THE WISDOM OF UNCERTAINTY: "RE-VISIONARY STRATEGIES" IN WILSON HARRIS'S "THE INFINITE REHEARSAL"

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To understand ... the world as ambiguity, having to confront, instead of one absolute truth, a lot of relative truths which contradict each other, to possess therefore as the only certainty the wisdom of uncertainty, this requires great strength.

Milan Kundera

The imaginative universe a writer creates may so turn upon him, address him, even strike him - as if it were alive in its own right - that the writer is drawn backwards and forwards to other imaginations he may have ignored or misunderstood in the past, other imaginations he may grasp more truly when he comes upon them in the future.

Wilson Harris

Many years ago, after I had begun exploring the new literatures in English and written a few comparative articles, Albert Gérard told me that I was involved in comparative studies. I rather felt like Monsieur Jourdain who was speaking prose without knowing it, for I was more familiar then with the concept of comparative literature which required that the comparison should apply to literatures in different languages than with the broader conception which allowed for comparison between literatures written in a similar language. But I was grateful to Albert Gérard for drawing my attention to a critical framework which I had until then little taken into account in spite of the practice of comparison. I am now convinced that in terms of both difference and similarity, of historical, sociological and/or interpretative approaches, the new literatures in English offer one of the richest fields for comparative explorations even if, as Helen Tiffin argues, the basis for comparison and the criteria of judgment specific to that field need to be clearly defined. It is not my purpose in this essay, however, to enter the arena of theoretical definitions. Rather, I shall try to show in what way Wilson Harris's creative and critical writings contribute an extra philosophical and humanistic dimension to the very notion of comparison in its widest sense and its deepest ramifications.

Wilson Harris is a poet, novelist and thinker of Guyanese origin who worked for many years as a surveyor in the South American interior. Since settling in England about thirty years ago he has published seventeen short, densely poetic novels and is completing another. Like Joyce, who only wrote about Dublin after leaving it, Harris has kept writing about Guyana (with two or three exceptions) even in those novels that are mainly set in London. He has also written two collections of novellas which re-create Amerindian myths. Yet to call him prolific would be to misunderstand the nature of his creative venture since each fiction can be called an installment and a "rehearsal," with variations, of its predecessor (however different in its surface texture) within an opus which, by its very nature, must remain incomplete or unfinished. He was also a proponent of cross-culturalism avant la lettre since his first novel, Palace of the Peacock
"Re-visionsary strategies" are both exploration in depth and intuitive arousal of layers of experience ("living fossil-strata") that have been lying dormant in the unconscious, in order to re-voice both one's own and the other's ingrained roles or functions. This process, through which the author dialogues with his own earlier fictions as well as with existing myths and/or major texts from various cultures, affects all aspects of his writing, whether content, narrative texture, symbolism and even genre, as we see in his use of allegory. Most importantly, it stimulates the redemptive, unifying role of the imagination, a theme that has run through his work since Palace of the Peacock. In retrospect, one can read an "infinite rehearsal" in Donne's several ways of dying, as in Masters' serial deaths in Carnival (1985), though as a concept, it is clearly a late outgrowth of the "drama of consciousness" or "play of the soul" in which Harris's protagonists have always been involved. His latest novel picks up what he calls "intuitive clues" from The Eye of the Scarecrow (1965), in which many ways he "re-writes." "Ghost," for example, has developed from "the ghostly idiot stranger ... in one's own breast" who first appears in The Eye, and in the two novels both nature and man's deepest self ("inner space, inner time") are the seat of that third nameless dimension or "TI" which Ghost also represents allegorically.

Since Black Marsden (1972) Harris has created his own form of allegory in close connection with his "re-visionsary strategies":

I do not believe an imaginative writer may re-visit - if I may say put it - the field of allegory and discover new emphases such as complex comedy, complex modernity, save through the uncanny depths of creative experience within his own work and the sensation he or she may have of living interior guides arising from the collective unconscious encompassing the living and the dead.15

In the same essay Harris wrote that

if we are to re-discover an originality to cope with the terrors of our age, an evolution in form needs to occur that cuts through narrow vested interests and narrow sovereign state. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe are as much the heritage of black 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<br>

The cross-cultural psyche of humanity informs what he calls the "literary imagination," i.e., "the true arousal of a native universal imagination - the true arousal of a diversity of cultures in counterpart with one another within a tapestry of mutual self-knowledge."17 Literacy, for Harris, is thus the reverse of the "mental incest" or one-track thinking which asserts the purity of identity or the supremacy of one culture in opposition to others.

