

WILSON HARRIS

Theatre of the Arts

Before I start I'd like to say that "braids" is a term which seems to me to be crying out for cross-culturality—not multiculturalism but cross-culturality, which is quite different from multiculturalism. It cries out in an urgent way and it also cries out urgently for us to begin to approach art and fiction differently from how we have been conditioned to receive them. That was the reason why I accepted this invitation because I felt it was a useful chance to discuss these matters which are very important to me, and I believe they can be very important to you as well. I hope from what I say you may be able to pull from them something that bears on British Braids.

The following essay was then read by Wilson Harris as the opening address to the British Braids conference at Brunel University, Twickenham campus, on 19 April 2001. It is followed here by a transcript of the ensuing discussion.

Recently a commentator, in a scientific programme on genes, stated—I now paraphrase his remarks—that if we stripped away our pigmentations, we should find an African presence beneath the varying colour of our skins. But—he went on to say—this has only been recently perceived and is still little understood. Furthermore, he implied, in the ages of *involuntary* migration of the original African presence—across land-masses, oceans and rivers—the profoundest changes have occurred.

Our immersion in such changes has led us to conceive of absolute ethnicities or racial compartments. Thus, in the arts, we have blocked the flow of *measureless* cross-culturalities. We tend to claim fixed boundaries and to gain support for such absoluteness from animal habitats. Ironically, the centuries have witnessed to gross conquests. The most recent of these occurred in the Americas five hundred years ago. European cultures invaded the Aztecs, the Incas, and others and appeared to destroy invaluable differences. Such differences, in my view, are the foundations of universal possibilities woven from diversities.

By the way I spoke, a moment ago, of our seeking support for fixed boundaries from animal habitats. What is animal habitat? Has it not been determined by the movement of land-masses, the changed shape of continents and oceans? Do we not see this in the incredible evolutionary detail that emerges in the animals of Australia, of the Andes, of the Amazon, and elsewhere? It is important to realize that animal habitat, though apparently grounded, at a particular moment, in absolute place, is itself partial in the life of the earth.

That is a message for art—for the way art bears on the human person—which we still have, it seems to me, to perceive very deeply—if art is to speak to us beyond material fixtures and ornamentations, if art is to take us slowly, constructively, across the most sensitive boundaries.

Boundaries are *sensitive*, however partial they actually are. Their partiality may assist us to live and move in order to skirt or avoid earthquake regions by which we may be fatalistically trapped generation after generation. There is a measureless nature to the life of the earth in the midst of catastrophes, drought and famine and flood that we blindly invite, a *precarious* freedom we need to understand if our cultures are to awaken from their “sleep” or “obliviousness” —which seems so strong it is called realism.

Technical brilliance is at the core of realism. Realism, I would say, has undoubtedly been the fruit of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European novel-form which has influenced the twentieth-century theatre of the arts. But such realism—however sophisticated or satiric or comic—led the rulers of civilization, unintentionally perhaps, into an “obliviousness” of the many diverse peoples under the umbrella of empire. This may seem surprising. The British empire was one, it was said, on which the sun never set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Perhaps it was a trend or habit that ran from the “sleep” of conquest of the Americas making one people regard itself as absolutely superior to others who pursued different faiths. The art of empire, in the novel-form of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, displayed all-white characters from all-white families and ignored all other peoples, diverse and peculiar, under the imperial umbrella. Ruler and ruled never gained the mutual insight of creative and re-creative responsibility. The ruled were bracketed, as though they did not exist, upon the passivity of stages marked by the military crossings of the ruler.

There were a few American novelists of the nineteenth century such as, for instance, Herman Melville, whose black and white and brown characters (all playing major roles in his fiction) offered pregnant silences and room for speculation as to what lay beneath those silences. In a sense the absolute domain of the ruling novel which Melville inherited, was implicitly broken through such an array of speaking silences. *Benito Cereno* closes as follows:

Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end [... his] head, [a] hive of subtlety [...].¹

It is possible also that we may find sketches of *the fluid life of the earth* in Melville’s narratives. Critics, as far as I am aware, have not looked into these issues.

