

## “Numinous Proportions”: Wilson Harris’s Alternative to All “Posts”

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A truly creative alchemical response to crisis and conflict and deprivation — a response that engages with formidable myth — may well come from the other side of a centralised or dominant civilisation, from extremities, from apparently irrelevant imaginations and resources. The complacencies of centralised, ruling powers . . . begin to wear thin at the deep margins of being within a multi-levelled quest for the nature of value and spirit.

WILSON HARRIS, “Literacy and the Imagination”

As the century and the millenium draw to a close, the major crisis that beset Western civilization with world-wide repercussions before World War I has not abated, and we seem to approach a new era dangerously poised between a sense of exhaustion and disintegration on one hand and the resurgence of a narrow fundamentalism on the other. Also with the possible exception of the Renaissance, no other period seems to have combined more inextricably man’s propensity to tyrannize and destroy with his extraordinary capacity for progress, though on the moral side whatever gains were made are largely cancelled out by losses.

Wilson Harris belongs with those writers who still believe in the moral function of art, a belief actualized, as the quotation above indicates, in a quest for value rather than categorical assertion. His many recent essays on imagination as provider of a genuinely creative response to crisis are proof enough that, in his eyes, art is still *the* major potential carrier of meaning. In the context of the “modernism versus post-modernism” debate this makes him close to modernism, as I think he is, but could disqualify him as a post-colonial writer because modernism has grown out of the liberal humanist tradition whose strategies fed on colonialism and the unacknowledged appropriation by metropolitan centres of cultural features from their heterogeneous colonies (Ashcroft et al. 156–157). I am only making this point to show the kind of contradiction one comes up against as soon as one classifies in a field averse *per se* to categorization. Nor am I denying the impact of so-called “primitive” or “exotic” cultures on modernist art but suggest that the influence worked both ways if at different moments, and that not a few post-colonial writers are direct heirs of what *was* a

modernist breakthrough in spite of its political conservatism and sometimes, though not always, unconscious ideological biases.

Before comparing Wilson Harris's work with literary post-modernism, a few preliminary comments are prerequisite if only to make clear what specific features call for comparison. No discussion of post-modernism can avoid remarking on the welter of contradictions it elicits among supporters and detractors or even within each group. Such a lack of consensus reflects on the nature of post-modernism itself for the loss of value and significance it posits has entailed a similar disagreement as to what language means, as evidenced, for example, by the proliferation of "posts" and their personal, contradictory meanings. Some could argue, for instance, that Simon During uses "post-cultural" in a progressive sense and George Steiner in a conservative one. Still what appeared originally as the expression of a liberating pluralism is sometimes turning into an obstacle rather than an auxiliary to the understanding of literature. This may sound like the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* all over again, and a comparison with the French "Battle of the Books" is not so preposterous if one remembers that a major issue in seventeenth-century France was an opposition between cartesianism and non-rationalism (whether in religion or poetry), and between the claim to universality represented by the classics and national subjects or myths. Also, then as now, both sides resorted to cartesian logic in their argumentation but created confusion by using the same terms with different meanings. My own purpose is not to enter the post-modernist controversy but to briefly substantiate Wilson Harris's view that the prevailing alternative to post-modernism is a fall-back on a one-sided tradition which he sees as a given "formula" rather than a genuinely renewed and renewable concept.<sup>1</sup>

To give a few examples, Gerald Graff's analysis of the "post-modernist breakthrough" has the merit of clarifying the issue, though perhaps too systematically. He argues that post-modernism is the "logical culmination" of romanticism and modernism and continues these movements rather than represent a sharp break with them. Eagleton offers a parallel argument when he writes that it was "modernism which brought structuralist and post-structuralist to birth in the first place" (139), and Lentricchia makes a fairly similar point (xiii). But there is a certain irony in Graff's presentation of post-modernism as a "reactionary tendency" (219) for he criticizes it through his essay in the name of rationalism and coherence, basically the values already put forward in the late twenties by Wyndham Lewis against romanticism, the intuitive in Bergson's philosophy as well as against Joyce and Lawrence, all destroyers of the classical ideal, endangering Western civilization by a return to primitivism. It is worth mentioning that for Graff, as indeed for most commentators on post-modernism, the role of imagination is to shape and order rather than discover (237).

In a commonsensical article on the arbitrariness and the motives of the "modernism versus post-modernism" debate, Susan Suleiman argues that it is one of naming rather than content, relevant only in the Anglo-Saxon context (255–270). In the same

volume Hans Bertens, one of its editors, offers a well-informed and helpful survey of the characteristics and historical development of post-modernism as term and concept. But in spite of his insistence on the pluralism of the post-modern *Weltanschauung* and of his own approach to it, and apart from a brief allusion to Latin American Magical Realism, he makes no reference whatsoever to phenomena outside Europe and the United States. He shares with Graff and Suleiman, as indeed with most Western commentators for or against post-modernism, a total lack of attention to basic factors which brought about the much emphasized disintegration, decentering (though not loss of power) and disenchantment or bitterness of the West. That this was formerly experienced by colonized peoples is totally ignored, as is the interaction of cultures in a "global" world and the surfacing even in the West of visions and modes of thought alien to its tradition and capable of modifying or renewing it.