Though Carnival seemed like a climax in his opus, The Infinite Rehearsal probes even deeper into the labyrinths of self and nature to present as facets of the same allegorical quest the survival of modern civilization and the creative process of fiction writing. Significantly, it is a "re-writing" of the ever-modern myth of Faust, who longed to reach heights accessible to God only and thereby pierce the mysteries of creation but paradoxically attempted to do so through a pact with the devil. There can be no such pact in Harris's novel because good and evil are not separate moral categories. Like
Harris's earlier fictions, this novel reads as a dialogue between the living and the dead, close and distant voices, or sovereign and lost traditions. The first-person narrator, Robin Redbreast Glass, is dead but speaks through W.H., from Above, who nevertheless shares "an approach to the ruling concepts of civilization ... from the ruled or apparently eclipsed side of humanity" (vii). Since his "Da Silva" novels Harris has entered his own fiction as a character "in search of a species of fiction"19 as if the fiction pre-existing, a 'living text' brought to the fore through a polyphonic narrative in which both he and the existences or "agents of personality"20 he creates are vessels rather than the omnipotent author and sovereign characters of realistic fiction. Tenuous, even uncertain facts underlie Glass's narrative. He introduces himself as a "grave-digger conscience, dumb at first yet eloquent with disasters resulting from originally hopeful capture him.

The shipwreck in which Aunt Miriam, the female creator, and her young actors drowned can set out for the uncertain facts under Glass's narrative. He introduces himself as a "grave-digger conscience, dumb at first yet eloquent with disasters resulting from originally hopeful capture him.

Chambers's (9) Neverthelass, he agrees to hide Ghost from Glass as night is falling on twentieth-century civilization. He comes as his immigration officer who sees in this apparition both God and Beast and wants to immolate him. Wilfred Owen's words, "children ardent for some desperate glory." falling in 1939 on Chamberlain's peace in our time. "Why," asks Glass, "must we axe evil and hurt ourselves?" (9) Nevertheless, he agrees to hide Ghost from Ulysses Frog, the immigration officer who sees in this appari tion both God and Beast and wants to capture him. Ulysses Frog is an ambivalent Faustian figure "who patrol[s] the world in every national costume" (6) and whose very idealism and longing to entrap "the glorious Beast ... from time immemorial ... had led him blindly into the uniform he wore ... patrolling the beach of the sacred wood" (10). His mistress Calypso (Homer's nymph and West Indian musician) sings a Caribbean folksong voicing the lament of the slaves on the Middle Passage. When Glass resists Frog and is axed by him (another version of his death), his head "topple[s] into the globe," (11) a dismemberment which sets him on his quest for the resurrection.

Glass's name naturally conveys both reflection and transparency,21 reflection and thus sharing of the biases that prevail in the world (particularly Frog's) and the transparency concomitant with creation, whose very origins he attempts to grasp, particularly in the first half of the novel which reconstructs his birth and childhood. Glass can be seen as the fictional offspring of the "glass woman" in Carnival in whom Masters saw himself as a foetus. A similar "pre-natal adventure"22 occurs here when Glass, a foetus in his mother's womb, responds to his grandfather's revised version of Faust which his mother is typing. His grandfather, poet and mathematician, was himself a Faustian character who went pork-knocking for "crass gold" but was converted when he heard voices singing "Stone Cold Dead in the Market" (Calypso's lament) and within it the faint whisper of his future grandson, clearly his spiritual progeny. Glass was born the year his grandfather died, 1945, when the bomb fell on Hiroshima: "[My mother's] contractions began. The bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (17). The simultaneousness of the two events, "birth threaded into death," (17) illustrates a basic conviction that each catastrophe carries its own seed of rebirth.