And this brings me to the question: what does one mean by the life of the earth? I am not speaking of a *description* of hills or valleys or plains or rivers that are *fixed* or *insentient* features.

In *Tumatumari*, a novel of mine published in 1968, we come upon a portrayal of *moving* landscape creating, I feel, a measureless dimension. The passage I have in mind runs as follows:

The clouds had vanished and the line of the mountains appeared now like a lofty crest of water breaking its own wave ceaselessly—undulating and refracting. It was a curious impression—the vast outline of the mountains and the transparent ocean of the sky within and beneath which fell away other exposures, shorelines, crests and seas [...] vegetation as well as sand—tier after tier, rank after rank of bush, descending balconies as in a submerged amphitheatre [...] fluid/solid—water/fire—cauldron of space....*In truth the ocean had once crawled here upon an ancient continental shelf and climbed still higher beyond Tumatumari to its farthest limit—the escarpment of Kaieteur....*²

In that passage is it not possible to visualise the ever-changing mobility of the earth, a mobility, a vulnerability, a curious infirmity, shall I say, that is born of land and water and fire and cloud through which we may create doors or windows, *sensitive* doors and windows, *sensitive* freedoms in the midst of fates?

When I speak of infirmity, I am referring to the infirmity of strength; the strongest fortresses have a hidden infirmity through which it is possible to build new architectures in space. The very fixed stages—upon which we build our cities—are *sentient* and *alive*. Sentience—and its veined and tributary variations—may be coming home to us at last as we find ourselves potentially overwhelmed by the threat of flood and drought that we, in part, visit on ourselves in our “obliviousness” of the life of the earth. May I emphasize again that the life of the earth is not *fixed*, it is not a description of fixed mountains or valleys divorced from the characters that move on it. The life of the earth needs to be seen *in fiction* as

sensitively woven into the characters that move upon it, whose history, may I say, reflects a profound relationship to the earth, so that we may speak of a humanity whose feet are made of mud or land or water or any other element to attune us to our being on an earth that moves as we move upon it. This is the mystery of fiction if not of science. You may remember epic figures with one eye in the middle of their forehead and with feet of oats.

TUMATUMARI is an Amerindian word, somewhat anglicized, I would say, which means “sleeping rocks.” In the novel I sought to bring the “sleep” of a traumatised people, traumatised by conquest, into league with sculptures that have sprung from the earth—sculptured crests, sculptured outlines, sculptured exposures—in order to engage in an awakening, within many-sided nature, from the brutalisation of every-day place and person by conquistadorial legacies.

Let us remember that across the ages—before Man appeared in his present shape—the eruptive earth would have sculpted figures, in its sentient thrust and momentum, resembling Man and Beast and Bird before Man and Beast and Bird had actually appeared. This, I feel, is the measureless origin of the arts, an apparently sleeping form imbued nevertheless with a subtle momentum, a subtle life within an apparent passivity.

We have seized on such passivity with what seems an all-powerful technology, we have brushed aside ancient legends of gods of the wind and the sea and the earth and the air without a thought of their *intuitive* depth, their intuitive bridle on the horses of the earth—horses of wind and sea—that needed a greater re-creative understanding and development.

Such horses, in the sculptures of the earth, may seem asleep but they may teach us of our own “obliviousness,” of our tendency to turn into blocks of flesh-and-blood. We are ourselves sculptures awaiting a dream of life that may dawn upon us when we engage differently with a pace that is secreted everywhere.

I can imagine someone pointing to philosophical concepts of alchemy—such as the *massa confusa* and the *prima materia*—which implicitly tell of the life of the earth and warn against assuming the earth is “passive” or “inanimate” or “dead.”

