

## Teaching Past the Posts<sup>1</sup>

In an essay on Wilson Harris published some fifteen years ago, I suggested that the dissolution of values and forms due to the combined action of science and history, in particular the horrors of two world wars, had left the Western world in the same kind of psychological and spiritual void as that experienced by West Indians with far greater and tragic intensity throughout their history (Maes-Jelinek 1979: 181). This suggestion called for an important qualification in that Western powers had, to begin with, been responsible for the void experienced in the West Indies and other colonies. But questions of responsibility temporarily set aside, history has caught up with the West, and one can assert that a similar experience of disorientation and loss is at the origin of both post-colonialism and post-modernism, however different the post-colonials' and Westerners' reaction to that experience and its literary expression may be. The "crisis of civilization" that is generally acknowledged on a global scale is a convenient starting point to make clear the connections and divergences I see between the two movements.

It is by now a commonplace to say that definitions of literary post-

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<sup>1</sup> The major part of this essay was read at a conference which took place at Queen's University (Kingston, Canada) in the Fall of 1992 in honour of Professor J.P. Matthews, a pioneer of comparative post-colonial studies. Its theme was "Post-Colonial Pedagogy: Teaching the Commonwealth Literatures." The title of the paper, and also that of the workshop in which it was read, refers to attempts in recent years "to characterise post-modernist and post-colonial discourses in relation to each other, and to chart their intersecting and diverging trajectories." Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (University of Calgary Press and Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p.vii.

modernism abound and that, pedagogically, the continuing proliferation of sometimes contradictory commentary makes it more rather than less complex. It is an umbrella term which, in spite of common features and strategies, covers different kinds of phenomena that are themselves inspired by different realities. Though the term first appeared in Latin America in the 1930s (Bertens 1986: 11), it is generally agreed that, in its present-day connotation, it grew out of the collapse of the Western system of values, leading in some cases to a denial of metaphysics altogether. As a Western phenomenon, it first appeared in the United States in the 50s and 60s. American critics usually emphasize the historical, social and political circumstances that gave rise to it in their country, an approach that is self-evident in post-structuralist analysis, which places emphasis on the context. But my impression is that where European history and its impact on European peoples are concerned, much writing in English tends to take the context for granted except when this is its specific subject.<sup>2</sup> The relation between post-modernism and history is discussed at length and its importance emphasized, but in general terms, as discourse or fictionalized narrative, on the ground that no true account of history is possible anyway and that it is necessarily subjective. I don't deny this subjectivity nor the need to challenge one-sided, hegemonizing interpretations but I see a dangerous confusion in a theory which often makes little distinction between history and historiography even when referring to a past supposedly known through texts only. Much as I admire Linda Hutcheon's analysis of post-modernism, I disagree with her assertion that "the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts,'" and with her claim that this is not a "'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the *meaning-making function of human constructs*" (Hutcheon 1988: 82, emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup> Without disputing the significance of that function, I

<sup>2</sup> See *The Context of English Literature Series*, particularly Alan Sinfield's books.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon qualifies this statement in her conclusion to *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: "Postmodernism refuses to eliminate (and indeed foregrounds) 'the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text' (Andreas Huyssen, *After the great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, 221), and it does so by historicizing and contextualizing the separation between those discourses, which for humanism, have been seen as almost mutually incompatible" (1988: 227). She sees postmodernism as holding the view that contradictions are inevitable, and indeed "the

still object to theory's cancellation of the real, even if the automatic identification of historiography with reality is sometimes highly questionable. I don't think anyone who has actually faced the deprivations, genocides, bombing and other ravages that history brings in its wake would deny that the meaning is in the events *first*, whatever the historian or hegemonizing discourses make of them afterwards: the meaning of events is after all the major impulse behind much post-colonial writing and criticism and its challenge to Western historiography. The way events shape people's lives, and their inevitably subjective narrativization, "the meaning-making function of human constructs," are *not* mutually exclusive.

