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Abstract

Although the European world which accepted the allegory of Dante's Divina Commedia no longer exists, the concept of a sovereign ideal, Christian and European, governing humanity is still prevalent in Western civilization. The idea of a homogeneous world has been imposed on all parts of society so that those groups and individuals outside this concept of society are inevitably suppressed as alien to it. This view of the unity of all minds has been a problematic one even within 'homogeneous' cultures (for example, Tuscany of Dante's time), but it is completely ineffectual in dealing with the fragmented nature of the multi-cultural 20th century — the heterogeneous cultures of the New World in particular.

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GAY WILENTZ

Wilson Harris's Divine Comedy of Existence: Miniaturizations of the Cosmos in *Palace of the Peacock*

Although the European world which accepted the allegory of Dante's *Divina Commedia* no longer exists, the concept of a sovereign ideal, Christian and European, governing humanity is still prevalent in Western civilization. The idea of a homogeneous world has been imposed on all parts of society so that those groups and individuals outside this concept of society are inevitably suppressed as alien to it. This view of the unity of all minds has been a problematic one even within 'homogeneous' cultures (for example, Tuscany of Dante's time), but it is completely ineffectual in dealing with the fragmented nature of the multi-cultural 20th century — the heterogeneous cultures of the New World in particular.

Literature in the Caribbean is often centred on the effects of colonialism, the variegated ethnicity of the area — African, Amerindian and European among others — and the ways these groups interrelate in a post-colonial age. The novelists of the Caribbean reflect these concerns by rejecting the conventions of the traditional novel since it is 'an accumulating of selected elements meant to consolidate the world view of a dominating section of society and to persuade the reader that the plane on which the narrative develops has an inevitable and unquestionable existence'.[1] This has posed a problem for post-colonial writers since they have inherited both the form and the language of the colonial masters. The response on the part of many of the writers of the Caribbean and Latin America has been to create a literature which is a complex reworking of the myth of what Hegel would have called 'the unified spirit'. Helen Tiffin in her study of myth and metaphor in the Caribbean states:

> Metaphoric activity in post-colonial writing is thus likely to be more culturally functional than poetically decorative, more self-consciously concerned with the problem of expressing the new in the language of the old, and more concerned with the

importance of language, art, literature *not* just as expressions of new perceptions of paradox, but *as active agents in the reconstruction of the colonial psyche*...[2] (my italics)

Wilson Harris, a Guyanese-born novelist, poet and critic, explores the culturally-mixed heritage of the Caribbean in his essays and novels. He has been seen as a difficult writer in that his language, imagery and thematic concerns attempt to dislodge the concepts of totality to expose what is 'other' in the dominant ideal. Anthony Boxill in explaining his difficulties with Harris quotes W.I. Carr, who notes that Harris's images of the Guyanese landscape are 'wrapped in so personal a symbolism that communication itself is only partial'.[3] Exactly! Harris stresses that all our perceptions are partial — including the hegemonic viewpoint. In his critical essay, 'A Talk on the Subjective Imagination', Harris states that 'to a major extent, we are dominated by what I would call a homogeneous imperative. We are dominated by that, and therefore we fail to see that the homogeneous imperative very often masks or conceals from us the heterogeneous roots of a community.'[4] Harris is dedicated to expose the 'heterogeneous roots' of Caribbean culture, so that the concept of a sovereign ideal governing humanity will be called into question. What is 'other' in the society, under this imperative, is viewed as a contradiction of the society, yet it is precisely this contradiction which disrupts any concept of totality. The philosopher, T.W. Adorno, expresses this inconsistency:

> Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself.
>
> What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just so long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity...[5]

Wilson Harris, in his imaginative fiction, strives to break through the conventions of traditional Western thought to unmask what has been heretofore suppressed as a contradiction to the unified ideal. In his approach to literature, Harris moves away from the concept of an absolute — rigid distinctions of subject and object, identity and non-identity — towards a mutuality in which all cultures share the burden of humanity. He creates a 20th Century 'divine comedy of existence' in which, rather than the 'homogeneous imperative' demanded by the dominant culture, a potential for a meaningful 'dialogue' between oppressed and dominant cultures is explored. Harris's literary style disrupts the linear, conventional novel and expresses, through his language, imagery and thematics, the possibility of a world in which no image is sovereign, no culture supreme, no word a static fact.

