SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE NOTIONS OF HISTORY, TIME AND THE IMAGINATION IN THE THOUGHT OF WILSON HARRIS

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My goal here is to revisit some earlier papers of mine on Wilson Harris's critical essays with a view to discussing Harris's conceptualization of the history and identity of Caribbean people as well as his ideas concerning the role of the imagination in investigating the past(s) of Caribbean peoples.

Although Harris's approach to the history and identity of Caribbean people can be categorized as 'poetic,' he does not share Brathwaite's Rousseauistic nostalgia for a purer and simpler 'African' identity and language that presumably existed before the traumas of the middle passage, the plantation and colonial status. Brathwaite's approach indicates indeed a strict selectivity, a decision to limit his concern to the African component of contemporary Caribbean reality. Harris, for his part, recognizes the links and influences of other Old World cultures (European and Asian) that also shape Caribbean identity -- as well as, indeed, those of vanished New World cultures adumbrated in the tribal remnants of Amerindian peoples in his native Guyana. Apart from this difference in scope, there is also a difference in method in how these two Caribbean writers approach these questions. Perhaps because of his academic training as a historian, Brathwaite begins (in works like "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" [1970]) by studying the 'African' cultures of origin and then looking for remnants and survivals of these in the Caribbean. Harris, on the other hand, prefers to begin with Caribbean cultural phenomena and attempt to discover – or rather *imagine* – their links with the past. For Harris such cultural phenomena become 'gateways' between different worlds and times and peoples.

An interesting example of Harris's imaginative investigation of a Caribbean cultural feature associated with the past is found in his treatment of the 'limbo' dance in his essay "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas" (1970). Harris mentions the familiar current context of the limbo dance -- entertainment for tourists in Caribbean hotels and night clubs -- but then goes on to say:

> Limbo was born, *it is said*, on the slave ships of the middle passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders. . . . Limbo [therefore] emerged as a novel re-assembly out of the stigmata of the Middle Passage. . . . (157-158; my emphasis)

I emphasize the words 'it is said' because everyone who speaks of limbo in this context uses the same formula but I have never been able to discover who it is that 'said' this in the sense of reporting serious research. Maybe the link to the Middle Passage has been established to the satisfaction of historical scholarship, I do not really know, but it is tempting to see it as an imaginative truth declared by Harris or Brathwaite or some other cultural thinker. My point is that it is widely accepted and is no less a 'truth' for being 'imaginative.' I include this as an illustration of the process of the imaginative exploration of what Harris calls historical 'voids' or 'spaces,' where the imagination has to 'compensate,' as it were, for the unrecorded origin or motivation of the phenomenon. The important point, however, is what Harris does with these ideas about limbo. Making the fullest creative use of the resources of language, he puns on the word 'limbo,' referring to the "limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean"(157), between old worlds and the new. In this way, the dance is made to evoke the 'limbo' of some Christian religious traditions -- an intermediate state between heaven and hell, a place of suspended animation between two definite worlds or realities, a waiting room of sadness and suffering; all of these apply to the journey on the slave ships, hence the tense, writhing, uncertain stage of the dance (passing under the bar) and the exuberant, celebratory upright dancing signifying survival and release. The other meaning of the word is the suggestion of what Harris calls "the theme of the phantom limb" (158) -- the dancer loses almost all vertical dimension and becomes a spider, spreadeagled on the ground; he is then re-assembled to full height, re-inhabiting vertical space and suggesting, Harris says "the re-assembly of dismembered man or god – possess[ing] archetypal resonances that embrace Egyptian Osiris, the resurrected

Christ, and the many-armed deity of India"(158), while commemorating the dismemberment of African tribes that the slave trade entailed and seeking, in music and exuberant dance, to compensate for the pain and hardship of the past, the recovery of a dancing limb of joy that had been amputated by slavery. This area of meaning is also an important contribution to our understanding of the nature of the transformations wrought by the Middle Passage, importing as it does an emotional and mythic dimension into the process.

