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Abstract

Wilson Harris's *The Infinite Rehearsal* is the most recent work in what is already a remarkable Bildungsroman. It begins with a 'renegade' note from the protagonist, 'Robin Redbreast Glass', complaining:

Book Reviews

Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal*. Faber and Faber, 1987.

Wilson Harris's *The Infinite Rehearsal* is the most recent work in what is already a remarkable *Bildungsroman*. It begins with a 'renegade' note from the protagonist, 'Robin Redbreast Glass', complaining:

W.H. has stolen a march on me and put his name to my fictional autobiography. So be it. I do not intend to sue him for my drowned rights. Call it character licence on his part.

He and I are adversaries, as my book will show, but we share one thing in common, namely, an approach to the ruling concepts of civilization from the other side, from the ruled or apparently eclipsed side in humanity.

The note is a reminder that Harris, as author, refuses to be authoritarian in his approach to character or text, abandoning conventions of realism, authorial omniscience or artistic detachment. The author enters into the narrative, becoming a 'character' in his own fiction, admitting to his own biases. Later on in the book, Glass, who serves as the reflection (rather than simply a transparent device) of his author, challenges him on the accuracy of his facts:

'May I give you the facts?' said W.H. 'I may be a character in your book but still...'

'Facts?' said I.

'You - Robin Glass - your mother Alice, your aunt Miriam, and three children were drowned in June 1961, the afternoon of the earthquake. The boat Tiger overturned at sea...'

'It's not true,' I shouted. You know damn well I was in bed with flu at aunt Miriam's.'

'It was I,' said W.H. gently.

'You?' (pp. 47-48)

The 'autobiography' touches intimately on both author and character. Aunt Miriam who runs a children's school of drama in her home is drowned along with several children, when their boat capsizes in a storm during an outing. Alice, Robin's mother (the father has long deserted), a literate, intelligent and brave woman, is herself drowned attempting rescue. Robin, ill in bed at his aunt's home, hears the news from his childhood friends, the orphans Peter and Emma, whom Alice had managed to save. From these slight ingredients, a visionary 'rehearsal' of events takes place in the child's fevered brain, deeply affecting his view of the real world. Catastrophe is converted into creative insight. Not only has the child been exposed (at aunt Miriam's) to a world of 'magical theatre', where 'the histories of the world' are re-enacted through 'the shoestring budget of childhood theatre' (p. 65); but he has also been influenced by stories of his eccentric, bookish grand-father who has 're-written'

Goethe's *Faust* while 'pork-knocking' (prospecting for gold and diamonds) in the rainforests of his own 'Sacred Wood', where he dies of beri-beri on the day Robin is born, the same day the nuclear bomb is dropped on Hiroshima 'and history changed, revised itself backwards, never to be the same again' (p. 12).

This awareness of childhood deprivation and global turbulence (conveyed with great power and economy as the simultaneous trauma of childbirth and nuclear devastation) imbues Glass with the conviction that he has been charged by the Creative Spirit (a 'revision' of the ghost's charge to Hamlet, 'the glass of fashion', to seek revenge) to embark upon 'the ceaseless rehearsal, ceaseless performance of the play of truth', in which the Self is 'fictionalised' as a means of locating the creative imagination within 'ageless author', 'ageless character' (p. 82).

Like his grandfather, he becomes a 'gravedigger/pork-knocker' in the 'Sacred Wood' (a rather more humble role than Eliot/Frazer's priest/poet). Classical and modern texts of European civilization are subjected to a 'panning' by the author as 'pork-knocker' in a 'library of dreams', and made to yield up their correspondences with other, 'lost' or unregarded cultures. The result is a novel amalgam in which bits of the 'revised' texts are embedded within a rich magma of cross-cultural, universal significance. Tiresias, the seer, for example, now observes things from within a third world perspective, 'like a tourist under a black sky'. The other side of the Great Tradition appears: 'I saw the negative film of Thebes ... I saw Napoleon's negative crown and Alexander's sceptre and Captain Cat's tombstone floating with Alice's ring and with the stone from a Jamaican hillside.... It was an uncanny vortex. The flotsam and jetsam of empires' (pp. 72-73).

The idea of fiction as a continual rehearsal or 're-vision' of accepted traditions (including the art of fiction itself), was already present in Harris's early work. In a 1967 lecture he described it like this: 'It is as if within his work [the writer] sets out again and again across a certain territory ... of broken recollection in search of a community or species of fiction whose existence he begins to discern' ('The Writer and Society', in *Tradition, The Writer and Society*, New Beacon, 1967).

That technique of 'rehearsal' is at the root of all his work from *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960) onward, and the overwhelming concern is with avoiding the 'sovereign', absolute nature of Tradition, or the tyranny of 'hard fact'. His use of Classical myth and allegory, or of the European literary tradition, is part of a process of re-interpreting or 'retrieving' values that have become ossified, their links with other, so-called 'primitive' cultures, lost. In the unlocking of those 'sovereign' traditions, there is a release of potential energy for creative change. '...my grandfather's *Faust* (which he wrote or brought to completion in the year I was born) possesses roots as much in the modern age as in the Columbian workshop of the gods and therefore addresses a European myth from a multi-faceted and partly non-European standpoint' (p. 7). Robin Redbreast Glass, in writing his 'autobiography', is aware of this 'pre-natal text' which, like Goethe's lifelong work, mirrors its author's own sense of involvement in a drama of consciousness in which final vision is never achieved. *Faust* appears as a central text in the novel, but the figure of Faust, brought alongside the modern age, revises his perspectives: 'You know, Robin, ... I like to think of my surgery as a window upon heaven. Except that heaven's changing ... technology's changing. And quite frankly I'm not sure what investitures the devil now wears' (p. 64). In fact, Faust now sees with 'Quetzalcoatl eyes in which were entwined the marriage of heaven and earth' (p. 64). The reference to the Aztec 'plumed serpent', the god uniting ethereal and early life, also conjures up Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, with its plea for a wedding of physical and spiritual 'contraries'.