Palace of the Peacock, Harris's first novel as well as the opening book of the *Guiana Quartet*, has been seen as a seminal book which 'contains an embryo of all further developments' in his later novels.[6] Therefore I have chosen this novel and Harris's use of 'reductive symbols of the cosmos' to elucidate Harris's attempt to reveal, through his fiction, a mutuality between what is called the 'third world' and the dominant world of the former colonialists. *The term 'reductive' does not mean an over-simplification as in 'reductivism' but rather a partial vision of the whole universe which would be too excruciating to bear in its totality.* Through this phrase, Harris illustrates our inability to comprehend all of creation: 'There is no total or absolute model for the universe — only through reductive symbols of the cosmos are we able to bear the beauty and terror of the universe.'[7] It is through certain miniaturizations charged with allusive power rather than absolute symbols that we can possibly glimpse the fragility as well as the wholeness of the universe:

> What is required at a certain level — if a new dialogue is to begin to emerge — is a penetration of partial images, not a submission to the traditional reinforcement of partiality into total or absolute institution; partiality may then begin to declare itself for what it is and to acquire a re-creative susceptibility to otherness in a new and varied evolution of community within a fabric of images in fiction and drama...[8]

Through a discussion of reductive symbols or miniaturizations in Harris's imagery, and the use of supposed sovereign images, we will explore the potential for dialogue between cultures where before there was merely a pattern of conquest.

The plot of *Palace of the Peacock* is deceptively simple. An ethnically-mixed crew under the leadership of the conquistador Donne follow the Amerindian folk, the Arawaks, up-river into the jungle of Guyana to force the folk to work as cheap forced labour on Donne's plantation. Throughout the treacherous journey, the crew (following the steps of an identical first crew who were drowned) are stripped of their imperialist desires as they search for spiritual self-realization. They reach the end of the journey at the Palace of the Peacock, which is situated within a towering waterfall. Much of the background and memory of the novel comes from Harris's own voyages into the Amazon basin as a surveyor. The landscape of the Guyanese jungle was excruciatingly beautiful yet treacherous; a small stone jutting above the sparkling water might conceal jagged rocks to tear a boat and its inhabitants to pieces, yet the river would appear calm, crystalline and lovely in the sunlight. It was this affinity of beauty and terror, often perceived as opposites in our identification of them, that led Harris to question sovereign views about nature

and humanity. Each one of the partial images betrays a world barely glimpsed at, containing traces of vanished cultures. Undefined by a linear sense of time, Harris's jungle becomes the landscape which maps out the possibility of dialogue between oppressed and dominant cultures.

Although reductive symbols work on multiple levels in *Palace of the Peacock*, I will focus on three main ways Harris utilizes this approach — the I-narrator and his dream, the imagery, and the blending together of cross-cultural symbols. The I-narrator's dream is the framing structure of the novel, reducing the reality of the action to that of the nether world. Throughout the novel the I-narrator is constantly awaking, yet each time he wakes up, we have to question whether he is, in fact, awake or if that, too, is part of his dream. Harris explains his motives in refusing to accept static notions of dreaming and waking: 'The logic of the dream allows us to split the image. We are left with a cosmic note ... nothing is sovereign.'[9] The state of being awake or asleep is seen *not* as contrasting aspects of consciousness but as a mediating interrelationship of our varied perceptions.

The I-narrator, who is nameless, is our guide throughout most of the novel, yet in Book III, 'The Second Death', he vanishes from the narration only to return at the end. The reason for the loss of the guide at the crucial time of the second drowning may be that, through his vulnerability, the I-narrator has partially learned what the crew has yet to know, but the loss of the narrator also directs our attention towards another dominant structure — narration. W.J. Howard in his study of the *Guiana Quartet* addresses this issue by noting that the 'whole problem of the relationship between the narrator and the activity he narrates must be reconsidered'.[10] In re-evaluating this relationship, even our general assumptions concerning first person narratives must be reworked and the narration itself becomes a threshold into a counterpoint between the conditioned mind (conditioned by authoritarian imperative) and the shock of new awareness within capacities for a true voice and a true dialectic ear or response to Being. The fact that the I-narrator is nameless separates him from the other members of the crew and aligns him with the nameless 'folk'. Through the I-narrator, Harris emphasizes 'the positive value of «*identityless-ness*» ... as a means towards a genuine re-sensing of the world'.[11] It is the I-narrator's vulnerability which is turned around to be a sign of the potential for growth.