The most telling example of this limited outlook in the Fokkema and Bertens volume is the essay by Richard Todd, generally a perceptive critic on British fiction by conventional standards. Todd is intent on proving that there is such a thing as "Postmodernist British Fiction" and he considers it of primordial importance that the writers he has in mind should have become part of the canon. Some of the novels he mentions are indeed by major British writers (Fowles, Murdoch, Golding in *The Paper Men*) but the aspects of their fiction he discusses, such as playfulness, pastiche and parody, are not the only or major criteria one would judge by if prone to canonization, despite Linda Hutcheon's insistence on their creative potential (*Narcissistic Narrative, A Theory of Parody*). Moreover, what Todd sees as the aspiration of British post-modernist fiction towards a pluralistic discourse seems to be of a very limited kind. This also applies to other Western commentators for whom pluralism generally means separate commitments to the "ex-centric" in "class, race, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity" as opposed to the "homogeneous monolith . . . middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 12). Todd refers to the "colonial or imperial past" but significantly mentions Scott and Farrell and seems unaware of experimental post-colonial writing in Britain other than Rushdie's, generally one of the few post-colonial writers worthy of "appropriation" by British critics.

Linda Hutcheon, on the contrary, offers an amazingly inclusive analysis of the many forms of post-modernism and exposes its paradoxes and contradictions, seeing in them a source of power and creative tension as well as the reason for the diverging interpretations it gives rise to (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 47, 222ff.). Above all, she suggests that post-modernism remains partly trapped by that which it challenges and rejects when she writes that "one of the lessons of the doubleness of post-modernism is that you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are implicated in the value you choose to challenge (223). Truth and reference, she says, have not ceased to exist but have been problematized (223)<sup>2</sup> and the post-modern foregrounds process as opposed to the discovery of total vision even when it does find such a vision (48). One of her recurring arguments against negative comments on post-modernism is that its representatives are aware that their creations are only human constructs, which

naturally follows from the negation of a referent. But the impression one often gets is that, within the persisting confines of their tradition, the writers she deals with dismantle and “play” with its building blocks and move them around, but seldom cross its borders except at surface level. Certainly, the self-reflexiveness of much post-modernist fiction has not necessarily entailed a drastic revision of narrative strategies and change in outlook. I would take Fowles’s fiction as one example among many. Like Todd, who considers *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as “perhaps Britain’s closest approach to the ‘canonic’ Postmodernist novel” (Todd 112), Hutcheon clearly sees it and *A Maggot* as significant examples of post-modernist fiction. Her analysis of Sarah’s role as fiction-maker in the first of these novels is illuminating. But her conclusion is that the creative aspects of parody, allegory and *mise en abyme* which characterize metafiction in this novel are saving techniques for the mimetic genre (*Narcissistic Narrative* 70). If saving the mimetic genre is what matters, and it obviously is since she approves of the novel as “realism redefined” (58), it is difficult to accept that post-modernism has been the genuinely revisionary mode she sees in it. It contradicts what I see as a major feature (and shortcoming) in Fowles’s fiction. He is a good storyteller, and the role played by women in his novels as stimulators of male consciousness can be seen as an advance on his predecessors in the realistic tradition. He may even have suggested through Alison, the Australian girl in *The Magus*, that English society needs to be regenerated from the outside. But in spite of the mysterious aura about Sarah in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, he has repeatedly tried and failed to convey a deeper, mysterious dimension through his narratives. The trials Nicholas is subjected to in *The Magus*, the different versions of the allegorical episode of the cavern in *A Maggot* (which partly mars the *tour de force* achieved by Fowles in his trial narrative, a challenge indeed to historiography [Hutcheon, *Poetics* 106]), are incentives to awareness through a fairly conventional though baroque symbolism and through mechanical devices such as His Lordship’s unexplained disappearance (in spite of its metaphysical connotations) or, for that matter, the celebrated endings of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. They may “challenge certainty” (48) and, like the four postscripts in Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*, they question the main text (Todd 114) and convey a sense of relativity but not the genuine ontological doubt supposed to be a major feature of post-modernist fiction.