What is perhaps most important, however, is that both these areas of meaning evoked by the puns -- in fact, the puns themselves -- rely on a kind of cultural cross-fertilization as they involve myths or concepts from Christian / Catholic tradition, early Nile Valley cultures, and Hindu deities. These are all fused with the West African notion of the Anancy spider god and a knowledge of the marine mercantile practices of the European slave trade. In this way, such a relatively minor cultural feature as the limbo dance is made to involve and to resonate with an entire global perspective while remaining an *original* feature of Caribbean cultural reality. Harris shows that the global contexts in this case are not crudely superimposed upon the limbo dance, and do not obliterate its specific Caribbean origin or reality, but rather expand its significance and mythic suggestiveness and rescue it from the triviality of mere tourist entertainment:

> The limbo dance becomes the human gateway which dislocates (and therefore begins to free itself from) a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic. This dislocation or interior space serves therefore as a corrective to a uniform cloak or documentary stasis of imperialism. (159)

Harris goes on to comment on the scant attention paid by contemporary historical scholarship to cultural features such as the limbo dance. Those he calls the "new historians" (158) of the Caribbean are impatient with anyone or anything who / that does not indict the Euro-American world by exposing therein a uniform pattern of imperial exploitation in New World areas such as the Caribbean. In this way these 'new historians,' Harris tells us,

> conscripted the West Indies into a mere adjunct of imperialism and overlooked a subtle and far-reaching renascence. In a sense therefore the new historian -- though his stance is an admirable one in debunking imperialism -- has ironically extended and reinforced old colonial prejudices which censored the limbo imagination as a 'rowdy' manifestation and overlooked the complex metaphorical gateway it constitutes. . . . (158)

Although Harris was writing this some thirty years ago, his use of the past tense in describing the actions and attitudes of his 'new historian'(158) seems, paradoxically, less appropriate now than it did then -- as one is frequently disconcerted by the contemporary climate of anxiety and suspicion concerning teaching and learning subjects in the humanities. I am thinking, for example, of students of Literature reading Derek Walcott's poem "Ruins of a Great House" (about feelings of anger as the persona imagines the enactment of slavery's cruelties on the now abandoned and ruined site of a plantation great house in the Caribbean) and expressing disappointmeent with the compassion at the end of the poem: "It's because his head too full of Milton and Kipling and Donne for him to focus on the needs of his own people for poems that will tell the truth." So compassion is not truth, or perhaps it is too personal a truth for some readers -- evidence of a sensibility corrupted by its love for the culture of the oppressor.

It seems to me that this kind of xenophobic cultural nationalism is one of the dangers of the 'romantic,' nostalgic approach to the past and it is in this context that I value the more open approach of Wilson Harris -- not because it provides definitive answers or counter-arguments, but rather because, in terms of both content and method, it explains the anxieties of the Caribbean and also suggests strategies for the preservation of the integrity of the imagination. Also, long before the notion of globalization started to be bandied about, Harris was asserting that the nature of consciousness and the imagination is concerned with the transcending of barriers and

categories of all kind, with looking "beyond the fortress of self-created things towards a paradoxical womb" ("The Phenomenal Legacy" 47). Harris explains:

> The true complex of one's time is open and transformative, rather than static and imitative, multi-racial rather than racial. And the necessity to enter a transformative era of assumptions beneath one's safe crust of bias becomes increasingly imperative, if we are not to succumb to monolithic callouses and complacencies in the name of virtue or purity. (44)

In this same essay Harris does not only advocate the importance of the imagination in confronting the legacy of Caribbean peoples, but also demonstrates the use of the imagination in, for example, his recourse to a metaphor of space. After describing the "essential character" (45) of space -- "a phenomenon which subsists upon its very losses, the transubstantiation of consciousness" (45) -- he mentions the use of space in modern sculpture where form and meaning depend upon both matter and its absence, the losses from the original block of material which are essential for the achievement of form. He also hints at the use of spaces within the material form -- holes and hollows which, though they consist of 'nothing' are of vital importance to the meaning and nature of the work. He refers to modern sculpture as the "timeless, placeless mind of the skeleton" (45-46), thus focusing perhaps on fundamental notions of structure rather than the accretions and accidents of a particular race, culture or even time– which indeed such abstract forms may be attempting to transcend. And yet the phrase 'mind of the skeleton,' when applied to the investigation of historical 'voids' in which Harris is engaged, is a paradox which gestures towards the possibility of recovering much more than formal continuities with the structures past and of other cultures. This helps define and clarify, perhaps, the role of the imagination in the process of transcending losses and a futile longing for fixed and vanished realities in the past.