While agreeing that the notion of historical knowledge has been problematized (Hutcheon 1988: 87ff.) by post-modernism, I see this problematization more as a development of, than as a break with, modernism, which Hutcheon partly acknowledges ("postmodernism is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism," 88). If Modernist writers tried to escape the "nightmare of history" and, with the exception of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, turned to conservative politics to limit its impact, their work is nevertheless steeped in history and not sheer "ahistoric formalism and aestheticism" (88). Think of Joyce's Ireland, Eliot's 'Wasteland' which he sought to counter by adhering to institutions like Royalty and Anglicanism, of Lawrence running away from European history while being obsessed by it, as the "Nightmare" chapter in *Kangaroo* and his other later novels show. Even Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* expresses her premonition of impending catastrophe in a fragmented narrative, while the impact of Mexican and European history in a late modernist novel like Lowry's *Under the Volcano* produces an effect not dissimilar to Picasso's *Guernica*. For these writers the significance of history is in both the event and its narration, however fictionalized and subjective, while post-modernism adds its own awareness of this fictionalization but does not automatically bypass the actual event. My comments here bear on British literary post-modernism, a comparatively limited phenomenon, which nevertheless shares some features with the French and German varieties or the work of the Czech novelist Kundera, though each has

condition of social as well as cultural experience" (227).

a different axe to grind.

The shift from modernism to post-modernist self-consciousness and its challenge to received versions of history is most obvious in Graham Swift's *Waterland*, which fictionalizes the dilemma of the present-day story-teller and historian, for the I-narrator is significantly both. This fictionalization occurs through an intricate weaving of the "grand narrative" of history (Swift 1983: 53), whose incompleteness and false objectivity are exposed, with the gradual unveiling of the roles of those individuals involved in it. Hutcheon rightly suggests that "the value of histories" becomes "a substitute for history" (214). But the narrator's purpose in telling stories is to counter the uncertainty of history and, in his own words, "to uncover the mysteries of cause and effect" (92). The question he keeps asking is why, why, why? much as Golding's hero in *Free Fall* keeps asking "When did I lose my freedom?" and discovers that it was through a personal act rather than in a German camp. The narrator in *Waterland* stresses the ambiguous relation between fact and fiction and even shows that unchallenged fiction can kill as much as real fact (which we also find in *The Satanic Verses*). But he never underestimates the significance that is to be found in the events and above all in the motivations he manages to elucidate. Nor does he ignore the way history shapes individual lives, as the two World Wars do in the stories he tells. The history and histories of Europe, of England and English imperialism, of a specific region (the Fens), of public and private events, have an accumulative and combined effect and turn him into a desperate man, who neither as a historian nor as a story-teller can assuage the terror of the pupil who has founded a nuclear holocaust club.

*Waterland* expresses the individual's anxiety at being trapped by history no less than its modernist predecessors did, and one may wonder whether the emphasis on the fictionalization of history by post-modernists and post-structuralists alike, which places it on a par with literature, is not a way of escaping history. As self-reflexive, historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon's terminology), this novel evinces the major characteristics of post-modernism: ontological and epistemological doubt, reflection on the nature of reality, unreliability and a questioning of the subject, pluralism, subversiveness, revisionism, the decen-

tering and disruption of traditional realistic narrative, inconclusiveness. What it does *not* offer is playfulness or parody, major post-modernist strategies that are not necessarily compatible with the despair, alienation, the sense of impending annihilation or apocalypse that are also foregrounded in a novel like D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*.

