon insists on its "doubleness," and asserts that "you cannot step outside that which you contest, you are implicated in the value you *choose* to challenge."[9] This paradox is usually presented as a major postmodernist feature as well as of much post-structuralist criticism and even of the post-colonial theories inspired by it. Steven Connor reads a similar doubleness in the post-war practice of rewriting canonical texts and asserts that the rewritten text's "departures from [the] original must be measured in terms of its dependence on it . . . the rewritten text must always submit to the authority of an imperative that is at once ethical and historical."[10] He also wrote that "for all the decentring and subversion, the cultural authority of the texts chosen diminishes not at all."[11] My contention is that this authority does not diminish within the historical context of the original work. But it is precisely because the cultural authority of antecedent texts and the world view they represent are not fundamentally questioned **now** that they remain an inescapable referent and that there has been such an easy compromise between Postmodernism and Realism in British fiction which, even in its most characteristic and "talented" narratives seldom departs from the basic premises

7 On this subject see the sections entitled "Addressivity" and "Economics, Publishing and Readership" in Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996).
8 Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 58.
9 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 223. See also Alison Lee: "contemporary fictional texts . . . [challenge] Realist conventions . . . from within precisely those same conventions." *Realism and Power. Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 3.
10 Connor, op. cit., p. 167.
11 Steven Connor, "The Modern and the Postmodern as History", *Essays in Criticism*, XXXVII, 3 (July 1987), p. 187.

of Realism and its values. In theory the two trends are indeed oppositional. Even when not exclusively representational, Realism posits a correspondence between world and text, claims (or did until recently) authorial objectivity in its evocation of the real, of truth and above all of a recognizably authentic world and its values, whereas Postmodernism subverts these values and established literary forms. It professes ontological doubt and doubt about the nature of reality, fictionality, the destabilization of people and meaning, revision, decentering, self-reflexivity and a significant shift of interest from world to word with anxious questionings about the latter's capacity to express the former. There are admittedly various degrees of scepticism in Postmodernism, from mere doubt and the problematization of truth and reference to the denial of meaning. But if it really implies the loss of any referent, then it would seem that few British novels qualify. *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) is one with its suggestion that the real source of the realistic tradition, represented by Flaubert, cannot be pinned down and that language itself is inadequate to express a reality that is uncertain anyway.

A few other examples may help answer the questions:

Does Postmodernism exclude meaning and value in favour of depthless language games? Or do the despair, alienation, apocalyptic threat or actual ending in, say, Swift's *Waterland* and D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) imply regret for the loss of meaning and value? The answer seems clear: in spite of contradictory definitions of history and his scepticism towards its "grand narrative,"[12] which he compensates for by stories of individual lives, Tom Crick, the protagonist of *Waterland*, still seeks to uncover, albeit through a disrupted narrative, "the mysteries of cause and effect,"[13] and both says and shows that history is no mere discourse. An even more obvious case is Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), considered by many as best representing British Postmodernism. The innovative aspect of this novel is, I think, mainly technical, chapter 13 and the inventive double ending the illustration of an intellectual conception rather than imaginatively integrated into the narrative. Otherwise, the pleasure derived from the text is due to its being so refreshingly traditional and, as Malcolm Bradbury points out, many readers simply ignore the author's self-reflexive interventions.[14] He also argues that "the book remains . . . suspended between the "'Victorian' mode . . . and the self-critical meta-fictional novel." However, it is not the illusion of authenticity only and the substantial narrative that keep the novel within the realistic tradition but some of the social and cultural assumptions underlying it. In spite of Sarah's existential freedom and Charles's struggle to overthrow nineteenth-century conventions, their quest for self-discovery does not radically depart from similar attempts in, say, Hardy's fiction, though it is there cruelly countered and frustrated. The narrative of *A Maggot* (1985), built on a judicial inquest, is more obviously postmodern in establishing a given reality only to question it when the constraints of the interrogator's "alphabet" or language are in turn interrogated by the heroine.

12 Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1984), p. 53.
13 Ibid., p. 92.
14 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 359-360.