In addition to his non-authoritarian narration and his namelessness, the I-narrator is also reduced as a protagonist: He is the weakened, half-blind twin of the conquerer Donne. The relationship between the I-narrator and Donne is a miniaturization of the relationship of oppressed

to dominant cultures. Donne is the imperialist; he abuses his brother and the folk. His treatment of his Amerindian woman Mariella as well as his cruelty to the folk in general compel them to vanish into the rain forest when he tries to recruit them: 'Donne was brooding a little ... his face growing severe as of old, spoilt, hard, childish with an old obsession and desire... «Look what's happening now. Nearly everybody just vamoosed, vanished. They're as thoughtless and irresponsible as hell... Isn't it a fantastic joke that I have to bargain with them at all?»'[12] We see Donne with the colonialist attitude of 'owning' the folk, without any understanding of their lives and his relationship to them, even though he is also part Amerindian. His twin brother, the I-narrator, is controlled by Donne, but through his weakness, he comes closer to comprehending both his and Donne's true kinship with the folk. He tries to explain it to Donne, who is not listening, as he tells Donne that this aggression towards the folk is a 'fear of the substance of life, fear of the substance of the folk, a cannibal blind fear in oneself' (p. 59). The concept of blindness raised here is one that Harris uses to further the sense that our vision is always partial; clarity is sometimes false. We have noted that the I-narrator is disadvantaged because of his partial blindness which he may consolidate into a 'clarity'. He tells us, 'I dreamt I awoke with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye' (p. 13). Throughout the journey, his closed eye becomes an opening towards spiritual sight while Donne's clarity of vision is an image of blindness. The I-narrator, like the 'disadvantaged' cultures he appears to represent, is able to dislodge the barriers of a closed identity through his vulnerability; it is Donne, with the dominant code he espouses, who must become totally blind to gain a capacity for mutuality with his brother and the folk.

The second, and perhaps the most noticeable use of miniaturizations in *Palace of the Peacock* is the imagery. The novel's imagery is as dense and fertile as the Guyanese jungle Harris describes; within this jungle are layers upon layers of appearance and meaning which can neither be stripped away nor taken at face value. The crew, as well as the reader, must content themselves with only partial understanding of a universe that neither science nor philosophy has completely deciphered. The reductive symbols of the cosmos are, therefore, signs which lend some kind of understanding to what is incomprehensible in its totality. Two examples of the complex imagery will suggest the working of miniaturizations in the novel. The first example is one that I have already mentioned in passing but at this point we will look at it more closely. The greatest danger of travelling into the interior of the Guyanese rain forest by river is the violent rapids which can destroy both craft and crew. On a

symbolic as well as a literal level, it is precisely the deceptive moment of calm — unexpected — which is the most treacherous. The I-narrator is speaking:

> 'The rapids appeared less dangerous before and after us... I detected a pale smooth patch that hardly seemed worth a thought. It was the size of the moon's reflection in streaming water save that the moment I saw it was broad daylight. The river hastened everywhere around ... the pale moon patch of death which spun before them calm as a musical disc... They bowed and steered in the nick of time away from the evasive, faintly discernible unconscious head whose meek moon patch heralded corrugations and thorns and spears we dimly saw in a volcanic and turbulent bosom of water.' (p. 33)

There is much activity in Harris's rich, metaphoric language, but I would like to explore two aspects of this passage relating to the use of reductive symbols. It is obvious that clarity may sometimes prove a deceptive mould. What appears as a reflection of the moon shining upon tranquil waters is actually an indication of the deadly, jagged rocks below. The moon patch which heralds death is a reductive symbol of the moon, opening up a partial understanding of the 'mediating forces'[13] of the river, the rocks, the sun and the moon. The image also exposes our own contradictory notions concerning the moon. The moon itself is clearly a reduction of the sun, reflecting merely the sun's rays, and in nature the moon is both beneficial and destructive to human beings: It brings a plentiful harvest as well as damaging tidal waves. In our conscious minds, the moon is viewed antithetically as an impetus for love as well as insanity. Finally, because of the transient quality of perceptions, the moon patch is transformed in the crew's eyes into a symbol of human technology, a musical disc, and then into the volcanic and turbulent water befitting the vicious rocks below.

The second example of the use of reductive symbols functions as a motif throughout the novel, but we will look specifically at one incident. I have mentioned that Donne abused the folk, especially his woman Mariella. The folk leave the mission, named after Mariella, and disappear into the forest to escape from Donne. An old Arawak woman is left behind and Donne and his crew take her by force to act as a guide to lead them to the folk and to protect them from the violent rapids. She allows herself to be taken, having 'the unfathomable patience of a god in whom all is charged into wisdom, all experience and all life a handkerchief of wisdom when the grandiloquence of history and civilization was past' (p. 72). At this point the Arawak woman appears as a muse who contains all of life's wisdom in her kerchief. The passage is further

charged as the woman herself becomes a miniaturization for both nature and the wisdom of humanity:

> Tiny embroideries resembling the handwork on the Arawak woman's kerchief and the wrinkles on her brow turned to incredible and fast soundless breakers of foam. Her crumpled bosom and the river grew agitated with desire, bottling and shaking every fear and inhibition and outcry. The ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew. This sudden insolence of soul rose and caught them ... with silent streaming majesty and abnormal youth and in a wave of freedom and strength. (p. 73)

The interrelationship of the Arawak woman and the river is not necessarily a causal one; it is impossible to determine whether the Arawak woman is causing the rapids' agitation or if the river has blown new life and strength into the old woman. But what is clear is that the Arawak woman muse shares the burden of the violent waters with the crew and protects them from crashing while, at the same time, she opens their eyes to spiritual sight: 'The crew were transformed by the awesome spectacle of a voiceless soundless motion... Earthquake and volcanic water appeared to seize them and stop their ears *dashing the scales only from their eyes.* They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued all together...' (p. 73; my italics). Harris explains that the Arawak woman becomes a force to break the system of oppression, yet although 'on the precipice of disaster, the monolith is broken, there is the tendency to go back to the monolithic'.[14] It is at this moment of vision, when the scales fall from their eyes, that a potential for dialogue is reached which wards off catastrophe. But it lasts only for a moment. Immediately after, the crew are again concerned with their imperialist desires.

The crew's personal and societal views lead into the third section of this paper — Harris's blending of supposed sovereign, cross-cultural archetypes as reductive symbols. Symbols which have been purported to be absolute in Western culture, such as Christ and the seven days of creation, become partial images in *Palace of the Peacock.* The final part of the crew's journey up-river, once they are no longer pursuing the folk, is their ascent into the palace situated in the waterfall. The crew, whose members are of diverse parentage — both individually and collectively, can be seen as a reductive symbol of the ethnically-mixed Guyanas. This may be further extended as an archetypal view of the composite cultures of the New World. Each member of the crew shares the burden of their internal voyage with the others, and, unlike the first crew that drowns, this crew arrives at the palace. The success of the crew further intimates

that the mixture of cultures need not be destructive but *could* lead to a closer alignment with the universe.

At the palace, the remainder of the crew look into the waterfall windows and envision the carpenter Christ painting the world. In the next window is the madonna and child, yet this madonna, on second look, is Mariella, Donne's battered woman, as well as the Arawak woman made young again as in the scene in the river. This muse of Amerindian mythology shares the palace with the son of Christianity as does the Spider of the African Anancy tales through Wishrop, a member of the crew. What has hitherto been perceived as hegemonic becomes one strain in the heterophony of human discourse. The sun, a sovereign image in many cultures as well as for the conquistador Donne, becomes partial as it breaks into stars that become the eyes in the peacock's tail. At this point many supposed absolute symbols are blended, breaking through the bonds of a single world view:

> The bark and the wood [possibly from the tree of life] turned to lightning flesh and the sun which had been suspended from its head rippled and broke into stars that stood where the shattered leaves had been in the living wake of the storm... The stars became the peacock's eyes and the great tree of flesh and blood swirled into another stream that sparkled with divine feathers where the neck and the hands and the feet had been nailed. (p. 146)

The peacock itself, an ancient symbol of resurrection, incorporates the contradictory notions of humanity: It is a reductive symbol for the vanity and conceit of the crew at the beginning as well as for the potential 'power of metamorphosis and renewal'.[15] Finally, Dante's 'music of the spheres' is played through crew member Carroll's 'small mouthpiece' which starts out as a whistle, then a cry, and, at last, the squawk of the peacock. But what has been viewed as a comical sound for such a magnificent bird becomes a rich melody as yet unheard: 'It seemed to break and mend itself always — tremulous, forlorn, distant, triumphant, the echo of sound so pure and outlined in space it broke again into a mass of music' (p. 147).

Through the partial images of the figures within the palace, the crew is reunited with the folk, and from the death of the crew's material desires comes the potential for rebirth. With this possibility, the whole notion of death as annihilation is also called into question. 'Absolute death is polarization ... it seems to lie in the individual's ... inability to go beyond fixed points.'[16] And, of course, the thrust of the entire novel is to expose alternatives in the face of absolute determinants — yet, lest we be lulled into a complacency towards life in our response to a chance at 'rebirth',

we must look closely at the potential for regeneration that Harris is posing. The rebirth of the crew has been fraught with the death of some members and the mutilation of others, so their understanding comes at a cosmic cost. And it is clear from the ending that the rebirth itself is only partial, only within their potential, as the seven-day journey to the palace becomes a reductive symbol for creation.