What distinguishes European post-modernism, at least in its British variety, is that when not actually in search of new meaning and values, it cannot help feeling nostalgia for lost certainties. A case in point is the fiction of John Fowles, who is often considered as the most characteristically British post-modernist and possibly the only one who has acknowledged the influence of post-structuralism by paying tribute to Barthes (Alexander 1990: 4). Whatever his technical innovations and subversive intentions in his frequently ambiguous manipulations of irony and parody in *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Daniel Martin*, his protagonists' journey of self-discovery, in opposition to society's authoritarian or conventional pressures, does not differ fundamentally from that in, say, Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence. His latest novel, *A Maggot*, is his most impressive and most obviously post-modern to date. The narrative consists almost entirely of a judicial inquest, which can be read as a metaphor for the basic post-modernist strategy of establishing a given reality only to question it. The tyrannical constraints of the legal interrogator and of his "alphabet," as the heroine calls it, are in turn subversively interrogated by her. All the authoritarian assumptions of eighteenth-century England and its imperialistic practices both within and outside its territory—symbolized here by the transportation system (alluded to in extracts from *The Gentleman's Magazine*)—which served capitalism and kept the lower classes within manageable bounds, as well as the rationalist foundation of the future modern society, are challenged here, while the marginal elements in English society—a Welshman, an actor, a prostitute—are brought to the centre. But it can also be argued that Fowles's narrative manipulations (in this novel mainly the unexplained disappearance of the originally major character), though "on the surface a disclaimer of power, may be read as an exercise of power at the reader's expense" (Alexander 1990: 131). More significant for my argument: even if the heroine's self-realization can and has been given a feminist interpretation, and in this respect is specifically post-modern, this self-realization

together with her spiritual conversion, visions, and mysterious pregnancy, is an expression of a need for a transcendental referent, however unorthodox in eighteenth-century terms (and, by the way, also un-post-modernist from a twentieth-century perspective). Her development, like that of Fowles's other protagonists, also illustrates his well-known distinction between the many and the few, *hoi polloi* and *hoi aristoi*, which can be grist to the mill of post-colonialist criticism. Admittedly, Fowles's elitism is neither social nor political but moral, psychological and intellectual. But his need to substitute one kind of elitism for another is an attempt to remedy the collapse of those values that held society together, just as the narrator in *Waterland* tries to assuage his fears by telling stories, when he realizes that "reality is an empty space" (52). There is some truth in the assertion that "the denial of history [by post-modernists] is part of a disappointed demand that history be the ultimate source of meaning and value" (Thiher 1990: 17). One could similarly argue that the brand of post-modernism that Iris Murdoch offers in some of her novels is a way of countering solipsism, or that a longing for love and stability runs through Laurence Durrell's evocation of European entropy in *The Avignon Quintet*.

Possibly, the ambiguities of European post-modernism are due to the fact that most Europeans are both imperialists and victims.<sup>4</sup> Europeans may have been responsible for the horrors of their history in a way the colonized are not for theirs. One can understand Barbara Christian's resentment against Western post-modernists who express "their dissatisfaction with some of the cornerstone ideas of their own tradition ... But ... concentrate[ ] on themselves and [are] not in the slightest interested in the worlds they ha[ve] ignored or controlled" (quoted by Arun Mukherjee, 1990: 3). But I note that from the outside and from the perspective of some post-colonial critics, Europe is often seen as a fixed, non-differentiated entity still united in its hegemonizing purposes—which, of course, it never was. It has always been and remains more than ever a mosaic of potentially conflictuous nationalist

<sup>4</sup> Belgium is a good example of this ambivalence. It came into being as an independent state only in 1830, and its first king, Leopold I (of Saxe-Cobourg), was proposed as a candidate and strongly supported by the British. Belgium has been at all times a battleground for its powerful neighbours and was ruled by them in turn. Yet it was itself imperialistic and accepted the Congo, which had been the personal property of Leopold II, as a colony.

regions inhabited by peoples of different cultures, who speak different languages, don't always understand each other, and at one time or another were colonized lastingly or temporarily. It has, to use Arun Mukherjee's words, "[its] own internal centres and peripheries, [its] own dominants and marginals" (1990: 6) and it now even reverts to some kind of feudal regionalism. Deconstruction is as European as the loss of empires. The unprecedented destructions of the twentieth century have left, as Frank Kermode put it, "the sense of an ending," which is why, it seems to me, the prefix "post" doesn't mean the same thing in post-modernism and post-colonialism.