The eighteenth-century class system, transportation as an instrument of imperialism, a rigid rationalism, all are challenged while marginals, a Welshman, an actor, a prostitute, are brought to the centre. But the heroine's spiritual conversion, visions and mysterious pregnancy are again expressions of a need for a transcendental referent, unorthodox in eighteenth-century terms but equally un-postmodern in a twentieth-century perspective. Both *A Maggot* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have a feminist slant. But the latter significantly takes place in the nineteenth century, for Sarah's freedom yet dependence on pre-Raphaelite generosity and broad-mindedness would be a dubious emancipation by contemporary feminist standards.

Emma Tennant's *Tess* (admittedly published more than twenty years later) is a far more radically postmodern revisionary narrative. While fictionalizing from actual biographical data Hardy's gradual conception of his heroine, the narrator, Liza-Lu, destroys his image as the benevolent or pitying creator of a "pure" woman victimized by a narrow-minded patriarchal society. He is, on the contrary, a "monster", a "minotaur", whose imagination selfishly feeds on an actual muse, a "cruel-minded" if "delicate" practitioner of chastisement[15] who imprisoned Tess in an implacable logic of punishment. Interestingly, the novel seems to rewrite *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as well, by showing that far from being an example of Darwinian progressivism, the geological history of Dorset reveals the gradual dichotomization of man from nature and, most importantly, the fall of woman from preeminence and genuine freedom in Celtic times to subservience first by the Romans, then by a perverted Augustinian christianity. The various incarnations of Tess in the novel testify to an adamant male will-to-power and resentment for being repeatedly seduced by the beautiful temptress. There are also echoes of *Waterland* in the narrative technique: similar chapter transitions linking general history with personal stories, stressing the chain of cause and effect between apparently unrelated factors, parallels between natural and human history and, above all, the rewriting of rape and incest from a feminist perspective.

A very different version of the fall occurs in Martin Amis's *Other People* (1981), though here too man is seen as its responsible agent. As a parody of the romantic quest, of conventional notions of good and evil and of life and death, the novel evokes an unreal real world, in which violence and a death-urge lead to nighmarish alienation. At first sight, this is postmodernist nihilism at its most obvious, until one becomes aware of the moral tenor of its intentionally shocking banalisation of evil. The monstrosity of Auschwitz is similarly reduced to an everyday commonplaceness in *Time's Arrow*, as the self-divided narrator, an agent of the genocide, re-lives his life backwards and the most criminal deeds become part of an acceptable reality which any ordinary person could subscribe to or accept indifferently. This could be one of the most self-consciously postmodern British novels in its destabilizing amoral shifts, evasions and self-deceptions as well as the uncertain reactions it first arouses in the reader towards the reminiscing conscience. But the novel's subtitle ("The nature of the offence,"[16] a phrase borrowed from Primo Levi), the afterword and Amis's own

15 Emma Tennant, *Tess*. First pbd 1993 (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 123, 126 and 93.

16 Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow or the Nature of the Offence*. First pbd 1991 (Penguin Books, 1992).

comments[17] on the moral import of his work confirm that in spite of a more radical and pessimistic vision, a clever, rather self-advertising narrative trickiness or playfulness, he shares with the postmodernists I alluded to (admittedly, a scant and subjective selection) the liberal humanist ideology and values that have always informed British Realism. Though space is lacking to do so, it can similarly be argued that formal devices favoured by postmodern novelists (e.g., narrative fragmentation, pastiche, parody, or self-reflexiveness) do not necessarily partake of a modified and modifying interpretation of experience.

This continuity explains the recent critical attempts to vindicate Postmodernism in Britain as a natural development of the British literary tradition, re-naming its narrative modes "mimesis in progress," "experimental mimesis," "meta-mimesis" or simply "post-modern realism."[18] It may be, as one critic puts it, that "the Anti-Realist movement is itself ensnared . . . *in the habits of thinking* of the literature and indeed of the culture that it seeks to subvert."[19] For these somewhat apologetic re-definitions indirectly re-assert the primacy of the "Great Tradition," albeit with variations. The past achievements within that tradition are not here questioned in so far as they perfectly caught the spirit of the times in **British** society and actually evinced from the beginning original features now deemed characteristically postmodern: it was continuously innovative; its authors were aware from the first that their creations were "human constructs" and often pretended they were reporting factual stories to achieve "suspension of disbelief." They were even self-reflexive (witness George Eliot), if not necessarily self-questioning and far less self-consciously so than postmodern writers. My questioning bears rather on the ascertained plurality and all-inclusiveness of its present, largely postmodern variety, allied with a renewed tendency to integrate the more prominent writers into a new canon which may not be the crucible of cultures and races it aims or claims to be.