Thus, Harris sees a relationship between Henry Moore and ancient Amerindian sculpture. In this way, not only is his own imagination bridging the gap -- or 'space' -- between cultures, but he is also providing, in the metaphor of sculpture, a way of understanding the Caribbean legacy. The holes, voids or empty spaces in works of modern sculpture can suggest the voids or gaps in the historical record of the peoples of the Caribbean, whether Amerindians, slaves or indentured labourers cut off from their original homes; such spaces or gaps, like those in the work of sculpture, need not be considered irretrievable losses and barriers to understanding, but rather as points of entry for the creative imagination which, though it cannot consolidate a static picture of the past nor create a seamless continuity with the present, can "concede and enter upon those alternative realities ('phenomenal legacy') which may lead to a new scale or illumination of the meaning of community" (45).

Harris suggests that such imaginative entry into and participation in the 'spaces' of Caribbean history "borders on a confession of weakness" (45) which would encourage one to draw upon resources and perspectives that would be overlooked or ignored if one were confident of the material continuities of the shape of history that one is examining. In other words, instead of giving up because of the gaps in the record, one can conduct a rigorous imaginative enquiry within the gaps themselves to discover, as with the piece of sculpture, the 'mind' of the past ('skeleton').

Wilson Harris's comments in "History, Fable and Myth," as well as other critical essays, certainly indicate that he would have difficulties with the notion of institutionalizing any censorship of the creative imagination (I am thinking here of the students who disapprove of Walcott's alleged Eurocentrism) and of the teaching and application of contemporary literary theory (those students who want only African or Caribbean theory and feel compelled to ask 'This Homi Bhabha is a black man?' before they can know how to 'read' him). Harris would probably agree that there are risks involved in the complete freedom to pursue so-called global perspectives on Caribbean culture, but such risks are necessary and far less inimical to the understanding and the 'health' of national and regional cultures than prescribing the boundaries of academic and scholarly enquiry. With such censorship and prescription, "the institutions of the day

will become increasingly rigged by fear and misgiving, and political deterioration is the inevitable corollary" ("History, Fable and Myth" 161). As Harris himself has shown in his discussion of the limbo gateway, the approach to a problem that refuses to exclude seemingly inappropriate areas of knowledge and experience stands a greater chance of achieving the kind of results that liberate and challenge the spirit, instead of merely consolidating a pre-conceived sphere of meaning which seeks to allay the political, racial or nationalist anxieties of the time.

Perhaps the clearest understanding of Harris's thoughts and method concerning the past is to be found in his fictional treatment of the Amerindians of Guyana, particularly in the two volumes of 'Amerindian Fables,' The Sleepers of Roraima and The Age of the Rainmakers. In these two volumes Harris is exploring the 'void' of Amerindian culture and history. Harris has complained about "the documentary stasis of Amerindian culture" ("History, Fable and Myth" 18) and warns in "The Phenomenal Legacy":

> It is possible to consolidate the usual picture of the Amerindian, and by clever narrative constructive gain apparent clarity or coherency, sensational chronicle or even sensitive documentary. Nevertheless the poverty of conception in such enterprise remains enormous. Indeed if history has anything to tell us, it is of the danger which resides in the wilful conscription of primitive character: a uniform consolidation of so-called historical features through an account of deeds whose motivation or mind we have not penetrated leads inevitably to vulgarization or tyranny. (44)

This 'vulgarization or tyranny' is avoided through a willingness to "participate imaginatively" (44) in the life of the primitive community:

> Such a willingness . . . borders upon a confession of weakness, and this, therefore, paradoxically, supplies the creative wisdom or potential to draw upon strange reserves and perspectives on would otherwise overlook or reject, detached as we feel we are within our absolute tower of strength (false tower of strength). (45)

This latter course of 'imaginative participation' is the one chosen by Harris in the fables and it obviously has implications for the form of these tales. Harris himself uses the term 'fable' in the sense of a story not based on fact; yet, paradoxically, the stories in some sense replace or serve as a substitute for factual history and cultural data. Harris is seeking to retrieve, through a process involving the originality of the creative imagination, the vanished truths concerning the tribal remnants that are the subjects of his investigation. The fables themselves are very dense, with archetypal, circular narrative patterns and movements, reversals and seeming contradictions that mimic metaphorically, perhaps, the difficulties involved in investigating the vanished past of the Amerindian peoples of Guyana.