With regard to post-modernism, it may be tempting to share Linda Hutcheon's optimism and her confident hope that in spite of its contradictions and doubleness—being "compromised by that which it challenges" (1988: 230)—post-modernism is essentially, as *process*, an open and flexible mode of representation following an exhausted tradition which it can renew. At the other extreme there is the conviction of Wilson Harris, a major post-colonial writer, that post-modernism is synonymous with nihilism allied to scepticism ("In the Name of Liberty," Harris 1990). I have explained elsewhere that the experimental techniques he shares with post-modernism are informed by a totally different world view (Maes-Jelinek 1990). For Harris, "a post-modernism that is bereft of depth or of an appreciation of the life of the intuitive imagination is but a game for a dictatorship of technologies aligned to sophistry and nihilism" (Harris 1990a: 186).

One may ask then whether there is a *via media* between these two positions. European post-modernism is the expression not just of a "crisis of authority" (Tiffin 1988: 171) or "legitimation" (Lyotard/During 1985: 367) but also a crisis of civilization and meaning for which it does not offer a solution except, as I suggested, by way of a nostalgic return to the values of liberal humanism which it questioned in many ways in the first place. From this perspective, "post" can also mean the failure of the modern era to fulfil the hopes with which it started and their petering out in disenchantment. Right now it seems "[poised] between two worlds" (Alexander 1990: 22), and whether it is capable of genuine renewal remains an open question.

In spite of my suggestion that, with all due reservations, there are similarities between the European and the colonial experience, I see a basic difference between the two “posts” even if both are “contaminated” by that which they contest and often use similar strategies (Hutcheon 1989: 170-171). The difference between the two is not just, as Hutcheon suggests, that unlike post-modernism, post-colonialism cannot stop at irony and that its social and political agenda allow post-colonialism to go beyond the deconstruction of post-modernism; it is also philosophical and ideological. The “post” in post-colonialism clearly represents a transition from the end of an era to the beginning of a new one. The kind of overlapping that Hutcheon detects between post-modernism and post-colonialism is on the whole limited to second-world fiction, at least in English. One thinks of Canadian, Australian, and some New Zealand fiction. I would select, for instance, Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* as a good example of this overlapping and of the regenerative role of parody as defined by her (Hutcheon 1985: 30-49). But I find it significant that, to my knowledge, there are no post-colonial post-modernists from the anglophone Third World, even though writers like Harris, Soyinka and Armah have used techniques that may resemble post-modernism. In their work such strategies derive, as suggested above, from a different “philosophy.”

Some Third-World writers have been assimilated to post-modernism via magical realism (D’haen 1990: 222), which seems to me a specifically post-colonial mode of writing claimed for post-modernism by post-modernist critics, though I see little connection between the deconstructive aspect of post-modernism and the native imaginary world which is usually a major referent in magical realism.<sup>5</sup> Salman Rushdie, who uses this mode of writing, has been called a Third-World cosmopolitan (Brennan 1989: viii) and *The Satanic Verses* is often seen as offering an

<sup>5</sup> In an essay entitled “Magic Realism: the Energy of the Margins,” Jeanne Delbaere makes a clear and interesting distinction between two kinds of Magic Realism, namely between an intellectual trend “derived from Borges and the surrealists and a popular one derived from Márquez” (1992: 76). She argues that Magic Realism developed from the margins even in its European varieties (in Flemish Belgium and Germany it was used as a form of resistance against the oppressor). I am grateful to her for discussing with me the nature of Magic Realism *vis-à-vis* post-colonialism and post-modernism as well as the general substance of this essay. On the link between Magic Realism and post-colonialism, see also Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse” (Slemon 1988).

exemplary fusion of the two “posts,” though I find it ambiguous on that score. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge write that “it ceases to be post-colonial and becomes post-modern in political terms” (1991: 406). Like the satirical poet in his novel, whose role is “to stop the world from going to sleep” (97), Rushdie’s fierce satire of Thatcher’s England foregrounds post-colonial resistance. The difficulty is to perceive what alternative he offers to the denial of a system of values based on revealed religion, whether Muslim or Christian. The impulse behind his various satirical targets seems to be a secular humanism, which manifests itself mainly through cultural hybridity and a denial of absolutes. But it is difficult to detect in the novel the sense of expectation and hope for change present in much post-colonial literature.