English literature has always been successful at absorbing non-English sensibilities. One thinks of Henry James, Joseph Conrad and the modernists, of whom several were foreign while most had affinities with other European literatures. Moreover the flexibility, empiric stamp or texture of the English language also make possible the most daring experiments and facilitate this absorption.[20] Postmodernism too is inevitably international, not just because we now live in a globalized world and even literary trends spread quickly but because the conditions of crisis which led to Postmodernism in the first place prevail everywhere. Yet what one really means by "international" Postmodernism is a Western phenomenon, which, in Anglophone literatures, includes the so-called Second World (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, white South Africa) but not the Third. I am not suggesting that Third World writers

17 John Haffenden, "Martin Amis", in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 13.

18 See Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995). Amy J. Elias, "Meta-*mimesis*? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism" and Catherine Bernard, "Dismembering/Remembering Mimesis: Martin Amis, Graham Swift", both in Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, eds., *British Postmodern Fiction*, Postmodern Studies 7 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993).

19 Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction, a Guide*. First pbd 1987 (London: Longman paperback, 1993), x. Italics mine.

20 In this respect, literature in English is, I believe, more diversified than literature in French, in which non-metropolitan forms, especially from the Antilles, remain largely marginal.

are excluded but that with the possible odd exception, they exclude themselves by a different world-view, mode of writing and national concerns. One needs only think of writers published in England but clearly not part of the English scene, like Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe.

The contextual framework of Postmodernism may extend from despair at the horrors of the twentieth century and the subsequent denial of meaning in the West, the dissolution of familiar cultural forms and, generally, a crisis of civilisation to the more gratuitous adjuncts of a fashionable mode of writing, sometimes avowedly inspired by post-structuralism rather than the other way round, though playfulness and language games may not solely originate in doubt about the capacity of the word to represent the world. They evolved in a greatly improved political and social context as opposed to a creativeness stimulated by catastrophe and suffering and were also the symptom of the purposelessness which often follows achievement. Linda Hutcheon noted that "radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses."[21]

Post-colonial literature is frequently presented as a branch of the postmodernist plurality, emerged from a different history, from dismemberments, and the sense of living in a spiritual and psychological void through centuries of disruption, exploitation, slavery, loss, deculturation, etc... It explains the argument that since the different worlds have in some respects come even or may do so in the future (though the reverse is still true), the expression of their experience is similarly inspired. There **are** intersections between Postmodernism and Post-colonialism though, as has been remarked, Western postmodernists who expressed "their dissatisfaction with some of the cornerstone ideas of their own tradition . . . concentrated on themselves and were not . . . interested in the worlds they had ignored or controlled."[22] Also apart from the fact that a frustrating hierarchy of worlds continues to prevail, far more damaging in reality than in fiction, the rendering of experience in their respective literatures is sustained by different perspectives in spite of common features mainly evident in novels that actually blend the two "posts" as in the fiction of Peter Carey, J.M. Coetzee or Salman Rushdie.

Of the three, only Rushdie's work can be included in British literature[23] and is also the clearest example of syncretism between the two "posts", combining metafiction, parody, intertextuality, playfulness with a serious critique of authority in England, India and Pakistan. Rushdie's fierce satire of Mrs Thatcher's England and its treatment of immigrants in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) have been interpreted as post-colonial resistance and "counter-discourse", and it is also possible to read Chamcha's return to India at the end of the novel in that light, an India that can be conceived anew when

21 Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism", *ARIEL*, 20, 4 (October 1989), p. 151.

22 Barbara Christian quoted by Arun Mukherjee in "Whose Post-Colonialism and whose Postmodernism?", *WLWE*, 30, 2 (1990), p. 3.