These few and admittedly arbitrarily chosen examples suggest that post-modernism still functions within a tradition in which it is difficult to envisage genuinely new and different modes of perception.<sup>3</sup> The continuing impact of tradition as expression of established culture and outlook, and a return to it, were already evidenced five years ago in some of the negative responses to an inquiry by *PN Review* (1985) on the “New Orthodoxy” in critical theory. It is also interesting to note that a return to realistic narrative is being hailed from ideologically opposite quarters.<sup>4</sup>

Wilson Harris’s conception of tradition was the subject of his first major essay and, just as *Palace of the Peacock* contains embryonically all further fictional developments in his work, so *Tradition, the Writer and Society* contains the quintessence of

all further developments and conceptualizations of his thought. I do not think, incidentally, that Harris puts forward “theories,” though *some* of his views have been theorized and used in criticism. His own critical essays are usually written after or, judging from their dating, in parallel with some of his fiction, and the premises in both are largely non-rational, as a close scrutiny of his writing shows (cf. *The Womb of Space*). Even though the general trend of his essays develops as a “logical” argument, there are, as it were, “gaps” in the logic filled by what are for Harris wholly intuitive insights. As often with original writers, his fiction and critical writings are most profitably read in the light of each other for a better understanding of his vision and thought as of their unique symbiosis. Harris’s conception of tradition, inspired, as is well-known, by the West Indian experience of void and so-called “historylessness” (*Tradition*), is a good example of the resistance of his views to theorization. Its non-rational tenor has not been sufficiently emphasized though, as he said in an interview in which he connected post-colonial allegory and tradition, “the absent body is rooted in an understanding of presence which lies *beyond logical presence*” (Interview 1988: 49). To rationally minded critics (myself included) the full implications of the italicized words are not easy to grasp, yet they are the very essence (if one still dares use that word) of Harris’s art. They account for his mode of writing as a visionary, predominantly “dream-like” yet transformative re-enactment of the past, for the “deconstruction” of the surface reality and the decentering of the narrative perspective in his fiction, not in playfulness or, at the other extreme, out of despair in a world become meaningless but, on the contrary, to make possible the quest for value and meaning which, as we saw, he clearly advocates. Though it does have ideological and political implications (if only in its rejection of any kind of imperialism and authoritarianism), decentering for Harris, while denying hierarchy, does not express his suspicion of “truth” or “reality” and implies more than Derrida’s awareness that contamination by the metaphysical is impossible to escape (Lentricchia 174). But he too rejects the notion of all absolutes and the notion of a “transcendental signifier” through which “truth or reality . . . will act [and should act] as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience” (Eagleton 131). The foundation of truth is, for Harris, “unpinnable” and absolute truth can never be reached, not even through a “reconciliation of opposites,” which, as the protagonist of *The Four Banks of the River of Space* realizes, is “too uncreative or mechanical” a formula (51).

I am in fact arguing that Harris’s thought, like the linguistic fabric of his prose, defies categorization. His works of art, to reverse Lyotard’s much quoted phrase (81), are not looking for rules and categories, and both his fiction and criticism seek “to translate/re-dress all *codes* into fractions and factors of truth” (*Womb of Space* 86, italics mine). The truth his characters are in quest of, “the inimitable ground of Being” (*Four Banks* 51), is never reached and its existence is only perceived intuitively through “a glimmering apprehension of the magic of creative nature, the life of sculpture, the genesis of art, the being of music” (*Four Banks* 39). The God Harris seems to believe in is not, if I understand rightly, a reality exclusively beyond man but essentially a creator, “a true Creator, whose unknowable limits are *our* creaturely



infinity" (*Four Banks* 32, italics mine). I hope this will become clearer as we go along. The point I am making here is that Harris's God exists through men as much as they through Him, just as in his novels the creative process develops through an interaction between the author/sometimes "editor"/sometimes protagonist and his characters (see below). At one stage in his imaginative quest the protagonist in *Four Banks* thinks:

I had missed the subtle linkages of a parent-Imagination *in, through and beyond* all creatures, all elements, a Parent beyond fixed comprehension until I began to retrace my steps. (125, italics mine)

Retracing one's steps is the process in which Harris's protagonists have been involved in from *The Guyana Quartet* onwards. Through their experiences and encounters with a vanished past, lost cultures or deprived individuals and groups (apparently non-existent yet agents of the sacred in his fiction), his protagonists confront "areas of tradition that have sunken away and apparently disappeared and vanished and yet that are still active at some level" (Interview 1988: 48). Harris continues that "one has to make a distinction between *activity* as a kind of mechanical process and *movement* as something which is rooted in . . . a combination of faculties in the imagination," thus clearly linking the creative process to the kind of tradition ("absent body" beyond logical presence) he has in mind. From whatever angle one approaches his fiction or essays, one comes up against this enigmatic "presence" which he himself says he apprehends through "intuitive clues" (see above) and which takes on innumerable shapes in his novels. The dreaming recreation of New World conquest in *Palace of the Peacock* is a surfacing of that lost tradition into consciousness, as are the runaway slaves Fenwick encounters in *The Secret Ladder* but also the mysterious presence which hovers over Catalena when they threaten to execute her. The Indians in *Tumatumari*, the pre-Columbian vestiges into which Idiot Nameless falls in *Companions*, the Nameless country in *Black Marsden*, the canvas Da Silva "revises" are so many faces (sometimes paradoxically faceless) or manifestations of tradition, which sometimes erupts with unpredictable force and can arouse terror as much as ecstasy.