This paper is not primarily concerned, however, with narrative patterns and metaphor. Part of the discernible qualitative difference in Harris's treatment of the past and its peoples comes about, I would like to suggest, as a result of the distinct philosophical context in which Harris seems to be working. In 1965, C. L. R. James gave a lecture to students of the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad entitled Wilson Harris, a Philosophical Approach. The lecture has not been paid much attention, it seems to me, by Harris critics, perhaps because of its somewhat 'schoolmasterish' and condescending tone. But James's basic point is important: he draws attention to a certain philosophical context in which Harris's techniques of fiction might fruitfully be examined. By referring exclusively to Heidegger and Jaspers, James identifies this context as essentially the Existentialist movement. However, I would prefer, at least for the purpose of my concerns in this paper, to adjust that context somewhat and suggest that Harris imports into his techniques of fiction some of the tools of phenomenological investigation as seen in the writings of Edmund Husserl, in Heidegger's Being and Time (Heidegger was, after all, the foremost student of Husserl) and in such works as Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception.

All this is not to claim that Harris is writing philosophy in the guise of literature, but simply that his fiction and fictional techniques seem to achieve further levels of meaning and are better explained when viewed in the light of this philosophical context, just as the literary writings of Beckett and Sartre, for instance, are similarly enriched by reference to a particular philosophical context. In his critical writings, Harris himself mentions a few philosophers in ways that suggest more than a passing acquaintance with their work on his part, and I think it is not insignificant that he entitles his important essay on investigating vestiges of lost cultures "The Phenomenal Legacy."

In the Amerindian fables, Harris can be said to take a phenomenological approach to the questions of time and consciousness as they relate to the vestiges of Amerindian history or culture that he mentions in his 'notes' to the stories. Perhaps the point can be better made if we look at Harris's concerns and techniques in the fables alongside certain passages from Husserl's The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness. In looking at the fables we saw that the question of form seemed to be linked to the idea of consciousness -- in all the stories we somehow enter the mind of the protagonist in order to perceive his vision of reality. This has to do too with Harris's obvious concern with overcoming the historical moment, with a perception of reality that is valid both 'now' and in the vanished past. As Calvin O. Schrag points out in his introduction to Husserl's book, all

> forms of perception [according to Husserl] presuppose an intentional structure of consciousness, and it is in this intentional structure that the primordial link between consciousness and the world is to be sought. (12)

Thus, as Harris seems to be saying, the factual, historical moment is of minor significance, since there exists within the 'structure of consciousness' the clue to his imaginative ('original') perception of Carib history. While one would not go so far as to say that the form of the fables imitates the intentional structure of consciousness, there is nonetheless frequently a sense (as in 'Couvade') of the reader purposefully negotiating a highly structured pattern of associations within the dreaming consciousness of the protagonist and, by extension, of the author (who is, in any case, initially 'present' in some of the stories). This pattern of association itself then becomes the meaning of the experience.

The form of the fables is also concerned with time. Certain paradoxes of time -- closed circular movements, confusion between beginning and end, past and future -- tend to give shape to the stories themselves. It is important to note, as pointed out by Schrag, that:

> Consciousness is qualified by temporal determinants. Temporality provides the form for perception, phantacy, imagination memory and recollection. (12-13)

In all his works Harris seems to be dealing, in part, with the way in which consciousness is qualified by time, the way in which the imagination functions by retrieving and juxtaposing different methods of lived experience. It is worth nothing that Harris probably extends the notions of imagination and consciousness from the individual to the race or community -- in his note to the fable entitled "The Mind of Awakaipu" he mentions his own Amerindian antecedents as if to establish his own imaginative credentials.

