The quest for form

Wilson Harris
Abstract
There are different and manifold ways in which an imaginative writer may approach the quest for form. I write critical essays but I must confess that many of these are prompted by discoveries one makes as an imaginative writer. Discoveries that open unsuspected doors and windows on the works of other writers one may not have appreciated before. This seems to me a hopeful capacity in that one witnesses, in a strange way, curious fissures that appear in one's biases.
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In this brief address, I would like to imply something to do with the enigmatic life of form, the riddle of form, in the tone of my address. I would like to embody some aspect of philosophic and intuitive psyche, so to speak, in a sensuous discourse.

The metaphysic of the imagination deals with violence and force, violence is destructive, force — on the other hand — may be regenerative. They (violence and force) resemble each other. The blow of the rapist resembles the honeymoon blow struck in tenderness by the bridegroom who cares for the bride. The distinction between violence and force has many ramifications in the archaeology of civilizations. A perception of the consequences of our actions is never immediately clear. The burden of foreknowledge, when a particular deed is performed, would be much too great to bear in the instant of performance. Nevertheless a deed or act may draw upon itself a constellation of images whose strangeness — whose half-obscurity, half-transparency — begins to prepare us for degrees of illumination and confession, degrees of implicit comprehension and responsibility for what we have done or are still blindly doing.

None of us can escape entirely the legacies of violence that exist everywhere in our world. The blow one receives that seems utterly unjust is the injustice we once may have inflicted unwittingly upon another.

To see all this, to accept all this, with imaginative capacity, is to open ourselves to a converse miracle. Love is mutuality, art is mutuality. The artist is both feminine and masculine; the male artist is fashioned internally, seized internally, by the women of all ages and climates that he
creates or attacks, strips or sustains, renders violent or summons into sensuous beauty, in his fictions or sculptures or paintings.

The same is true of the woman who sculpts or paints or writes. In the elements she sculpts or assembles into characters in fiction and poetry exist invisible and visible arrows pointed at her innermost guilts, innermost longings and desires, innermost fears of eternity.

What is eternity? Eternity is unbearable womb of endless progression — forever and forever: who can bear the terror of gestating eternity, of being locked into a paradox that annihilates birth and death in human creative terms, leaves nothing but forever and forever and forever and forever. It is easy to say ‘world without end’ — we tend to repeat such phrases like parrots, unthinkingly, unimaginatively.

Beauty and terror are faces of eternity. I recall at this moment a fragment from Rilke’s Duino Elegies —

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence. Beauty is nothing but beginning of terror....

Since eternity is an implacable riddle, since eternity is an extinction of birth and death in human creative terms — and beauty and terror are faces of eternity’s angels — the blow of art, the very genius of love, lies in creating forces that penetrate or make fissures in eternity. Such fissures embody miniaturisations or reductive symbols of a terrifyingly infinite cosmos we tend to identify with our own rages or passions. Therefore it is as if a complex irony is built into the cosmos, an irony within which the cosmos appears to make itself small in order to limit or thwart or overcome what appears to be the projected consequences of our natural hubris, our natural lust for conquests of natures, for ransacking cultures — our natural lust that resembles infinite desire, infinite cosmic ambition. The irony of reduction or miniaturisation that the cosmos plays upon us brings into action a paradox and a marvel. A creative paradox or perception begins to flourish, and through finitude, or limits, conquest may be fissured and the burden of catastrophe shot through by the strangest hope for real change, for mutuality, for a mutual capacity shared by diverse images and cultures and characterisations around the globe. Such reality of change — such capacity to bear and cope with beauty and terror — I call an annunciation of humanity.

May I re-state, in a slightly different way, what is a complex position to do with the ‘quest for form’. The mutuality I imply between images and
cultures and characterisations is a paradox. It breaks, at certain levels, the conscription of polarised worlds bent — it would seem — on destroying each other. It implies a profound irony and comedy of existence built into paradox, into a creative perception of finitude through the poetry of miniaturisations of the cosmos.

Therefore that irony, that comedy, encompasses realistic fallacies or projections of infinite range to human passion through miniaturisations of the cosmos that thwart (to transform), reduce (to overcome), the consequences of such lust for infinity.

Thus it is as if the cosmos coheres into complex miniaturisations that translate infinite hubris — or addiction to infinite hubris — into ceaselessly finite, mutual deaths, mutual re-births, borne by diverse cultures. Such mutuality is an annunciation of humanity. It profoundly alters narrative imagery in forwards and backwards play of associations, reading strategy.