I am convinced that there is a tradition in depth *which returns, which nourishes us even though it appears to have vanished*, and that it creates a fiction in the ways in which the creative imagination comes into dialogue with clues of revisionary moment. The spectral burden of vanishing and re-appearing is at the heart of the writer's task. ("Literacy" 27)

It is this subterranean living tradition ("living fossil texts" is, as we shall see, another expression for it) which informs the notions of "reversal," "re-vision"<sup>5</sup> and "infinite rehearsal," *a-posteriori* conceptualizations of his fictional practice, now frequently applied in post-colonial criticism, though not always in the sense meant by Harris because the critic, perhaps inevitably, ignores the complex overlapping of layers of reality and the intuitive thrust in exploring them, the *faith* in the power of intuition by which Harris has radicalized fiction. In addition, his conception of a lost tradition

and of texts coming alive, as it were, of their own volition, texts which he scans for frail clues he (or any other author) may not have been aware of planting there himself ("Comedy" 131), suggests that the text not only has a life of its own but an intention of its own. Harris convincingly substantiates this view in *The Womb of Space* by his wholly personal and original reading of novels which had previously received considerable attention of a more conventional kind.<sup>6</sup>

It should already be clear that the uncertain enigmatic reality which, for Harris, is the substance of tradition differs from what is usually called the post-modernist indeterminacy. That reality is not only rooted in a lost past but in the physical world and in man's psyche ("the womb of space"): "It is not a question of rootlessness but of the miracle of roots, the miracle of a dialogue with eclipsed selves" (*Explorations* 65–66). It naturally influences his conception and rendering of character. The "dissolution of ego boundaries," the fragmentation of the self, characteristic of much post-modernist fiction, entail in his novels neither mere uncertainty of identity nor, at the opposite pole, the assertion of one that is merely "other," as in some Black American writing and criticism or, for that matter, much post-colonial writing. Neither the author nor the characters are "sovereign" in his view, by which he means that they do not embody one given personality but rather a series of personalities born out of "one complex womb" (*Palace* 41): "personality is cognizant of many existences [who] become agents of personality" (*Kas-Kas* 53). Already in *Palace* Harris had presented the men who accompany Donne on his quest as "the eccentric emotional lives of the crew every man mans and lives in his inmost ship and theatre and mind" (48).

In this first novel also Harris anticipated what post-structuralist critics call "the disappearance of the author," though with a different effect and meaning. Barthes proclaimed the death of the author as the exclusive and original source of meaning concomitant with his authority as the unique producer of that meaning (see, among other writings, "The Death of the Author"). The act of creation becomes in Linda Hutcheon's words "performative inscription" produced *here and now*, whose significance largely depends on the receiver's role (*Poetics* 76–77), as we know from Iser's theories. Or, according to Hutcheon, the author can be, as in Coetzee's *Foe*, an "agent provocateur/manipulateur" (*Poetics* 78). The disappearance of the author in Harris's fiction implies more than a provoking stance, a challenging of received truths (though it does this as well) or an escape into parody. He becomes a vessel through whom other voices speak. As he or the narrator disappears, like the "I" narrator in *Palace* or the third person narrator in *The Tree of the Sun*, the serial personalities that speak through him become capable of provoking change (like Donne in his trial when the "I" narrator temporarily vanishes). The characters thus become "agents" creating fiction themselves and even fictionalizing their creator. This dialogical process is increasingly foregrounded in Harris's later novels such as *The Tree of the Sun* and *The Infinite Rehearsal*.<sup>7</sup> It recalls my interpretation above of God as both Creator and Created. It also explains why the author is "an agent of real change" (Interview 1986: 2) who can still influence humanity and civilization through the transformation of both

art and life. There is no doubt an element of Shelleyan Romanticism in the belief that imagination can awaken mankind, though, to Harris, the “literacy of the imagination” is first and foremost a deep perception of the fallacies and false clarities which imprison man in a one-directional role. It is not the appendage of an elite, intellectual or other, as he shows in his discussion of Beti in *The Far Journey of Oudin* (“Literacy”). Though illiterate, she reads Oudin and because she is intuitively capable of grasping his need in his extremity, she creates him anew.

Harris’s repeated emphasis on conversion, transformation and translation is also rooted in his vision of an apparently lost tradition which he sees as “the true source of the text” when it (the text) “comes profoundly alive” (“Literacy” 22). If one keeps in mind that the “soil of tradition” is also “the soil of the world’s unconscious” (“Literacy” 22–23), the text coming alive clearly shows that the author is a mediator, as indeed Harris suggests when he writes that “[the author] is susceptible to an unpredictable movement of consciousness-in-unconsciousness” (“Literacy” 23). Although critics have repeatedly emphasized the importance of transformation in Harris’s fiction, little attention has been paid so far to his vision of creation as a transfer or “translation” of the substance of fiction from unconsciousness into consciousness. Yet in a much quoted essay like “Comedy and Modern Allegory” Harris refers five times to “a bridge between the collective unconscious of the human race and the miracle of consciousness” (135), a bridge “from the limbo of the lost to the limbo of the saved” (132), not a static or finished bridge but one that grows out of a response to “intuitive clues.”