The question of originality in the sense, already noted, of origin or primal time is also dealt with in Husserl's essay:

> The question of the origin is oriented towards the primitive forms of the consciousness of time in which the primitive differences of the temporal are constituted intuitively and authentically as the originary sources of all certainties relative to time. (Husserl 28)

In a subsequent clarification he states that he is really concerned here with the "primordial material of sensation out of which arises objective intuition of space and

time in the human individual and even in the species" (28). What is interesting in these passages is that although Husserl is using the words 'primitive' and 'intuitively' in their technical, philosophical senses, these nevertheless have equal or greater pertinence when considered in their more common senses in the context and in connection with Harris's techniques. (In that case 'objective intuition' would become the kind of paradox that would embody the spirit as well as the techniques of Wilson Harris in these fables.) In the Carib trilogy The Sleepers of Roraima, Harris's enquiries into 'original time' ("Couvade"), 'first cause or causeway' ("I Quiyumucon") and the 'first native' ("Yurokon"), point to his obvious concern with the general question of origin or originality. His techniques themselves assert the primacy of consciousness and such notions as intuition and imagination over and above the irretrievable reality of the past or that which is contained in a specific moment.

Here again, the phenomenological approach serves Harris well, for it allows him to 'bracket' time in terms of actual historical moments, and to explore characters and situations outside of time:

> If I add 'now' to the idea of man, the idea acquires no new characteristics thereby; in other words the 'now' attributes no new characteristic to the idea of man. In perception, when something is represented as present, nothing is added to the quality, intensity or spacial determinateness thereby. (Husserl 34)

Hence, by extension, the factual historical moment is unessential to the business of exploring the quality or intensity of personality and experience. Thus we get in several of the stories a deliberate sense of temporal disorientation in order to subvert, I would suggest, the primacy of the historical moment in order to arrive at truths and perceptions that are timeless and to forestall objections about historical accuracy or historical plausibility.

An objection could be made concerning the validity of the whole enterprise of enquiry into the dead past of Amerindian peoples, especially the Caribs of whom, according to Harris, only a few remnants remain. Harris himself supplies reasons for his concern, which are also explanations of his techniques. In terms of the phenomenological enquiry into one's consciousness of time, the 'reality' of the past is, according to Husserl, beyond question:

> The attempt, therefore, to set forth what is past as something not real or not existing is very questionable. A supervenient psychical moment cannot make something non-real or get rid of what presently exists. In fact, the whole sphere of primordial associations is a present and real lived experience. To this sphere belongs the whole series of originary temporal moments produced by means of primordial associations. . . (Husserl 39)

I would suggest that it is through a process of 'primordial associations' that Harris arrives at the origins or at the 'originality' of the Amerindian communities he is investigating. Within that chain of associations or perhaps, in some cases, initiating it, are features of landscape which, Harris suggests, modern man possesses in union with the vanished tribes. This might explain his note on Mount Roraima in The Sleepers of Roraimaa – a tremendous feature of landscape which serves as a locus of shared perception across the ages or historical moments, an omen of originality, as it were.

The foregoing is an attempt to demonstrate that some of the ideas and methods of phenomenological investigation can fruitfully be seen to underlie some of the fictional techniques in the Amerindian fables of Wilson Harris. I am not claiming a specific influence or indebtedness on Harris's part by or to any philosophical work or body of work, although it is interesting that Harris's ultimate resolution of the moments of Carib history (in the story "Yurokon") is in terms of notes that make up a symphony (an "Annunciation of Music" [The Sleepers of Roraimaa 81], as Father Gabriel says at the end), while an essential image/example in Husserl's attempt to distinguish durations of time and their corresponding perceptions within consciousness involves the notion of the single phase of a note, the note itself with its full temporal extension, its lingering

echoes in the mind and finally the accumulation of notes to form harmony, which only exists after all the notes here actually passed into nothingness. This is paradigmatic of the sort of relationship I see existing between the concerns and methods of Husserl's phenomenological investigation and the fiction of Wilson Harris – he makes the fullest creative use of these techniques and concerns in order to arrive at an 'original' mythology / history / lore of the Amerindian peoples. Underlying the whole enterprise is his vision of the arch of community that links himself and modern man, with the vanished tribes of the past, as he says in the Rainmaker's epitaph: "Originality is the fragile, yet indestructible arch of community whose web is akin to, but other than space" (The Age of the Rainmakers 9).

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