In this context of mutualities, we (as a civilisation) should nurse every dislocated culture in history as if it were re-born on our doorsteps, precariously re-born in the teeth of adverse eternity that we have ourselves escalated into deeds of conquest and sovereign death-wish.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that the birth of the modern world — adorned with all the complex stigmata we associate with our age — occurred somewhere between Dante’s Inferno and the conquest of the ancient Americas. It is possible to nourish hope that the dislocation of cultures need not continue to breed repetitive cycles of eternal violence, eternal revenge, between the exploiters and the exploited we have ourselves bred, the conquistador and the conquered we have ourselves invoked.

The black American whose antecedents came through the Middle Passage, the Jew whose antecedents escaped the gas chambers, the Irish whose antecedents fled injustice and famine, the Russians whose antecedents fled the ancient dynasty of the Czars or the repetitive dynasty of Stalins, the persecuted of all races, are not immune from the temptations of tyranny, of exercising tyranny as insane continuity or lust for infinity — endless progression, endless logic that consumes and despoils.

We create each other, we are each other’s plague as we are each other’s therapy. And the dividing line is virtually non-existent until ‘non-existence’ itself becomes a parable, until ‘non-existence’ itself becomes a cosmic irony, until ‘non-existence’ itself becomes metaphysic — metaphysic of the frail genius of humanity — frail but genuine counterpoint to inflated model, frail but genuine mystery that pits itself against all-consuming orders of the temperament of power.
Because of parables and ironies of existence, the living and the dead speak to each other in fictions of reality (the Mexican novel *Pedro paramo* is an instance of such fiction of reality), because of parables of 'non-existence' Christ walked on water as if the sea had become an oceanic shawl over the unborn on whose fluid back god walks — as if the ocean were the mother of Man — an ocean apparently seamless, yet fissured by fictions of reality into a discourse between the heights and the depths.

Because of parables of 'non-existence' history is a profound fiction of invisible forces that sustain us in the midst of perils and assist us to blend into an evolving metaphysic of the imagination that counsels us that there is a divine comedy of existence in each particle of dream, in each fissure of originality through implacable circumstance or fate, in each fissure or break through which we clothe our human limits in a wealth of paradox.

I use the term 'evolving metaphysic' with the greatest care.

Quite rightly, I think, the concept of 'evolution' in Darwinian philosophy, in terms of progression, is little used by students of society. Society is liable to unpredictable regress, it stores alarming fears, biases, passions, that may unleash wholly unbargained-for, undreamt-of conflicts that run against the grain of evolutionary models. Nevertheless I cling to the term 'evolving metaphysic' in an alchemical sense. Alchemy infuses fossils with a cyclical life. Rather than remorseless progression, there is cyclical re-birth, a re-birth that ushers us into complex darkness (*nigredo* is the alchemical term) in the middle of day. That re-birth, that complex darkness, is a miniaturisation or reductive symbol of unbearable wheels of light. It secretes a capacity for *visualisation*, a capacity to move with the indirections and the mystery of interior genius, interior illumination.

It is interesting, in this context, to reflect on a play called *The Road* by the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka. I find this play profoundly moving as fictional reality; as a fiction to be read and visualised in which encounters occur between the newborn and the newdead — in which darkness lies over the eyes of the newborn who cannot yet see as it lies over the eyes of the newdead who are slipping back into the womb of space. Dramatic performance becomes the surrogate, I find, of fiction. In other words, the dramatic performance is a substitute for profound insights that reside in the 'chrysalis of the Word' (as the play puts it). One is not suggesting that the performance is not memorable. Nevertheless a riddle remains: at a certain level the play *resists* performance on the
stage. Does that imply a failure in a work ostensibly designed for the theatre? If so, in my judgement, the ‘failure’ of *The Road* becomes a parable, ‘failure’ miniaturises theatre of the gods — of the savage god Ogun — into mask or chrysalis inhabited by the curious and marvellous life of *visualised* being in contradistinction not only to *visual* model but to theatrical lust for the conquest of sensibilities.

The truth is *alchemy of the word, alchemy of the image*, is *not allegory* in Dantesque, large scale, absolutely sovereign theatre or *fixed abode*. Alchemy converts, subverts, all realms into profoundest unscience-in-depth.