23 Like other British critics, Steven Connor discusses J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) and Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) in *The English Novel in History* without mentioning that they are not English novels. This is to ignore a major post-colonial aspect in both works: the allegorical South African context present until then in Coetzee's fiction and the fact that *Oscar and Lucinda* is first and foremost a rewriting of the settlement and history of Australia from an Australian point of view.

the world of his childhood gives way to Zeenat Vakil's commitment to an Indianness very different from Farishta's. But it can also be interpreted as a retreat from hybridity and a return to a kind of Realism which has been exuberantly challenged in the earlier chapters. Rushdie's work does not fit easily into any single "post." Still my impression is that the strong subversive parody in his work deprives it of that sense of the future and of new beginnings (as opposed to the West's "sense of an ending"), a will to rethink the past and give the future a different direction which, I think, generally differentiates Post-colonialism from Postmodernism and is a major feature in the work of British writers who came from the former colonies or descend from immigrant parents. These writers also bring to light and interpret aspects of British history so far generally ignored in British fiction. Caryl Phillips, a British Caribbean writer of the second generation, comments: "It wasn't just black people [who were involved in slavery], it was white people too. It was their history."[24]

A radical and significant departure from Realism was proposed in 1967 by the British novelist of Guyanese origin, Wilson Harris, who criticized what he called the "consolidation of character" in twentieth-century novels still inscribed within the framework of nineteenth-century fiction. "This is not surprising," he goes on, "since the rise of the novel in its conventional and historical mould coincides in Europe with states of society which were involved in consolidating their class and other vested interests,"[25] a point which Edward Said was also to make recently in *Culture and Imperialism*. It is now often claimed that the strength of writing in English lies with writers from the former Empire.[26] To use Rushdie's much-quoted phrase, "the Empire writes back with a vengeance,"[27] though others think that with the dissolution of the Empire notions like centre and margin no longer apply, or suggest, perhaps unconsciously, that only the centre remains. A.S. Byatt, for instance, emphasizes the perfect **Englishness** of Abdulrazak Gurnah's prose in *Paradise*. And Valentine Cunningham, after humorously commenting on the latest transformations of Defoe's 'True-Born Englishman' concludes "At the end of the century 'English' fiction is assuming, as 'England' has taken in, the world."[28] Malcolm Bradbury expressed another British point of view by acknowledging the end of "a familiar notion of Englishness and the literary conventions that had come to express it"[29]; one can sense this in **some** English writing too (Angela Carter's fiction, for instance, particularly in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972) and *Heroes and Villains* (1969). Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) is, to my knowledge, one of the rare attempts by a British novelist to explore the British conquest of the Caribbean from both the

24 "Caryl Phillips talks to Maya Jaggi", *Wasafiri* N°20, Autumn 1994, p. 26.

25 Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, p. 29.

26 This is implicitly acknowledged by successive jurys of the Booker Prize in recent years. See also George Steiner's opinion quoted above.

27 Salman Rushdie, "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance", *Times*, 3 July 1982, p. 8.

28 A.S. Byatt: "A New Body of Writing: Darwin and Recent British Fiction", in A.S. Byatt and Alan Hollinghurst, eds., *New Writing Four* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 441. Valentine Cunningham, "Facing the New," in Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke, eds., *New Writing One* (London: Minerva in association with the British Council, 1992), p. 239.

29 Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 393.

colonizer's and the colonized viewpoints and to sketch out at the end what Britishness might mean in the future.

Whereas the British identity used to be taken largely for granted, there are now attempts to re-define both Britishness and Englishness under the pressure of globalization, of the European community from outside and immigrants or their descendants inside the country. British society is now multi-racial and the assumption is that it is also multi-cultural. Again, this can be subject to interpretation. As an outsider, I find it difficult to judge whether that multi-culturalism is widespread or whether, in spite of institutional support and multi-cultural events, the immigrant communities live in cultural ghettos from which it is always easier for artists and intellectuals to escape. The complex interconnections between race, culture and nation-state have been explored by Paul Gilroy in his study *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*,[30] which actually offers a more open and dynamic view of Black Britishness than his title might suggest and is an attempt to define post-coloniality in Britain. Denouncing various kinds of racism on the political right but also blind spots in left-wing politicians and cultural critics, as well as exclusively militant claims to racial identity, he stresses the importance of culture as a factor of integration and proposes to the Black diaspora a "third way" between racial essentialism (black or white) and an undiscriminating pluralism which ignores the roots of Black culture and the history of the Blacks.