This is true but on reflection one cannot fail to see that the human person, by and large, is divided in himself or herself between sentient earth-sculptures (which appear to him or to her as insentient) and the living work of art that he or she is. This division of two selves, in the theatre of the arts, may mark, I feel, the summit of division within ourselves, a blind summit that seems to me to be at the heart of feud and conflict that ravage our age. The earth we have wasted is our greatest ambivalent conquest and enemy. Perhaps we extend our will to conquer the earth into patterns of hate against human cultures for which we grieve in despair and terror that stir us out of our sleep.

Did C. G. Jung conceive of bridging this division between opposite selves in his *coincidentia oppositorum*? He may have but it would have been intuitive. In an article entitled *Merlin and Parsifal. Adversarial Twins* I refer to Jung’s statement that “a new conceptual language” is needed.³ But, as far as I was aware, he made no further statements and seemed afflicted by grave misgivings. As a consequence he never pursued the psycho-physical medium he had raised. The novels he read were conventional in which an “obliviousness” rules the language and makes for an insentient and fixed stage on which character is built.

In *Tumatumari* I sought—through trials of the imagination—to create a theatre of the arts in which obliviousness is denuded and the two selves—sentient earth-sculpture and Man as a living work of art—actually come together in an astonishing way.

Curiously enough, I see this clearly now as I look backwards and forwards across my fiction from the nineteen sixties into the seventies, eighties, nineties and into *The Dark Jester* which has just been published. I can see now how they all have a measurelessness which I call the “unfinished genesis of the imagination.”

Let me return to *Tumatumari*.

Roi Solman dies in the Tumatumari waterfall. His wife Prudence sees him in a Dream descending into the waterfall and hunting the “wild boar of the rapids.” The hunt which is normally pursued on land changes subtly and complexly in her Dream of the waterfall.

Everything changes subtly and complexly.

Who or what is the “wild boar of the rapids”? It is sentient earth-sculpture. It existed long before Roi possessed his present human shape. As a consequence, the stage of theatre on which Roi hunts moves and is alive in his consciousness. The rigid barriers of time are *partially* abolished within a *space* that *lives* in its own right. Prudence awakens, in some degree, to the life of her husband as *he* appears to awaken in her Dream to *his* life as a work of art. Such is, I feel, the miracle of fiction.

However one traces it—I have done so in different ways, different fictions across the years—the fact emerges obscurely at times, clearly at other times, depending on the intuitive scope of the writing, that each player in a work (if I may describe him or her as a player) needs to come into league with the earth on which he moves, in which he swims, into which he descends, as a sentient living entity. I feel that this requires a wholly different theatre of the arts to the one we now have which may have sophisticated characterisation but which is established on an insentient stage. This leads repeatedly to a will to conquer which divides people everywhere like a remorseless fate.

In *Tumatumari* Prudence is a fictional player who sees her husband Roi, in her Dream of his hunt of the “wild boar of the rapids,” in a *fluid* combination of the earth and the “constitution of heaven [in the] raging spittle of the chase on the boar’s lips which mingled now with hers [...] like the water[s] of life.”⁴

What, may I ask, are “the waters of life”?

It is vitally important, it seems to me, to engage with this in the trials of the imagination that the novel discloses, however testing, however difficult, and *not* to divide one's attention by fastening on *pure* philosophical concepts: Philosophy is very important but it needs to blend with the images in a work of art so genuinely, perhaps complexly, that we free ourselves from absolute restrictions in pursuing the partial nature of each image in its correspondences with other partial images.

Reason, as advanced by apparently sophisticated thinkers, leads to exercises that ignore the language of art in fiction. Such ignoring, such ignorance, reduces or measures flesh-and-blood as a *block* and this inevitably, if unwittingly, leads to agencies of conquest. There are reasons beyond reasons, depths beyond surfaces. Such depths, such humilities, beyond a fixed or sovereign restriction, are the mystery of art, the true mystery of fiction.

Let me return now to the question I asked earlier on “the waters of life.”