For Harris, as for William Blake (whose prophetic books with their airborne, energetic figures Harris's work often calls to mind), without contraries there is no progression; and the novel, both 'autobiography' and 'fiction' is also organised on this principle. Glass, both fictional character and author, is in dialogue with the 'Erdgeist' of a 'Faustian' world.

The Faust/Mephisto dialogue is expanded, however, to include political tyranny, ballot-rigging in the 'third world', the refugee problem, the commercialisation of Space, the Challenger disaster, Chernobyl:

Don't exaggerate. Chernobyl is a disaster complex in the Soviet Union. What has it got to do with the free West and the choices that lie before the electorates of the free West?

'Hush-hush disaster, dateless day bearing,' said Ghost.

'When Communist Rome burns an empire of souls inhales its ash. But no one sees the fire of the brute faery at our fingertips.... Cheap energy is the opium of the masses, the new lotus.' (p. 54)

In his previous novel, *Carnival* (1985), Harris had used the allegorical densities of Dante's *Divina Commedia* as a 'text' through which his imaginative, cross-cultural vision ranges, picking up Medieval threads of meaning and connecting them to contemporary, but broken, lines of communication, rather like a lone linesman in a disaster area when most of the power lines are down. In this 'repair work', post-colonial cultural fragmentation and the resultant masks of carnival are linked with the social and political corruption and consequent need for spiritual guidance in Dante's 14th century Europe. The 'guides' in Harris's novels are culturally heterogeneous, modern figures, but their roles are the same: to re-establish the inner authority of unconditional love in genuine revolutionary change. The last sentence of *Carnival* begins with the last line of *Paradiso*: 'The love that moves the sun and the other stars' ('l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle').

The Infinite Rehearsal, like *Carnival*, like much of Harris's fiction, is not so much a 're-reading' as a 'revisoning' of European Myth (itself concerned with the retrieval of Value), in order to discover the deeper springs of the enabling Universal Truth that all myth contains. It was, Harris argues, the enshrining of the great myths as 'Sovereign Tradition' which, in a sense, created the 'third world' and broke the lines of communication between peoples and their cultures; a disruption that now appears on a global scale. Goethe's *Faust* serves as another Great Myth which, since its origins lie even deeper, within an 'Ur-text' or myth of the divorce between Reason and Emotion, may have resonances that suggest and reveal.

That is, in fact, a description of Harris's own fictional practice, where the writer 'sets out again and again across a certain territory...', but without any preconceived destination, open to 'revisory strategies' available to the creative imagination. This is what Goethe's *Faust* means when he tells the Erdgeist that he needs help in order to leave 'dabbling in words' and seeks to discover 'what holds the world together'. In Harris's novel, Ghost acts as Geist to Glass/Harris's quest: 'I say revisory strategies to imply that as you write ... of the dead or the unborn, bits of the world's turbulent universal consciousness embed themselves in your book. Do you see?' (p. 46). 'And I revise around these and through these. I see,' 'W.H./Glass replies. It is a method of 'validation of fiction', going against the grain of conventional form and practice, the author becoming involved in the fiction, following where the work (Geist) leads while also engaged in the writing.

Above all, this is a novel about the prophetic nature of fiction as a means of apprehending the dilemmas of our post-colonial civilization involving traumatised 'Third Worlds' as well as bewildered 'First Worlds'. The 'spectre of wholeness' that underlies the strange, rambling narrative lies in the hidden densities of the texts themselves, where there is a visionary thread of meaning running through them into a seamless, cross-cultural garment. Extracts from T.S. Eliot, Walter de la Mare, Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, Wilfred Owen, R.L. Stevenson, Robert Burns, Karl Marx and Shakespeare appear at odd moments within the narrative, often altered slightly, the result of cultural *frisson*. The texts jostle each other, share in each other's meanings:

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

At first sight, de la Mare's simple ballad, a relic of school days, and Eliot's classical allusions from *The Waste Land* seem to be joined by an unlikely bedfellow; the bawdy Caribbean folk song, 'Jumbie Jamboree'. But the folk song with its despairing echo of the cramped hold of the slave ship, becomes a mediating comment on both de la Mare's Traveller, unaware of a 'host of phantom listeners', and the Waste Land with its expiatory message for a historical and cultural Tradition in crisis. The Great Tradition was always (as Conrad saw) deeply implicated in the Imperial Adventure which served to support that Tradition. The texts gain a new 'immediacy of utterance' from their juxtaposition.

Harris is making a plea for world sanity; for the compassionate understanding denied by crude polarisations of language and thought. The novel is part of a profoundly moral undertaking; an attempt to understand the apparent paradoxes of remarkable human achievement in science and art alongside the equally remarkable record of human misery and deprivation. Instead of merely investing in the 'human interest' of these paradoxes, Harris looks within, at our own biases, our own failure to 'connect' because of an 'illiteracy of the imagination' which obscures the link between material progress and increasing violence in a world dominated by the stock-market mentality of 'Billionaire Death' (one of the allegorical figures which rise out of aunt Miriam's children's theatre). The hope for the future is Emma, who, in becoming the first female Archbishop, witnesses to a new *Divina Commedia*: a 'Divine Communism', a reversal of the bankruptcy of the human imagination which has led to the collective death-wish inherent in global violence, drug-trafficking, environmental rape and the spectre of nuclear destruction. It is to her that Glass/Harris sets out on his final journey.

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