The child in Harris's fiction is always a symbol of resurrection which is here probed more deeply since Glass is "revised foetus" ("foetal terror revised, foetal hope revised" [13]), whose imaginative quest after death makes him re-live the turbulence and chaos into which he was born. A dazzling nature imagery weaves the cosmic setting of ocean (crest of the waves and bottom of the sea), flatlands and sky in which Glass's apparition and Glass's birth as redbreast (also "lost golden species" and "lantern-butterly") take place, a "sacred wood" of iridescent beauty, nevertheless menaced by "Capital block prosperity" and "Marxist block necessity" (12,13), block suggesting monolithic ideologies, the auction block of slavery and the block on which heads roll. Glass is tempted from infancy to seize "the kingdoms of space" (20,66) and the bait of simulated life offered to him by Faust but he desists and acquires his own organs of perception, ear, eye, and above all his own voice when he screams and rejects Faust's "kingdom bell" (23). While the Easter bells in Goethe's First Faust prevent the hero from committing suicide, they are here the instrument of temptation. Indeed, in spite of, or precisely because of, the prevailing Faustian morality, Faust the tempter is also a major guide in Glass's quest towards a "waste land through which to plumb the rebirth of [his] age" (15). He appears again when Glass reaches the city of Skull and must ascend the Mountain of Folly. Skull, the nihilistic city of the swamps is "archetypal colony" (54) where a hollow and doomed humanity live in terror and uncertainty "held in thrall by the logic of violence, the logic of hell" (57). It is also the seat of progress which Faustian technology has transformed into a simulated, "an electric paradise. Cheap energy is the opium of the masses, the new lotus" (54).

While Goethe's Second Faust presents humanity's aspiration towards progress and the rational ideal of freedom and perfectibility (streben), Harris's shows that the ideal has been perverted. Temptations may be material or ideological as when Third-World populations yield not only to Faustian ambition but to the lotus flower exuding not death.
but "the drug of depravation that looks like the seed of black (or white) purity, the black (or white) seed of God, when the drummer of the senses protests in a fever against the ills of the world that are as much in him as in those he assaults. The lotus flower of addictive bias that hardens into terror" (30). In a world which puts its faith in material progress Faust, "the comedian of the machine," is a "prodigious immortal" (22). Others give in to fake spiritual temptations "convinced [they] possessed a duty to maim or kill in upholding the laws of God" (49), not to mention the political lures of "dangerous superpowers professing the good intention out of cunning self-interest, the good life out of expedient design" (67). Skull is full of refugees who have given in to various visions of new El Dorados, and when on the Mountain of Folly beyond Skull, Glass comes upon the window of Billionaire Death who explains that from the World Wars alone he pocketed billions of royalty, Glass looks at "the terrible opera of an age" (68) and the masks of the victims through the eyes of Death. Yet this very identification with the vision of Fictionalized Death leads him on to the "hospital of infinity," the vortex below the Mountain of Folly, first under the guidance of Peter, his childhood friend, then of Tiresias, the "seer of the underworld" (80) (also the leader of a steel band, who died protesting in the Guyana strike).

As in Harris's earlier comedies, the pilgrim's progress and "translation" occurs through the recognition of a central spiritual irony at the heart of all life, a capacity to discriminate between "LIKE YET UNLIKE FORCES" (23) which assume different shapes in his narratives. As already shown, the Easter bells, a symbol of resurrection, are used by Faust to tempt Glass into an act of possession, while on the Mountain of Folly he tempts him and Peter to seize a "glorious rope" to climb into heaven, which they reject to follow the "true sea[n]" that will take them through the Mountain (72). The central irony here is the distinction between illusions or simulations of immortality and, as we shall see, true survival in "Infinity's chain" (71). As "Fallen angel from the workshop of the gods, ambivalent sceptic of the purposes of evil, reluctant doctor of the soul," Faust incarnates this irony. When Glass begins to re-live, as it were, his Grandfather's revisionary Faust (19), he (Faust) appears, as we saw, as both tempter and guide, inducing in Glass through his very temptations (to which Glass sometimes succumbs) and the horrors he makes him witness "the ironies of strangest hidden conscience" (15) his grandfather had also experienced in the "sacred wood," so that Glass acquires the ironical capacity "to mirror yet repudiate and breach Skull reflexes and automatic behaviours" (60). Paradoxically, the "bridge of wisdom" is also the "Faustian bridge" (52,53) arching through opposite worlds, like the suspension bridge in The Eye. Faust explains that he must be read properly with a literate imagination (24) and Glass wonders later: "Were not mockery and self-mockery a measure in themselves of the changing shroud, the changing inveterates, of bias?" (77) When he borrows Faust's "Quetzalcoatl eyes in which were entwined the marriage of heaven and earth," he perceives the movement and parallels at the heart of the universe:

The backward shift, the forward shift, the folly, the creativity, the parallel laughter of the universe, the laughter of grace and mystery for which one pays dear, the laughter of the electric machine, of mechanical simulation, one buys cheap (64)