The ceaseless elaboration and “unfinished genesis” of that bridge is what Harris means by cross-culturalism as distinct from multi-culturalism, which designates the co-existence and recognition of different cultures but not necessarily their interaction, distinct also from the post-modernist pluralism discussed above. His most frequent example of cross-culturalism in his essays (but also fictionalized in “The Sleepers of Roraima”) is that of the Carib bone-flute which points to a nascent posthumous dialogue between two cultures, one conquering, the other defeated and lost but revived imaginatively. He has explained that the Caribs used to carve a flute out of the bones of their cannibalized Spanish enemies and eat a morsel of their flesh in order to enter their mind, sense their adversarial hate, and intuit the kind of attack they might wage against themselves. It would seem that the Caribs also saw in the bone-flute the very origins of music. The flute was therefore “the seed of an intimate revelation . . . of *mutual spaces* they shared with the enemy . . . within which to visualize the *rhythm* of strategy, the *rhythm* of attack or defence the enemy would dream to employ against them” (“On the Beach” 339, italics mine).<sup>8</sup> I wish to emphasize here Harris’s description of the flute as a “bridge of soul” (“Comedy” 9), “a fine, a spider’s web, revolving bridge, upon which the ghost of music runs, moves between the living and the dead, the living and the living, the living and the unborn” (“On the Beach” 339). The revulsive impact of cannibalism has long hidden this “mutuality” but it (cannibalism) now “begins to give ground to a deeply hidden moral compulsion” to

conquer the “inner rage, inner fire associated with cruel prejudice” (“On the Beach” 339). Harris insists on the need to probe “the links between moral being [the consumption of hideous bias] and profoundest creativity,” as he also metaphorizes in the bone-flute his conviction that “adversarial contexts” such as the encounter between inimical cultures can generate creativity since both destruction (cannibalism) and creation (music) coalesce in the instrument, and that catastrophe can so destroy the monolithic outlook of a people as to offer an opportunity for spiritual recovery and new growth.

Understandably then, Harris’s dynamic conception of creativeness as a bridge between the invisible and the visible, unconsciousness and consciousness, a “mutuality between perishing and surviving” (“Comedy” 132), is wholly incompatible with realism, even revised, and its post-modernist forms, which he most objects to on the ground that “the postmodernists have discarded depth, they have discarded the unconscious” (“Literacy” 27) and fail to probe the deeper psychological strata in individual psyche and culture. His own insistence on the surfacing and translation into consciousness of experience buried in the unconscious also accounts for his transformation of genres. When Linda Hutcheon writes of post-modernism as an art which interrogates and pushes limits (*Poetics* 8) and explains that literary genres have become fluid (9), she exemplifies this mainly by pointing to a blurring or mixing of categories as, for example, between various forms of elitist and popular art. Harris’s questioning and re-definition of traditional forms of narrative entails in practice a complete reversal of conventional expectations in major genres. The “drama of consciousness” (*Tradition* 34; 55) in which his characters have been involved from his first novel, enacting an “infinite rehearsal” yet never total mutation of established patterns of existence in the past, his “re-visions” of allegory and epic into “modern” fictional modes, these are also informed by the convertibility of experience at once personal and historical<sup>9</sup> which I have discussed. However sublime, Homer’s great epics and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* express a vision of life and death in keeping with their time and inspired by man’s longing for the infinite in a form which, if imitated, can be immobilized in its very sublimity. Harris replaces the “allegorical stasis of divine comedy” by an “evolving metaphysic” of the imagination (“Quest for Form” 27; 26) which he deems necessary to save humanity from the catastrophic death-wish it has given into in its very desire for the infinite. In many of his novels “convertible images” alter the formerly separate and distinct Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso into fluid, overlapping states. Commenting on Donne’s perception of the hell he is responsible for, when he hangs from a cliff in an invisible noose, prior to his conversion and evanescent vision of what may be called “Paradise,” Harris modifies Gertrude Stein’s expression of continuity (“a rose is a rose is a rose”) into “a noose is a noose is *not* a noose” and even “a rose is a noose is a particle is a wave” (“Comedy” 129):

An alteration, however intuitive, in allegorical stasis of divine comedy of existence must affect Faustian hubris. The very cornerstones of European literature may alter and acquire different creative emphases within a world that has so long been

endangered and abused in the name of the virtues of the superman, virtues that are synonymous with a lust for infinity. ("Quest for Form" 27)

It is within this perspective that Harris has revised and altered the leading thread and issue of *The Divine Comedy*,<sup>10</sup> Goethe's *Faustus* and major aspects of Ulysses' quest in his latest trilogy, *Carnival*, *The Infinite Rehearsal* and *The Four Banks of the River of Space*. In this latest novel Harris transforms the character and fate of his Penelope and Ulysses as radically as he had "revised" his Guyanese divine comedy in *Carnival*, a revision of epic which is also "cross-cultural dialogue between imaginations" ("Comedy" 128).