What are “the waters of life” which are gained from a wholly new approach to fiction and art as these may encompass inexplicable truth in multifarious life? Is this not a question of *gnosis*, of gnostic understanding, of knowledge gained from extremities of living encounter with earth-sculptures that revise our approach to the nature of human-made sculptures, the nature of *human* art? How does sculpture live, how does art live, in subtle, curiously moving ways though it seems ornamental and inanimate? Does such an approach to sculpture, to art, to the body and bodilessness of the Word in poem and fiction, point a way to the *veiled* meaning of original spirit, original soul?

Except that such knowledge—as I come, by intuitive degrees, to it—has no fortress location, no invulnerable location. In such apparently invulnerable fortresses lies a hidden vulnerability or infirmity we may see in mind and imagination. Such a vulnerability or infirmity may prove a complex window through our habits, beyond habitual discourse, beyond the cosmos, beyond the stars that we try to see, to place, within our galaxy.

The multifarious life of the earth, therefore, teaches us to pay the closest care and attention to variations and movements on the stage on which we live: and not to invest absolutely or fixedly on such a stage.

We are told of parallel universes by scientific speculations, parallel universes of which we know nothing except perhaps that there is a Wound—akin to the Wound of being and non-being we carry in ourselves—that may take us into the spirit of timelessness. A supreme paradox. We move through a *Wound* into *timelessness*.

Quantum “particle” and “wave” —in their apparent illogicality—may help us to sense a living spark reaching darkly and brightly perhaps from a true Creator. It reaches through the demiurgic and conquistadorial field with which we have to wrestle for precarious freedoms in the midst of implacable fates.

It is but a spark, a spark capable of multiple illuminations that take us into diverse potentials, diverse dangers, diverse hopes in cross-cultural ages.

It is but a spark but it offers us an intensity of creative and re-creative imaginative and intuitive scope.

Without that “spark” what do we have but biased games or functions of uniform art and a clinging to science for masks to conceal our failures and our mortality?

Gnosis therefore (within the intuitions I have inserted in this talk—that there is no fortress locality to knowledge, that there is a complex window or infirmity within the strongest minds, the strongest imaginations) brings us to “the waters of life” as imbued by the spark of a true creation, a spark which assists us in contending with the demiurgic politics of our age. The demiurge is equipped to ride all who are oblivious of the sentience of the earth and the threshold such sentience provides into parallel universes of the imagination through a tree of life existing long before we arrived in our present shape and form.

I do not say this absolutely but as a Jest, a serious Jest, however, which permits us a glimpse of chasms between knowledge and ignorance we dream to cross.

Let me quote briefly from *The Dark Jester*, my most recent novel, to sustain a grasp, as it were, of the measureless spark that makes us, in fiction, *living works of art* in the ground on which we move and which moves with us.

This is the City of Cities, El Dorado. I bring to it the ruins of the past, the memories of places I know as mine but which are taken by Europe and Spain. El Dorado is the Troy of the Americas.

I walk in shoes of mist, I wear rock and water. Rock melts, water becomes a solidity or a desert. My bone and my garments fuse in world theatre.

'El Dorado is gold. I am a man of gold in a place of gold. This is the distinctive legend of flesh and gold.' I cry the words boldly but my misgivings rise into space. There is a rumble. The Earth shakes. Shakes to Cassandra who comes across time to tell us in multiple ways of the fate of cultures. It is the heavy tread of my pursuers. Or is it my own bodiless step? A pulse beats fast as a drum.

[...] Troy collapses with the entry of a Wooden Horse which gives birth to a jealous many-headed enemy when everyone dances and celebrates in lust. El Dorado hides on a saddle of ground on a Misty Animal in the Amazon. I swear I see it wrapped in elements of jealous enemy and lusty friend. I give a cry of joy, such joy, but how sprinkled with the desperation of unease. It is swept from me, so swiftly I am astonished. All that remains are the tears of the Animal like a shroud upon me. They materialize into my pursuers in jungled space, and leap and seize me. El Dorado vanishes. It is swallowed in the belly of a gigantic Horse or Animal of space [...].