Since the first courses that were offered in post-colonial literatures twenty five years ago,<sup>6</sup> critical approaches have evolved with the gradual emergence of specifically post-colonial theories, formulated in *The Empire Writes Back*, *After Europe*, and other seminal studies. These have in turn stimulated a variety of responses, as a result of which post-colonialism too is fast becoming an umbrella term, whose definition has repeatedly been subjected to important qualifications (see the work of Benita Parry, Vijay Mishra and Arun Mukherjee). In seeking help from post-colonial theory, the student is thus faced with the following difficulty. Post-colonial theorists have so far been mainly, though not exclusively, second-world academics who have pleaded for an appropriation of Western post-structuralism while rejecting its hegemonizing drift, a paradox which they themselves acknowledge. Certainly, as Spivak has pointed out, deconstruction and post-structuralism played a major role in helping define the position of the marginalized (1990: 30) while drawing attention to the vulnerability of all human positions and discourse (18). Nevertheless, the European academic and student, aware that, with a few exceptions, post-structuralist theory took a longer time to influence the actual teaching of literature in European universities than in those of Anglophone countries, cannot help feeling

<sup>6</sup> The teaching of New Literatures in English began at the University of Liège in 1969. A distinction was made from the start between the literatures of the former settler colonies and those of the Third World, mainly African and/or Caribbean. The two courses begin with a joint introduction to draw attention to similarities and contrasts and give priority to text and context.

that Anglophone critics have given Western post-structuralism a power which may well be seen as a second form of colonization. For very different reasons, post-colonial critics of non-Western origin see a collusion, possibly unconscious, between first- and second-world critics in their similarly assimilating and hegemonizing tendencies (Mishra 1991, and Mukherjee 1990). Thus the original resistance to the colonizing centre splits into a chain-like reaction, a subdivision of binary oppositions rather than a pluralism, suggesting a hierarchy of concerns in which, understandably, each group that feels neglected within a larger entity cries out for more attention and the creation of alternative literary canons. While this brings out the complexity of the post-colonial reality, it also evokes the spectre of endlessly substituting one kind of hegemony for another. I am not arguing for an erasure of differences but note that, in spite of assertions that post-colonialism is best conceived of as a literary and reading practice (Slemon 1987: 13 and Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 193), attempts at definition and re-definition seem to arise less from a close attention to texts than from a repetitive oppositional stance, which may be necessary provided it does not become an end in itself, liable to undermine what Helen Tiffin called the need for “alternative ontological systems” (1988: 176). For it is actually through its presentation of possible alternative realities and ontologies that post-colonialism differs from post-modernism and post-structuralism, though there is also disagreement as to how these alternatives can be realized.

In a perceptive article on “Figures of Colonial Resistance,” Jenny Sharpe examines the anti-colonial potential of the Pankaj Wallah figure in the trial scene in *A Passage to India*. Her conclusion is that whereas Western-educated Aziz can exclaim “I am an Indian at last,” the untouchable who operates the fan remains silent (1989: 150). But she further argues that “as a model for subaltern resistance [the untouchable] ... fails[,] ... the subaltern is irreducible and yet ultimately irretrievable” (152). In this she echoes Gayatri Spivak and others before her who think that a genuine anti-imperialist resistance can only develop “as a product of the culture of imperialism” which a subaltern like the untouchable has no access to. In Spivak’s words, he is an “other that can neither be excluded nor recuperated” (1988: 180).

Nearly thirty years before the expression of this negative view, the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris had begun to fictionalize the “recuperation” of uneducated characters who had no access to the culture of imperialism. This made for a plausible narrative because it was clear that an intuitive understanding that may lead to action need not be the product of intellectual training. One such “figure of resistance” in his fiction is Beti, the illiterate Indian woman in *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961) who manages to first break away from the domination into which she has been imprisoned by the men in her family, and then, years later, from the threatening grasp of the rich old man who wants to possess her and her children. She does so by swallowing the piece of paper or contract tying them to this character. Her resistance and partial emancipation are due to her own developing “literacy of the imagination” (Harris 1989a: 13), which does not mean that Harris romantically idealizes the imagination while excluding social and political dimensions from his work. Rather he shows indirectly how deeply influenced these dimensions are by strong individual emotions. If his characters’ emancipation is first and foremost psychological, it is perhaps because he has greater confidence than the militant intellectual or politician in the capacity of the marginalized individual to develop a literacy of perception and consciousness.