A major feature of Harris's revision of allegory, which follows from the upsurge of reality from the unconscious is the apparition of "guides" in the narrative who belong to the buried past (as Virgil guided Dante through his quest) and are "substantial to the fiction" the novelist creates, helpers in the creative process ("Validation" 47–48). One thinks, for example, of the Caribs Cristo envisions in the forest in *The Whole Armour*, of the formerly vanished yet reappearing Da Silva in *Heartland*, José in *Companions* (also a literal guide through Mexico), as well as of characters acting more obviously as spiritual guides through the labyrinth of memory, like Masters in *Carnival*, Faust in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, and the characters, "live absences," who help Anselm translate "epic fate into inimitable freedom" in *Four Banks* (xiii, 9). I am, of course, oversimplifying what is actually a complex process in Harris's novels. If I am not mistaken, the guides who, as he has explained, "arise from the collective unconscious encompassing the living and the dead" are linked with, and partly personify, an "inner objectivity" ("Comedy" 127) which underlies the manifold manifestations of the phenomenological world. They usually belong in his novels with the living and the dead (see Masters in *Carnival* or Ghost in *The Infinite Rehearsal*) and partake of both the human and the divine. I think that Harris sees in the "inner objectivity" a kind of unifying function (though it is obviously more than that) embracing both reason and imagination, the undivided faculties of man which still operated in unison in alchemy. In both fiction and essays he has shown a preoccupation with the need to reconcile art and science, which were tragically separated as a result of the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment:<sup>11</sup>

The Enlightenment . . . began to turn its back on the life of the intuitive imagination. It negated the necessity to visualize in new ways, to . . . re-interpret in far-reaching ways, subtle links and bridges between the arts and the sciences, between poem and painting, between music and figurations of memory associated with architecture. ("Brodber" 2)

Finally, I would suggest that the substance of fiction which comes to life through "the complex arousal of imprisoned or eclipsed faculties and their genuine — in contradistinction to sublimated — contribution to a creative humanity" ("Oedipus" 15) is what Harris has called "living fossil strata" or "live fossil myth" ("Validation" 11,5).

Space is lacking to comment on the major role and transformative potential of myth in Harris's fiction,<sup>12</sup> which should be the subject of a separate essay. Suffice it to say that "myth becomes a basic corrective to tyrannous or despotic immediacy" ("Liberty" 5). Harris's emphasis on the livingness of a fossil reality can be associated to the "revisionary potential within imageries in texts of reality" ("Fabric" 176). That "texts of reality" or "texts of being" (180) should be capable of "revising themselves" because they are alive (yet another formulation of the living tradition) brings to light an identification between art and life, which at first sight may resemble the disappearance of "the familiar humanist separation of art and life" Linda Hutcheon presents as characteristic of post-modernism (*Poetics* 7). Again, her example shows that the fusion takes place at a fictional realistic level, even one of "journalistic facticity" (10), whereas Harris's characters re-live the torments of calamitous events as if experiencing them or their consequences. So that while post-modernist metafiction usually stresses the fictionality of narrative as a subjective human construct no better or worse than another (if, by post-structuralist standards, judgements of value are to be excluded), Harris boldly connects the transformation of images of a terrifying past through an act of imagination with a possible rebirth from catastrophe. And just as he thinks there is no short cut to solutions of the calamities of the world ("Validation" 40), so "there is no short cut into the evolution of new or original novel-form susceptible to, immersed in, the heterogeneity of the modern world" (*Explorations* 128). As he further explained, "without a profound alteration of fictional imagery in narrative bodies . . . catastrophe appears to endure and to eclipse the annunciation [change, rebirth] of humanity" ("Quest for Form" 26–27).