Among the many artists of post-colonial descent in Britain, a few writers of Caribbean origin seem to me to represent one of the most original trends in fiction writing in English today. They too reject identification with a monolithic racial or post-colonial group. Fred D'Aguiar, a poet who has written a remarkable first novel, *The Longest Memory*, argues "Against Black British Literature" which, he says, makes race a criterion of evaluation and "enclose[s]" and "prejudice[s]" the imaginary scope of creativity.[31] Salman Rushdie, who had denounced what he saw as the recreation of a racially discriminating Empire within Britain also refused another kind of enclosure by stating firmly that "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist."[32] Wilson Harris lifted the debate to a metaphysical level and wrote 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 . . . lie in, and need to be re-activated through, the cross-cultural psyche of humanity, a cross-cultural psyche that bristles with the tone and fabric of encounters between so-called savage cultures and so-called civilized cultures.[33]

30 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Routledge, 1987).

31 Fred D'Aguiar, "Against Black British Literature", in Maggie Butcher, ed., *Tibisiri* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989), p. 106. *The Longest Memory* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1994). His second novel, *Dear Future* has just come out (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996).

32 See "The New Empire within Britain" and "'Commonwealth Literature' does not Exist", in *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), pp. 129-138 and pp. 61-70.

"Cross-cultural psyche" clearly suggests a deeper kind of pluralism than a juxtaposition of differences or variations on a still totalizing whole. In spite of convergences, particularly formal, with Postmodernism and/or Realism in so-called migrant literature, there is a clear intention among British writers of Caribbean origin, to come to terms with a past silenced in metropolitan writing but for them a carrier of meaning and a prerequisite to an art which refuses to be inscribed in what Fredric Jameson, sees as the inescapable "world space of multi-national capital."[34] It is therefore often an "art of memory" which, as a Guyanese critic put it, explores the potentialities of "creative schizophrenia."[35] For example, the narrative of Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* is fragmented into a mosaic of voices, a broken stream-of-consciousness which subtly adds to and tranforms our vision of the major event: the beating to death of a young slave after his father's betrayal. The disruption and interweaving of narrative voices make up a cruel but coherent view of the master-slave relationship and a poignant exposure of the old slave's self-deceptive honesty and responsibility in the very system that oppresses him. His conclusion sounds self-defeating: "Forget. Memory is pain trying to resurrect itself."[36]

But the "longest memory" which frustrates his wish to forget is part of the creative momentum in the Black diaspora and of its continuing concern for the reality of history, which, as already suggested, remains a distinctive feature of post-coloniality both within and outside Britain, bringing to light an eclipsed victimized past and thereby redressing the partialities of history, its discursive practices and, in Wilson Harris's words, "history's addiction to authoritarian narratives."[37] It is also obvious in Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*,[38] another deceptively simple novel, whose underlying complexities gradually come to light with the deeper perverting after-effects of slavery. It has been labelled postmodern because of its intertextuality, the rewriting and "subversive mimicry" of eighteenth-century travel narratives and enlightenment literature, its all-pervasive irony. But its vindication of history is the more powerful for emerging from the narrators' silences and omissions. Like D'Aguiar's novel, it questions "the very bases of the ideological formations of the master culture,"[39] and exposes the way in which white hegemony in the Americas was strongly supported

33 Wilson Harris, "Comedy and Allegory: A personal View", in Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies - Then and Now* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1989), p. 137.

34 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 54.

35 Michael Gilkes, *Creative Schizophrenia. The Caribbean Cultural Challenge* (Warwick: Centre for Caribbean Studies, The Third Walter Rodney Memorial Lecture, December 1986).

36 *The Longest Memory*, p. 138.

37 Wilson Harris, "Judgement and Dream", in Alan Riach and Mark Williams, eds., *The Radical Imagination. Lectures and Talks by Wilson Harris* (University of Liège: L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1992), p. 19.

38 Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991). Now a Picador paperback.