Rejecting both post-modernism (Harris 1989a: 27) and an exclusive adherence to resistance theories, Wilson Harris has developed his own brand of post-colonialism, a third way inspired by the need to travel beyond all codified “posts.” All his writing, twenty novels and a considerable non-fictional output, grew out of his keen perception and re-interpretation of the so-called “historylessness” of the Caribbean and of its concomitant cultural and psychological void. Already in his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), he discarded the realism of the English “Great Tradition” as an inadequate tool to express the complex muteness and possible arousal from silence of the formerly colonized. How indeed could a mode of writing created by and for the English middle classes (admittedly an admirable instrument for *them*) be a suitable medium of expression for those who, directly or indirectly, had been victimized by their hegemony?

The narrow basis of realism, as an art that mirrors common-sense day or pigmented identity, tends inevitably to polarise cultures or to reinforce eclipses of otherness within legacies of conquest that rule the world. (1985b: 55)

Harris's major objection to realism is that it usually presents one text, one frame of reference<sup>7</sup> in a linear narrative which, until recently at least, was supposed to represent objective reality or to create the illusion of the *real* world. Whatever its formulation, the effect of realism, Harris says, is authoritarian because it works within a monolithic tradition in ignorance of other cultures or only takes into account its own biased perception of them.<sup>8</sup> As the above quotation makes clear, his use of the term "realism" is far from exclusively literary. As the following passage and the essay in which it appeared also make clear, its ramifications include historical, political, cultural and phenomenological strands:

The imperium is the fountainhead of colonialism, it is governed by extreme ideology or by extreme materialism, its bastion is realism. Its cornerstone of realism is 'deterrence' (and the astronomical expenditure upon armaments this involves) through which, we are told, the rape of civilisation may be averted in a nuclear age. (1985b: 335)

Harris further insists on the need to break with "dominant realism" (336) and save the humanities from bankruptcy by rediscovering faculties of creativity and being through "a genuine descent into tradition" (336).

From his first critical comments on this subject, the often quoted "Tradition and the West Indian Novel," Harris has explored a "*native* tradition of depth" (in 1967: 30) as an alternative to the English

<sup>7</sup> On this subject see, for example, "Judgement and dream" (Harris 1992: 20, 26).

<sup>8</sup> See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

tradition, one equally concerned with form; with the "intense moral interest," the "essential human issues," and the "profound seriousness" so dear to Leavis<sup>9</sup> but one that offers a different kind of morality inspired by what the "great tradition" used to suppress or ignore.<sup>10</sup> Harris's post-colonialism is largely based on his deconstruction of tradition as the expression of a privileged established culture and outlook. Deconstruction for what purpose? Not simply to make visible the fragmentation and uncertainties of a civilization in crisis, but to re-discover "areas of tradition that have sunken away and apparently disappeared and vanished and *yet are still active at some level*" (Harris 1988: 48; my emphasis). This belief in a lost yet still active tradition lies at the core of his conception of post-colonial creativity, as does his notion of "seminal catastrophe,"<sup>11</sup> i.e., the conviction that the colonial encounters broke down traditional civilizations and cultures that were themselves fairly rigid (as in Mexico), but that nevertheless did not exclude mutual fertilization.

One can trace in Harris's writing, whether fictional or non-fictional, an evolution from the interpretation of colonial and post-colonial material to the cross-culturalism of which he was among the first if not *the* first exponent among post-colonial writers. His first ten novels and two volumes of short stories deal exclusively with Guyana, re-interpret its history, bring back to life its victimized, decimated, apparently "dead" yet surviving populations while already foregrounding the "complex womb" (1960: 41) of their descendants' present-day diversity. Paramount in those multi-levelled narratives is the fleshing out, the emergence from memory and the metamorphosis of a catastrophic past, above all the persuasive substantialization, of what is a "void" in appearance only. This retrieval and transformation of the past,

<sup>9</sup> F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1962: 15, 16, 19).