Nor is this correspondence between life and art a rendering of the Leavisite "unmediated reality" Homi Bhabha criticizes (85) since Harris's not only breaks the mould of realism specific to the "great tradition" but the artist himself is, as I have argued, a mediator. Another consequence of this is that Harris's conception of language differs from the "post-structuralist views of Postmodernism which declare all attempts to turn any language into an instrument of positive knowledge utterly futile" (Bertens 22). Language is not "self-referential" (Eagleton 8), though Harris would probably not deny Eagleton's description of it as a "web-like complexity of signs . . . the back and forth, present and absent, forward and sideways [Harris would say backward] movement of language in its actual processes" (132). Harris's conception of language is naturally in keeping with his belief in the correspondence between art and life. Commenting on the narrator's "living, closed eye" in *Palace*, he writes:

The living, closed eye therefore is a verbal construct, but it is something sculpted as well. In the beginning was the Word, in the beginning was the language of sculpture, in the beginning was the intuitive/inner voice of the mask, in the beginning was the painted cosmos and its orchestra of light and darkness. ("Literacy" 26)

"Language is world" Harris also wrote ("Validation" 51), stressing a correspondence which he developed in a recent discussion of justice in *The Whole Armour*:



For what is at stake . . . is the flexible placement of associations *within a pregnant form, a living language, a pregnant Word*. Such pregnant form gives life to the hollow appearance of justice. That is my intuition of fiction and . . . its bearing on the scope and capacity of the Word to come into equation with inimitable truth. ("Liberty" 9)

"To come into equation with inimitable truth" will probably mark him out as an "essentialist," as he is in one sense when he writes "That goal [of his protagonist] or infinite domain is never reached or taken but it remains an essence that underpins, translates, transfigures the ground of all experience" (*Four Banks* xiii). One must emphasize that what Harris has in mind in terms of "essence" or "centre" remains, like wholeness as opposed to totality, forever "unnameable" or "unfathomable" (Interview 1979: 24) and cannot be encompassed in any "frame of dogma" ("Liberty" 3); it can never be the privileged source of authority of any given culture or civilization. I return to this aspect of his work because, if I understand rightly, this cohering, mediating but ungraspable force (*Womb of Space* xix, 56) is also the "untrappable source of language," which *because* it cannot be trapped (*The Eye* 96) is the instrument "which continuously transforms inner and outer formal categories of experience" (*Tradition* 32). This is the transformation illustrated through his work by "convertible imageries."

It is also this mysterious reality which makes of Harris a post-colonial writer and, perhaps paradoxically, has inspired some post-colonial criticism in recent years. To place my major argument in the post-colonial context, the victims of imperialism (vanished peoples and cultures), its psychological legacies, eclipsed "areas of sensibility," and their impact on landscape(s), the present-day deprived whom the powerful choose not to see, are all part of what Harris has called "an apparent non-existent ground of being" (expressed differently above) which nevertheless possesses a "regenerative force" (Interview 1979: 19; 25). For it is on that apparently non-existent ground that the frail transformative clues appear on the canvas of existence and art. This ground of loss (both inner and outer space) is also the driving moral force of his conception of fiction as "conversion of deprivations" (*Womb of Space* 63; 137. See also "On the Beach" 339), as constant re-vision, a fiction which, in the now much-quoted phrase "seeks to consume its own biases" (*Guyana Quartet* 9). I think this phrase means more than a negation of the authority of the text and an acknowledgement of the author's inevitable subjectivity. I would suggest that it applies mainly to Harris's working method, when he revises his drafts and concentrates on them with extreme attention, "scanning them for clues" ("Literacy" 19) and revising imageries which he will not accept as final, as their development throughout his fiction shows.

The point I have been driving at is that the immaterial/material perspectives and the unconsciousness/consciousness nexus which make Harris reject post-modernism as nihilistic are the very premises of his post-colonial outlook. Harris has expressed agreement with the post-colonial position provided one is aware of a hypnotic transference of influence from colonialism to post-colonialism and the fact that the latter is still partly bound up with the former (Interview 1986: 7). His objection to

much post-colonial writing is that it has adopted the realism of imperial cultures in both form and content, as some former colonies have in political practice: "punitive logic [like that of the slave owners] continues as the philosophy of post-colonial regimes" ("Oedipus" 18). He has also commented in several essays on Caribbean philistinism and its "refusal to perceive its own dismembered psychological world" (*Womb of Space* 122) as well as on the one-sided militantism of the literature and criticism of the formerly oppressed, particularly when they present themselves as "the antithesis of the thesis of white supremacy" (Ashcroft et al. 21). I have argued that his own cross-culturalism is deeply rooted in a perception in depth of lost, "alien" experience, of vanished, supposedly "savage" cultures (e.g. the pre-Columbian) with which the "civilized" must enter into dialogue as they retrieve them from the abyss of oblivion. It is precisely the "abysmal otherness," the never wholly perceptible third nameless dimension which underlies all Harris's narratives and may "bring resources to alter . . . the fabric of imagination in the direction of a therapeutic ceaselessly unfinished genesis"<sup>13</sup> ("Fabric" 182) which is the mainspring of Harris's post-colonialism. As he recently pointed out,

Extremity or marginality . . . lifts the medium of diverse experience to a new angle of possibility. Marginality is not so much a geographical situation . . . it is rather an angle of creative capacity as the turbulent twentieth century draws to a close. ("Liberty" 13)