I have already indicated that in this "fictional autobiography" Glass's quest for "the nature and the meaning of value" (9) is also a quest into the nature of creation and fiction. All Harris's fictions illustrate through antithetical poetic imagery what he called "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity," which means more than a Blakean progression through contraries. It implies a descent into humanity's buried so-called "savage" past and a probing into, as well as a partial identification with, the alien "adversary within and without." Creativity is rooted in a profound grasp of those elements both foreign and native to ourselves ("the everlasting stranger within oneself"). Fiction grows, as it were, from the accumulated intangible remains of human experience in the "womb of space." Hence the author's constant re-visions of "living texts," his own and other writers. In the wake of Eliot's The Waste Land, Harris frequently intersperses his narratives with images or phrases borrowed from other writers but in a way which modifies their original meaning and liberates them from a given or fixed cultural frame. For example, the frequently mentioned "chapel perilous" in this novel alters both the meaning of Jessie Weston's commentary in From Ritual to Romance and of Eliot's symbolism. This process is here expanded, so much so that echoes or transformed tags of multifarious origins offer a kaleidoscopic view into the "universal imagination" (82) which sustains the novel. Faust (Marlowe's and Goethe's) relates to a pre-Columbian myth. The Tempest, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Treasure Island, Burns's "Auld Lang Syne," Under Milk Wood, Waiting for Godot, The Four Quarters and possibly Hardy's "Moments of Vision" (among others) voice cultural contrasts and parallels. There is a juxtaposition of Ghost of 'familiar texts" by de la Mare and Eliot with Calypso's folksong:

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Kneeling on the moonlit door.
Belly to belly
Back to back
Ah don't give a damn
Ah done dead a'ready
And I Tiresias have forsuffered all
I who sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead. (32)

Though the three extracts refer to the dead and suggest an "absence" which is also a "presence," there is at first sight little connection between them. Yet, as Glass realizes, in spite of the cultural gulf which separates them, they counterpoint each other and "become strangely cross-cultural," (32) expressions of an "enduring tradition" (48) which, as suggested, grows from the residues of human experience. This "enduring tradition" is the reverse side of Leavis's "Great Tradition" which, as Michael Gilkes rightly points out, was supported by "the Imperial Adventure." 26

Unlike Goethe's protagonist who finally climbs into heaven, Glass's quest is both one of ascent and descent and at the end of it he is back in Skull though preparing to sail into the future to meet Emma, certainly a subversive counterpart to Jane Austen's heroine since she is a priest who in AD 2025 is to become Archbishop of Canterbury, a foil to woman-hating which has been a "long-standing taint in the body of our civilization" (74). Like the Arawak virgin in Palace of the Peacock, she wears the seamless garment of the
saving muse and does indeed offer the "religious hope" (44) Glass looked for, stimulating a balance between "terror" and "sacrament" (87). We remember that both she and Peter had survived the shipwreck, and Glass's last conversation with Tiresias is on the true nature of survival; he presents it as a seed "between survivor and non-survivor,"

a seed or frail bond between light and shadow, a frail window of strangest flesh-and-blood between the visible and the invisible. That seed is the primitive impulse of the resurrection of the body. To measure or weigh ourselves against the light-in-the-shadow, the shadow-in-the-light of others is to deepen a reality that breaches the ailing premises of time. (81)

Glass's fictional autobiography is thus a spiritual quest not towards a final goal but rather towards the apprehension of the nexus and frail equilibrium between the anninomies of existence, which is what makes for survival. 'Fiction,' said W.H. to Glass, 'explores the partiality of the conditioned mind and the chained body, chained to lust, chained to waste' (49). Just before vanishing himself, Glass looks at a blank page in his autobiography and wonders: "Whose hand would seek mine, whose mask become my age in the future?" (82) In the Postscript written by Glass in AD 2025 as he is on the point of being engulfed by a wave, he converses "with the mind and the hand of the new mid-twenty-first-century drowned voyager who is to be reflected in Redbreast Glass" (85). In the course of his quest Glass had envisioned the year 2025 when W.H. himself would have vanished and "someone else - some other ageing mask - played the role of authorship/charactership in my book as if I were he, he me" (57). Thus new faces and masks take on the role of author and character and there is no end to the "revivification of the spaces of meaning that tie one voyaging generation to another" (87). The last words of the novel, "Remember me, remember Ghost" (88) which may paraphrase Dante (Parzorio, v. 133) or perhaps Christina Rosetti's "Remember" sum up the "infinite rehearsal" in which Ghost within Robin Redbreast Glass within W.H. have been involved.