39 Paul Sharrad, "Speaking the Unspeakable. London, Cambridge and the Caribbean", in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, eds., *De-Scribing Empire. Post-colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 216.

and facilitated by the power of Christian discourse: the Word after or together with the sword and the whip. Both novels also retrieve from forgetfulness the torn self of the slave masked by imposed roles and names, creating what Harris called "a new and profound fiction of obscure but constructive humanity."[40]

This was to be the germ of Harris's considerable but, in his eyes, necessarily "unfinished" opus which ceaselessly elaborates a bridge between so-called "primitive" and civilized cultures, as spelled out in my earlier quotation on humanity's "cross-cultural psyche," and illustrated in his very conception of language:

> English is my native language now, a changing, subtle medium of imageries and numinous resource, a living possession or gesture of psyche after centuries of . . . conflict in the Americas. English as a living medium has absorbed I am sure . . . some of the rhythms, some of the incantatory spirit, of the alien tongues of those who are my distant ancestors.[41]

One finds a confirmation of this statement in his own language, at once highly poetic and musical, both abstract and sensuous, often fusing the scientific and the visionary. It is also one expression among many of a theme which runs through his poetic and philosophical fiction: an ontological cross-culturalism, the source of value, rooted in what he calls a "universal unconscious," which pre-supposes a different perception of the world and mode of understanding not exclusively framed by Western rationalism. One of its major expressions is the cross-fertilization in his work of the Western tradition with a native pre-Columbian tradition which, however eclipsed, survives as a "phenomenal legacy," a source of "alternative realities" and a possible counterpoint to the loss of "intuitive imagination" in the West in the wake of the Enlightenment.[42] It is not a kind of indegenism or idealization of the primitive, for Harris himself recalls that the Pre-Columbians had their own uncompromising absolutes and has compared the Aztecs' restrictive practices and heart-wrenching rituals to the Renaissance inquisitorial intolerance. Nor is it Resistance literature which he calls "self-righteous deprivation." [43]

Harris's imaginative reconstructions of the Amerindians' fall yet surviving "phenomenal" presence boldly merges in his later fiction with a scientific perception of the cosmos and human societies conversant with Einsteinian and Quantum physics and offers a unique symbiosis of widely separate phases or ages in man's cultural history. He explores a third way distinct from Postmodernism, which he deems nihilistic, and from Realism which, he says, ignores the world's multi-dimensionality and man's extra-human faculties (divine and animal). Realism informs the "novel of persuasion" in which a selection of items accumulate in a usually linear narrative, persuading the reader that the plane of existence on which it develops is inevitable

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41 *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, p. 62.

42 Wilson Harris, "In the Name of Liberty", *Third Text* 11 (Summer 1990), p. 14.

43 See Wilson Harris, "The Phenomenal Legacy", in *Explorations, A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981).
The Radical Imagination, p. 40. See also,"Anti-imperial resentment is a dangerous and limiting stance for the so-called battered or enslaved people to adopt. The problems go much deeper. . . ." p. 99.

and *consolidating* our view of society.[44] Realistic immediacy, Harris implies, tends to imprison reality within partial frames. Musing on the nature of Realism in both ordinary life and narrative, one of his protagonists says:

> The twentieth century was a century of realism that failed entirely to plumb the reality of the pagan in ourselves, the savage urgencies, confusions, labyrinths in ourselves, the savage illuminations we desperately needed. . . .[45]

As opposed to what he considers as a false coherence, Harris's narratives progress through shifts in space and time (past, present and future), which brings to light formerly ignored motivations or layers of being. Even the images in the dense poetic fabric of his novels are not final as their protean versions in one novel after another show. His fiction keeps revising itself and, in his own much-quoted phrase, "seeks to consume its own biases."[46] His protagonists are thus involved in a quest for truth not as an absolute but as "unfathomable whole", a quest he sees as a process of "infinite rehearsal", which, apart from breaking "a safe trust of bias," involves a *re-sensing* of the anguish and terrors of history and of missed opportunities for change on both sides of the experience of conquest and its lasting effects.