Such is my wrestling with enemy and friend in the suspended heart of fate that edges into uneasy freedom.

They seize me.

I have a golden chain around my neck on a jungled body of land. My hair is like the hair of trees. They take me back to Cuzco, an outcast in my own land.

As I stand on the Scaffold, in world theatre, the Sea turns into the dramatization of slender hope spinning a path into desolate cities, desolate places. The land that is mine has become desolate. And yet I see a thread of water on which I cross. How can one come Home except upon threads of desolation one still carries?

The Sword of God coils into a Rope as it flashes to the wisdom of the Serpent.

I faintly hear the Bishop intoning a prayer.

I touch the Sword against which he leans. It hangs from a soldier's side or robe.

Will the Bishop's God, the Bishop's Sword, respond to a shape in me that turns as red as a feather in Air and Earth? It is a Wound in the body of art as delicate as a sail, a flimsy sail. Flimsy as it is it sings of a Ship, a hidden Ship in a Hidden City no one has yet found though it still endures with the promise of creation on Land and on the Sea.⁵

Notes

¹ Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 307.

² Wilson Harris, *Tumatumari* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 53-54.

³ Wilson Harris, *Merlin and Parsifal. Adversarial Twins* (London: Temenos Academy, 1997).

⁴ *Tumatumari*, 55.

⁵ Wilson Harris, *The Dark Jester* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 107-109.

A transcript of the discussion which followed the talk

Mike Wayne *It's a really wide-ranging talk, and obviously I can't do justice to it, but I would have reservations about the way you use the category of nature. On the one hand, yes, it is important to suggest that it is not an inanimate, passive, fixed thing, and the way in which nature has been used by conservative forces to shore up cultural identities as fixed from eternity, it's important to undermine that. But I think the Gaia-like mystical quality to some of the way you were talking about nature—the way in which nature is perceived as passive, inanimate, is obviously a prerequisite to then dominating nature, and seeing nature as something completely separate from humanity is also a prerequisite to dominating nature, but for me, the domination of nature also arises out of another key set of relationships, which are the social relationships of humanity, the social relationships of domination in humanity, which then allow the domination of nature. I'll give you an example. I opened up the*

Guardian today and on page three there's an article about how BP are working with the state capitalist oil company in China for oil extraction in Tibet, which has some major cultural and environmental consequences for the people of Tibet. So I would say that we need to have a more historically specific sense of the mediation between nature and humanity. And when I say more historically and socially specific, a sense of being able to grasp those kinds of forces which are at work in BP and the Chinese regime would be the kind of things I'm talking about. And we also desperately need an aesthetics that can be up to that task. I'm not sure just an aesthetics of cross-culturality can do that, unless it's more sensitive to the social and historical.

Wilson Harris But you see, the point is that the social and historical have been created by this obliviousness of the life of the earth, and therefore we move on a social and historical plane which brings about the potential disasters you suggest, precisely because we have a notion of the life of the earth which fixes the social and historical provisions. I am suggesting that you have to go beneath those social and historical provisions. You have to have a sense of the life of the earth. The earth is moving. It has always been moving. The earth is alive. There are a few European scholars who admit now that they have wasted the resources of the earth for generations. This hardly comes out in the news, but you get the occasional admission, and the fact is that the novel form we possess has conditioned us to see ourselves as so divorced from the earth that we would accept the social situation that you describe. I am suggesting that we need a totally different understanding of culture, of fiction, of art, an understanding that has to do with the mystery of fiction, so that, for example, Roi Solman is seen hunting the wild boar of the rapids. He used to hunt on the land but now that he is hunting in the waterfall in the Dream of his wife, that changes subtly and complexly and he becomes a living work of

art, hunting the earth sculpture that is sentient, so that the waters of life come forth. The waters of life carry the social realities of which you speak.