<sup>10</sup> See Harris's reference to the need "to probe again and again the links between moral being and profoundest creativity" (1985b: 339). See also his essay "The Quest for Form," in which he brings together different kinds of antinomies which paradoxically stimulate change, conversion and mutuality, for him the hallmarks of creativity and what he calls "an annunciation [rebirth] of humanity" (1983a).

<sup>11</sup> On this subject see the essays "Some Aspects of Myth and the Intuitive Imagination," and "Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*" (Harris 1982: 97-106 and 125-133).

the arousal into consciousness of—and coming to terms with—the many formerly unconscious complex components of the Caribbean psyche, is what most differentiates Harris's novels from the realistic “slice of life,” a technique which by definition cuts off a given period or experience from essential links with the past, whereas Harris's imaginative explorations are also free journeys through time.

From *Black Marsden* (1972) onwards, Harris's narratives have bridged continents and cultures, pointing to the possibilities of fusion between the old civilizations of the Americas and Europe, while he gradually conceptualized “the cross-cultural strategy which links figures in Europe with eclipsed figures in the ancient world. ... We see that there is an unbroken thread that runs throughout humanity” (1992: 26). Moreover, “when you go to the so-called Third World . . . [what] they call ‘native’ archetypes, are all overlaid by European skeletons and archetypes as well. You will never activate them unless you activate the so-called ‘European’ skeletons as well” (40).

These quotations evoke several strands in Harris's work. One is his belief in a *universal* unconscious, in a silent overlapping territory of experience, which must be awakened and repeatedly revised through changing and developing perceptions, a ceaseless process he calls “infinite rehearsal,” never in an attempt to reach absolute wholeness, but rather to transform, “consume,” as he says, one's inevitable biases and move towards a “true diversity-within-intimate-yet-ungraspable-universality” (1992: 31). This is the dynamic and admittedly complex foundation of his cultural and literary cross-culturalism for, as he writes,

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. (1989b: 137)

Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe also evoke specific genres in the Western tradition: epic, allegory, comedy and tragedy—admirable models, which Harris nevertheless set out to “re-vision” in keeping with the need to interpret a contemporary cross-cultural, multi-faceted and changing reality.<sup>12</sup> This revisionary process, so eloquently illustrated in his *Carnival Trilogy*<sup>13</sup> and his latest novel, *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (1993), extends or is meant to extend man's perception of his environment to the non-human which he only ignores at his peril:

C.G.Jung's collective unconscious is regarded as the human unconscious whereas it needs to be extended into the life of landscapes, rivers, elements, etc. Quantum physics/mechanics and chaos theory imply embodiments of space and time in which we are linked to all things, to being and the intricate, scarcely measurable rhythms of non-being. (1993b)

What Harris calls elsewhere “a capacity for altered habits of perception” (1983b: 96) enables some of his characters to sense or to make subtle but fundamental distinctions between ways of seeing and modes of behaviour. For example, in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990) the very glasses through which one character fixes the dead into their fate enable the protagonist to carve natural elements into “living ... existential sculptures” who from “[s]culpted wood ... bec[o]me ... rock visionary flesh and blood” (39). Such transformative or, as he says, “convertible imagery” runs through Harris's fiction. Destructive fire can become a “seed of conversion.” The threat of rape can turn into transfigurative love. Though Harris's writing is sometimes labelled “abstract,” intense emotions are his characters' major motivations and equally important is their capacity to transform these emotions from destructive into creative forces. In a major essay entitled “Creative and Re-Creative Balance Between Diverse Cultures,” Harris

<sup>12</sup> On this subject see *The Womb of Space* (1983b), “Comedy and Modern Allegory” (1989b), and *The Radical Imagination* (1992).