At the crew's journey's end is a beginning and each member under the command of the peacock hugs to himself 'his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire' (p. 152). Harris reminds us in the next passage that this moment of unity is not to last: The crew fall from one another and themselves; the distance between oneself and one's 'otherness' is an unmeasured space, never totally fathomed, denying the rigid sense of self which translates into an absolute. To return to T.W. Adorno and his view of the reconciliation of what is other in identity, we can see a correlation with Harris's sense of partiality in which nothing is absolute, not even resolution: 'The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.'[17] Although the crew's first journey ended in catastrophe, the second journey recreates the past so that there is a possibility of dialogue between Donne (dominant culture) and the folk (oppressed culture). What is at the heart of the I-narrator's dream, and the novel itself, is that we can call into question the burden of the past and, through that process, engender the seeds of rebirth.

'In *Palace of the Peacock*, there is an invocation of indestructible harmony at the heart of the cosmos, but this can only remain a sensitive ... apprehension within a *caveat* or warning against self-deceptive blind bounty or bias.'[18] In his imaginative fiction, we see that Harris's 'divine comedy of existence', itself a reduction of Dante's allegory, is based on one's acceptance of the partial symbols sharing the burden of humanity. These symbols through which we glimpse the universe can never be fully apprehended. This paradox, Harris states, 'implies a profound irony and divine comedy of existence':

> Thus it is as if the cosmos reduces itself to translate infinite catastrophe (ingrained into human sovereign expectations or habits) into ceaselessly finite but mutual deaths, mutual rebirths, and infinitude of incarnations or annunciations of humanity. Such finitude fissures every sovereign death wish into an open, groping, sometimes terrifying corridor of the imagination.[19]

Although the breaking away from the concepts of unity may be a terrifying rupture, it may indeed avoid the catastrophic results of denying what is 'other' in ourselves. For this vision contains the seeds of regeneration for our dying civilization as well as the recreation of vanished cultures towards a mutuality of existence.

Wilson Harris, in his fiction and essays, is suggesting an upheaval in the way in which the world has been viewed in Western thought since Aristotle. This imaginative critique of a sovereign world view stands within a broader attack on the concept of a unified spirit governing humanity. The scope of this attack ranges from writers who come from areas designated by the West as the 'other' world to Western philosophers such as T.W. Adorno and Jacques Derrida. We have seen in this paper how closely aligned Adorno's critique of 'primal identity' as that which suppresses the alien is to Harris's exploration of what has been oppressed by a dominant ideology in heterogeneous cultures. Therefore, it may be argued that the critique of a sovereign world view comes necessarily at this point in history as we confront the fragmented, yet global nature of the 20th Century. And as individuals within the collective cultures of the Americas, we must extend this critique outside the realm of literature and philosophy to expose the diverse limbs of our cultural roots, so that, rather than trying to destroy what is 'other' in our mixed heritage and ourselves, we will embrace it in its otherness.

NOTES

1. Hena Maes-Jelinek, *Wilson Harris* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 1.
2. Helen Tiffin, 'The Metaphor of Anancy in Caribbean Literature', *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick (Sydney: CRNLE, 1982), p. 15.
3. Anthony Boxill, 'Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*: A New Dimension in West Indian Fiction', *College Language Association Journal*, 14 (June 1971), p. 381.
4. Wilson Harris, *Explorations* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 57.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 5. Much of the theoretical base for this paper has been drawn from Adorno's critique of Hegel's dialectics towards a 'negative dialectics' which returns the constant sense of non-identity in identity.
6. Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Wilson Harris', *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 182.
7. Wilson Harris, personal comment during seminar. I am extremely grateful to Wilson Harris for helping me formulate my thoughts on this novel through long conversations and a formal seminar.
8. Harris, *Explorations*, p. 116.
9. Harris, personal comment.

10. W.J. Howard, 'Wilson Harris's *Guiana Quartet*: From Personal Myth to National Identity', *Ariel* 1 (January, 1970), p. 48.
11. Michael Gilkes, *The West Indian Novel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 145.
12. Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 57. All further references to this work appear in the text.
13. Wilson Harris, 'Myth and Metaphor', *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick, p. 2.
14. Harris, personal comment.
15. Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'The True Substance of Life: Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*', *Common Wealth*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Akademisk Boghandel, 1971), p. 158.
16. Jean-Pierre Durix, 'A Reading of «Paling of Ancestors»', *Commonwealth Newsletter* 9 (January, 1976), p. 33.
17. Adorno, p. 191.
18. Harris, *Explorations*, p. 54.
19. Harris, personal comment.