While Postmodernism questions the possibility of grand narratives owing to a crisis of authority, of legitimation, of civilisation and meaning, Harris's fiction confidently borrows the structures and scope of the great landmarks of Western culture but from the very inception of his narratives transforms them in keeping with a twentieth-century cross-cultural perspective. His first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), already re-created the grand narrative of the new world conquest, converting the conqueror's enslavement of others and self-enslavement into a perception of the creative and redeeming features of their enemy and envisaging, if only briefly, a mutuality of being. His impressive *Carnival* trilogy is another daring imaginative reconstruction of grand narratives, whose major palimpsest is *The Odyssey*.[47] However, *Carnival*, the first part of the trilogy and "a divine comedy of existence," also illustrates Dante's separate categories of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* which corresponded to his mediaeval world view, whereas in Harris's novel these categories overlap and even alter since the "inferno" (here of colonial history), does not impose damnation; rather expiation is again converted into an opportunity to revise past errors and the transfigurative potential of catastrophe is recognized. *The Infinite Rehearsal* is Harris's version of the Faustian myth and presents as facets of the same allegorical quest the search for survival in modern civilization and the nature of the creative process in fiction. The third novel, *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, is his Guyanese Odyssey, a narrative which has obsessed him since

44 *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, p. 29. Note that in as recent a book as *The English Novel in History*, Steven Connor, who examines the present-day "conditions of England" and the development of fiction, asserts that "connected with [the] enlarging functions of narrative is its function of *consolidation*", p. 4. Italics in the text.

45 Wilson Harris, *Carnival* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 113.

46 Wilson Harris, "A note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*", in *The Guyana Quartet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

47 On this subject, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Ulyssean Carnival: Epic Metamorphoses in Wilson Harris's Trilogy", *Callaloo*, 18, 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 46-58.

childhood and inspired much of his writing since his early poetic sequence, *Eternity to Season*, through *Palace*, *The Waiting Room* and other fictions. The absolute sovereignty of the original Ulysses, his jealousy and implacable vengefulness are shown to have become a major threat to civilization and the very existence of humanity in highly technological societies. As opposed to the unitary self of traditional fiction, the hero, Penelope and the suitors are plural, multi-dimensional figures in keeping with Harris's view of the human personality as a cluster of partial selves, "strangers in the self," emerging in the protagonist's vicarious consciousness. The absence of a self-sufficient author or narrator from all Harris's novels anticipated in a way Barthes' announcement of the "death of the author," who no longer was the original source of meaning. For Harris, however, the author or narrator, while effacing himself, is a vehicle through which meaning can be approached: "it isn't a question of rootlessness," he later wrote, "but of the miracle of roots, the miracle of a dialogue with eclipsed selves."[48] And while warning against the fallibility of a purely human discourse, Harris nevertheless sees in language the agent of arousal of deep, latent, polysemic cross-culturalities. In his own phrasing, "it raises the whole question of the Word made Flesh."[49]

Briefly, this corresponds to his perception of reality (whether cosmic, natural or human) as text(s) of being. Therefore, the changes in the characters' consciousness concur with changes in the language, the "convertible images" that weave the texture of Harris's prose. Even the resurrection in one of his latest novels, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, is not the conquest of death inherent in Christian ideology but "a transition from one dimension or universe of sensibility to another,"[50] an endless process of breaking, reconstitution, conversion, which makes possible the resurrection of meaning. At one stage in his quest, the protagonist, called Hope, feels the need "upon the precipice of a civilization to explore the descent of populations all around the globe into the maelstrom" and reflects on the nature of his trial as he descends the rapids near Sorrow Hill in the Guyanese heartland:

> He was involved from the beginning of time and space in the composition of the vessel. . . Above all . . . he was involved in the possibility of originating dimension that gave a new intensity to every splinter . . . in the bristling orchestra of BIG BANG. Bing Bang drum of the rapids.
>
> Was such inchoate origin or unfinished capacity an inimitable progression in its own right in parallel with the crumbling progression of the end-game world, the end-game vessel of the globe within the rapids?[51]

There is no final answer to that question. Only further involvement in the resurrectionary process whereby Imagination recovers, in Hope's words, "those we appear to have lost."[52] This process, Harris implies, may free one from the vicious circle of

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49 *Explorations*, pp. 65-66.
50 *The Radical Imagination*, p. 53.
51 Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Wilson Harris", *Callaloo* 18, 1 (Winter 1995), p. 194.
52 Wilson Harris, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 59 and p. 68. Ibid., p. 166.

allegedly inescapable oppositions in the legacy of colonialism both within and outside Britain and open the way to a genuine balance between cultures.