<sup>13</sup> The trilogy includes *Carnival* (1985), *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990).



comments on the position of his protagonist in *Carnival*:

What he was saying was that morality may have to do with deep-seated layers of emotions which we tend to overlook when we discuss moral problems, as though moral problems are *theoretical* problems, problems which we can divorce from ourselves and our emotions, and the thrust of our emotions, and what happens to us in terms of the passions that may grip us. (1992: 103)

The protagonist's perception that his mother's intense grief when his father died can become a source of violence is shown to apply to societies as well:

the passion of sorrow and the passion of inexplicable violence are woven together. ... In the emotion that lies at the heart of society, the passion of sorrow is so wed to inexplicable violence that society seems to frame itself up everlastingly within that situation, and it becomes extremely difficult to break out of that frame. (107)

Harris calls the incapacity "to break out of that frame" "self-righteous deprivation."<sup>14</sup> "Anti-imperial resentment," he suggests, "is a dangerous and limiting stance," when the pride of victimized people "becomes caught up in [their] humiliations, [their] deprivations, and ... one is proud to maintain a limited, narrow position, and forever to complain to the world of the ways in which one has been oppressed" (99). Since his own fiction amply illustrates the effects of exploitation and oppression (as well as self-oppression), it is worth pointing out that he objects to the perpetuation of "anti-imperial resentment" on the ground that it entails a sterile stasis. The main object of his argument, however, is to emphasize

the ways in which our society has been conditioned by its passions, by its joys, by its grief, by a whole texture of emotions ... to understand this is vital, if we are to deal

<sup>14</sup> See *The Womb of Space* (1983b: 40, 92, 113) and *The Radical Imagination* (1992: 99).

with the problems of violence. Because our own sorrows—or even our joys—render us compliant to violence when we imprison ourselves within limiting frames of vision which allow us to see nothing apart from the adversarial patterns which those frames construct and perpetuate. (112-113)

Harris himself states at the end of *The Womb of Space* that the "capacity to convert, rather than succumb to, deprivations," to convert them "into complex parables of freedom and truth is a formidable but not hopeless task" (1983b: 137).

This task Harris sees as one way of regenerating the humanities today. He has often expressed his conviction that such a renewal and a truly creative response to the crisis of civilization can come from the so-called margins of the world:

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. (1990b: 13)

Unfortunately, such creative capacity is often thwarted by the way that the humanities reduplicate the barriers (rather than recognize the links) to be found in society:

I find that there is something gravely lacking in the Humanities ... There is a tendency to have one's "field" and to frame up that field in the proper way. Thus one begins, in a way, to perpetrate, at the most sophisticated level, a form of self-righteous deprivation. (1992: 37-38)

Harris himself is one of those post-colonial writers who have fictionalized their sense of the future. His considerable non-fictional output has been influential in some post-colonial theories, though it must be pointed out that his position is sometimes distorted by a partial assimilation of ideas whose basic premises are (conveniently) ignored: an example is his notion of a psyche mutual to protagonist and antagonist (1992: 23), also called "mutual spaces" (1985a: 126). He has

insisted on the need for Third World cultures to find inner confidence, inner authority and inner guidelines, and suggested that true freedom and innovation can develop out of "adversarial contexts." He condones neither the authoritarianism of Western thought nor a post-colonial oppositional stance, and his cross-culturalism ignores the subtleties of definition academics spend so much time discussing. As I hope to have shown, it takes root at a much deeper level, in the individual and the universal unconscious, which must be explored prior to the renewal of our sense of a genuinely pluralist community. But this is often found embarrassing because it is difficult to translate such a perspective into immediate political terms.

We often object to the assimilation to English literature of post-colonial writers thought worthy of the canon (which we call unfair appropriation). Harris however undermines the canon from within by re-writing both Guyanese and European myths from the margin, and he sees post-colonial writers in English as "a heterogeneity of talent impinging on the West" (1990b: 14). In his conviction that the response to crisis will come from the margins (1989a: 30), he is more truly and confidently autochthonous than any post-colonial critic. His own working method as a writer and critic is a close reading and re-reading of his own and other writers' texts, scanning them for the creative possibilities of marginality. Though we may not be able to share his insights, it seems a sound pedagogical model to start from and for teaching our students to think for themselves.

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