This may appear as yet another formulation of the creative potential of the subterranean tradition. But it calls for an important reservation as to the applicability of Harris's thinking to post-colonial criticism. One of the tenets of that criticism, as indeed of post-structuralism, has been the rejection of the notion of universality as an expression of cultural imperialism. Harris's view of that imperialism and his response to "universal" Western masterpieces are much more *nuancé* and, to that extent, his adherence to the post-colonial approach in criticism is a qualified one. It is not just a question of the meaning one attributes to words (though it is partly that) but also of his vision of universality, which, as much as post-colonial criticism, precludes any easy assimilation of the universal to the Western. But in this as in other aspects of his thought and writing, he has conceived his own third way. He has recently expressed his deep attachment to the English language in several essays and when he describes it as "a changing, subtle medium" which has acquired "some of the rhythms and incantatory spirit of the alien tongues of [his] mixed ancestry" ("Liberty" 13), this is not just, I think, a passing reference to the hybridization of English but a "validation" of his dynamic view of cross-culturalism and its transformative potential. He has also asserted 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 civilised cultures. ("Comedy" 137)

These words together with Harris's insistence on "diversity-within-universality" ("Brodber" 1) point once more to the bridge between a tradition rooted in a "universal unconscious" and the creative imagination:

The universal imagination — if it has any value or meaning — has its roots in subconscious and unconscious strata that disclose themselves profoundly within re-visionary strategies through intuitive clues that appear in a text one creates. That text moves or works in concert with other texts to create a multi-textual dialogue. ("Validation" 44)

I am aware that, while insisting on the importance of Harris's intuitive method and the bridge between the unconscious and consciousness in his creative process, I have been "hypnotized" to a large extent by my cartesian training and have presented a rational argumentation that considerably reduces and tames the creative energy, the complex vision, the significance and the stunning beauty of his metaphorical language, which inform his fiction. I don't mean by this that Harris's writing resists critical analysis, only that it is in his novels that the reader will discover the "visionary counterpoint of resources" ("Oedipus" 18) he brings to light; "the hidden numinous proportions within the mechanisms of colonialism and post-colonialism" ("Fabric" 176).

#### NOTES

1. Since I have mentioned Harris's affinity with Modernism, I should say here that Harris's own view of tradition is very different from Eliot's and the reverse of authoritarian though there is similarity between the two in their viewing it as a living phenomenon, and, as is obvious from his many references to Eliot's criticism, Harris admires it. Also, as we shall see, Harris's aesthetic is not "an aesthetic of the sublime" though Lyotard's phrasing of "modern aesthetics" (81) needs to be qualified.
2. Stephen Slemon also comments on this aspect of her criticism in "Modernism's Last Post" on page two in this collection.
3. I am aware that I have only drawn attention to the kind of criticism which points to post-modernist features that most clearly contrast with Harris's writing and that my brief discussion must give an impression of unqualified generalization. I would argue, for example, that Swift's *Waterland* and even D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* are better examples of what post-modernism is usually said to be than Fowles's novels. Some of the more original aspects of post-modernism are discussed in D'Haen and Bertens.
4. See, for example, Wilde, review article on Larry McCaffery, ed., *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, in *Contemporary Literature* XXX.1 (1989), and its conclusion: "Welcome back, World!"
5. Harris's conception of "re-vision" was expressed many years before Adrienne Rich's, a predominantly feminist concept often considered as breaking new ground. See Rich.

6. Umberto Eco has just recently expressed a similar view when he wrote that "between the intention of the author . . . and the intention of the interpreter . . . there is an *intention of the text*." Another parallel with Harris's thought (see, among others, "Comedy," "Fabric," and Harris's latest novels) lies in his assertion that "modern quantitative science is born, *inter alia*, in a dialogue with the qualitative knowledge of Hermeticism." Eco, 666; 678.
7. There is some affinity between this dialogical process and Bakhtin's conception of dialogue as explained by Julia Kristeva in "Word, Dialogue and Novel," though there are also differences. For a discussion of Harris's affinities with Bakhtin, see McDougall.
8. The full implications of Harris's interpretation of the bone-flute cannot be discussed here and I refer the reader to his essays in *Explorations* and to "On the Beach," "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity," "Comedy and Modern Allegory."
9. On the transformation of history see Slemon.
10. It is interesting to compare Harris's interpretation and "transformation" of the structure of *The Divine Comedy* with Said's in *Orientalism*. Said sees it as typical of "the Orientalist attitude in general which shares with magic . . . and with mythology [a classification Harris would strongly object to] the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system" (70). His criticism stops at Dante's rejection of Islam.
11. When alluding to this division, Harris often refers to Frances Yates's analysis in *The Art of Memory* of lost aspects of tradition and of the split between "arts of memory" since the Renaissance.
12. On the subject of myth see *Explorations* and most of Harris's recent essays.
13. Harris's latest image for this "unfinished genesis" is the "ravelling/unravelling" of "the coat of tradition that never quite seems to fit the globe" Penelope weaves in *Four Banks* (121, 54–55, 58–59).

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