But I quite see your point, because it is a point on which we have been so conditioned that people will fail to perceive the reality of what I am saying. I know in universities you may read of what Jung says in his *massa confusa* and things like that, but these things never blend into the images of art. They remain like pure philosophy, and people read the novel as the novel has been written for two hundred years, three hundred years. They continue to read the novel like that. They don't look for the blending of philosophy into the images of the work, and therefore they are still conditioned by a situation in which they read the novel in one way, they may read philosophy, and they may be able to tell you, philosophy, well yes, I know the life of the earth, it's not dead because of this... but that's pure philosophy, that has no bearing on the *image*. There are no trials of the imagination that allow this reality to emerge.

I sense that something *is* happening. I saw reviews of *The Dark Jester* in which I could see that they are now coming in some sense or other to understand what I am saying. The Cartesian has eclipsed Atahualpan form. What is Atahualpan form? Atahualpan form has to do with a different notion of being. That is the point I'm making. You see, you are taking the aesthetics and divorcing it from what I'm saying. I'm speaking of this aesthetics in collaboration with the earth, with everything. That is what I'm trying to do. That's what I've been doing for forty years.

Paula Burnett *One of the things that struck me in The Dark Jester was the way in which you do use that sense of the connectedness of all the different forms, not just the human form. You don't talk about an anthropomorphic universe, you are not interested in a man-centred world. On the other hand what you are also saying, and you say it very eloquently at one point in*

The Dark Jester, that in a sense for us as human beings one of the hardest tasks, but perhaps the most important tasks, is to open ourselves to the other, and that includes other people, other cultures, as well as other life forms. And I think maybe that's where perhaps one response to what you are suggesting lies: that it is actually an attitude of mind that has huge implications for social relations, and as a way of understanding history.

Gail Low *I just wanted to ask, in addition to that, whether you see the novel as a privileged form, and why not other kinds of mediums, like poetry, traditional song or religious chants, which might have a different dimension to it. Do you see the novel as the quintessentially privileged artistic form to explore these ideas?*

Wilson Harris Well, you know, I spoke of sculpture. I touched on the poem, and you trace it in many works of art. You can trace it in many other ways. But it is true that I was speaking more specifically of the novel because that is the area in which I have worked, and I brought up the piece from *Tumatumari*, which was published in 1968, as long ago as that, in which you see the earth moving—the sea, the land on which they stand is called the sleeping rocks, that's an Amerindian word. But the Amerindians themselves have forgotten why they call it the sleeping rocks. They have been so conditioned by the traumatisations of conquest that they don't know why they call it the sleeping rocks. It is up to us to get into it, and to see what sleeping rocks mean.

John Agard *A line which really struck me was when you spoke about moving through a wound into timelessness. And I suppose if you were to think about it, at the heart of it, it is very mystical at one level, whether you think of Christianity—the wounds of Jesus—whether you think in ritualistic societies—birth, being a kind of wound, menstruation—people refer to*

a kind of wound, at one level. But how do you feel about if we applied that consciousness to the wounds of history, the wounds of history in a very base way, whether it's slavery, whether it's racism. Do you think this attitude of moving through wounds into timelessness could be very healing and constructive in dealing with very crass reality?

Wilson Harris Yes, that is a point that I have considered, whether healing should not be associated with the wound. This is the paradox: whether healing should not be associated with seeing through the infirmities in ourselves, rather than seeking an invulnerable self. You hear all the time that science is seeking to keep people alive for a hundred and fifty, two hundred years. Science is seeking to keep people eternally—I mean all that kind of rubbish, you hear all the time. But the point is there is a wound which, as you say, can have healing power, provided we can understand its implications, its enormous implications, its subtle implications, so that you move into timelessness through a wound. Now that is a major paradox, because what is timelessness appears to have no wound, and yet you move into it through a wound. In other words that is as far as we can go. But to come to your point of healing. You need to see this in the forms of art, you need to see this developing in such a way that people can begin to change, and to grasp the possibilities that lie in this, the trials of the imagination.

Paula Burnett *Wilson Harris, thank you very much.*