The model universe on stage Dante inhabited has become a misconception of the cosmos across many centuries. All absolute model or stage is partial and needs therefore to be perceived in radical finitude if it is to confess to its partiality. The capacity of a play to make the stage a secondary manifestation of its rich, verbal, intricate life, enhances layers of receptivity within us even as it transforms the model theatre into a live fossil. The twentieth century — in that sense — may be seen in the future to have passed the most remarkable judgements on itself within minority genius that runs counter to majority addiction to visual media and to the Faustian conquest or conscription of tastes.

Three peculiar works that may be strung together are Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, Mervyn Peake’s *Gormenghast* and Amos Tutuola’s *Palm Wine Drinkard*.

Djuna Barnes is, I find, an American woman novelist whose power and intricacy in *Nightwood* can scarcely be matched by any other writer. It is an extremely bleak work with its *uninhabited angels*, its Matthew-Dante-O’Connor, its Robin Vote and others. A modern work that *resists* all contemporary media and reduces them to signals of the deprived consciousness of an age. An exquisite balance divides sheer deprivation of consciousness from the mystery of reductive symbol of the cosmos. Television thrives best on poverty of script, on banal prose: one is tempted to say that such poverty (such regard for triviality spiced with violence and sex) is a reductive symbol of cosmos. But NO. It is not. It may be *converted* into the edge of sardonic spirituality in which the television box becomes a fossil inhabited by moving shadows.

Mervyn Peake is an English novelist. His *Gormenghast* is a rare achievement. The character Flay, for example, the creature with the ‘dug-out heart’ is a walking, hollow skin. Where his heart should be fly golden creatures of beauty and terror. His failure to understand the evolving metaphysic — the marriage of alchemy and evolution — within
his own fictional body leaves him an outcast even as it tinges the space within him into apparently unconscious womb and maternal longing akin to masculine/feminine reality.

Amos Tutuola’s *Palm Wine Drinkard* was published within the same decade as *Gormenghast*. There too we find walking hollows, a beautiful fossil gentleman whose reduction to a daemonic skull is part and parcel of a terrifying secret of wholeness into which ‘father of the gods’ is initiated as he sets out to win his wife who has been stricken dumb and may be seen as a kind of inverse of the sleeping beauty that we encounter in archetypal European legend.

May I now read a short passage from *The Secret Ladder* that sets out to invoke the terror and beauty of the heavens collapsing into a measure of human paradox: human frailty, human rage, human destructiveness. In the passage one Jordan strikes out at a woman called Catalena but a butterfly becomes the surrogate victim of his anger.

Jordan was furious. He had been made to feel he was a helpless servant whose privileged back could easily be broken. His eye was distracted by a flight of brilliant butterflies sailing out of the bush. They hovered overhead and one enormous distended creature — wings breathing like fans — settled on Catalena’s shoulder. She brushed it off…. It flew straight at Jordan and he struck out savagely…. The fantastic wings were shattered save for the spirit of their design which persisted on the ground like stars of gold painted on the blue skeleton of crumpled heaven.

Twentieth century divine comedy of existence rests implicitly, I believe, on an oblique line that touches on a variety of live fossil spaces, animate and inanimate bodies, social, political, institutional idols, areas of sculpture, areas of mask and paint, half-conscious, half-unconscious flesh-and-blood etc., to illumine an indirect correspondence that transforms all sovereign expectation, apparently sovereign structure, apparently sovereign media, to partial elements.

These parts in an evolving metaphysic (in the sense in which I have adopted that term) cry out for different criteria of assessment, I believe, from those now employed in our regional humanities.

The metaphysical butterfly’s wing is the terror, and beauty, of fossil identity (therefore implicit finitude) to absorb unbearable heavens and hells — to transform ‘unbearable’ heavens and hells — ‘unbearable’ in the sense that they are so ingrained in human misery and conflict, greed and jealousy, that they seem to tilt the very cosmos towards polarization and oblivion.

Without a profound perception of this — without a profound alteration of fictional imagery in narrative bodies — it is difficult to fissure
the sovereign death-wish; catastrophe appears to endure and to eclipse the annunciation of humanity.

I have sketched in a tentative linkage of fictions in this brief talk. I would have liked to include the Caribbean, Latin America, Australia, Asia, Canada, etc.

We are, I think, despite apparently incorrigible bias, moving into a dimension of hope, however overshadowed that hope may be.

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.

On 12 February 1982, Raja Rao and Wilson Harris spoke at a British Studies Faculty Seminar at the University of Texas at Austun under the rubric, 'The Quest for Form: Commonwealth Perspectives'. Professor Emeritus Joseph Jones chaired the session. The above is a transcript of Wilson Harris's paper.