From The Eye of the Scarecrow onwards, Harris's fiction shows that we live in a hollow dying age though he sees that very hollowness as "the ground of creative conscience and value" (51). Like many contemporary writers, he equates life with a text ('language is world'25) but not with discourse, and his work does not emphasize the fictionality of fiction. On the contrary, as W.H. insists at some point (48), fiction reveals truths and the reality of the world, while fictionalized author and characters are, as indicated above, mere mediators or 'vessels' through which fiction takes shape. It could be argued that to reveal truth or rather truths (since Harris insists on the heterogeneity of truth and the uncertainty, "the ambiguity of the Word" [50]) has always been the function of art but Harris's view reverses the traditional view of fiction, for him, is reality in the deepest sense while "authors become unreal" (48). In this novel Harris gives the impression of attempting to approach the mystery of creation from both sides, as if his protagonist were mid-way between the living and the dead. Glass explores the 'origins' of sensation and of perception (35), the origins of sexuality (74), the origins also of spirit (19) and of value (51). On the other hand, through Tiresias's eyes he sees 'the negative film of Thebes ... the negative film of ancient walls under the sea ... Napoleon's negative crown and Alexander's sceptre' (72). In a world falling apart Harris significantly uses this very disintegration (which found its theoretical equivalent in "deconstruction") to urge a reconstruction with the "building blocks of humanity" (18) or, as he put it in an earlier allegory, "to re-sensitize our biased globe into moveable squares within and beyond every avalanche of greed and despair."26

The final word in this novel is Ghost's, who sees the resurrection he has enacted as a complex revival of buried resources arching through many cultures and civilizations towards a true voice, a true ear, a true dialogue that the resurrection body nourishes as its ultimate originality. (85)

Notes

4 The catastrophic eclipse of conquered people(s) is indeed a major theme in his work. However, unlike most interepeters of the conquest of America, Harris emphasizes both the terror and the "mutuality" the clash gave rise to and sees this duality epitomized in the Carib bone-flute, i.e., the musical instrument fashioned by the Carib Indians out of their cannibalized enemy's bone. On this subject see his Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', in: New Left Review, N° 134, Nov./Dec. 1985, pp. 124-128.
6 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', p. 125.
7 Tradition, the Writer and Society, p. 36.
10 Wilson Harris, The Infinite Rehearsal, London: Faber and Faber 1987. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.
12 'Intuitive clues ... appear to have been planted by another hand. It is as if a daemon navigates within the imagries in the text.', 'Valediction of Fiction', p. 45.
13 'Comedy and Modern Allegory', p. 17.
14 In The Eye of the Scarecrow the emphasis is on the metaphysical notion of self-exile which underlies that of "infinite rehearsal." In: Antigones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), a comparative study of a myth nearly as haunting as Faust's, George Steiner traces the


Ibid., p. 137.


The name "Robin Redbreast" may have been inspired by Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" but Robin could also have been named after the ostler in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, who tries to imitate the magician, while "Redbreast," whatever its connotations, is part of the rich bird imagery in this novel, a creature of the air counterpointing and complementing water creatures (cf. "Frog").

Tradition, the Writer and Society, p. 48.

Ibid, p. 47.


Harris has explained that after writing *Carnival* he came upon Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* (New York: Random House, 1966) and used a passage from this book as an epigraph for his novel. The first sentence of the epigraph reads: "The wanderings of the soul after death are prenatal adventures; a journey by water, in a ship which itself is a goddess, to the gates of rebirth." This is also relevant to The Infinite Rehearsal. For Harris's explanation, see "Valediction of Fiction", pp. 44-46.

Harris uses "comedy" in his own idiosyncratic way. It implies an ironic transformation or conversion by re-living the very evil one seeks to eradicate, moving through and beyond it. Since *Black Morden* his fictions are called "comedies" (*Carnival* is re-titled "Divine Comedy"). The Infinite Rehearsal is "Dateless Day Infinite Comedy," "dateless day" evoking the Mexican calendar and the timeless passageway of memory in which Glass meets Peter and Emma.

The duality of Faust's "ancient eyes" (64) is related to Quetzalcoatl in whose dual nature the fish and bird imagery in the narrative is rooted.

This phrase is the title of a book of essays by Harris, Westport: Greenwood Press 1983. It refers to the inner territory that must be penetrated and revived to give birth to the "resurrection child."


"Valediction of Fiction", p. 51.