Wilson Harris and the 'Subject' of Realism

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'... these roots in their crust of earth carry worms.'
Zulfikar Ghose[1]

I

On the first page of his book *The Literary Moment as a Lens on Reality*, James Roy King offers the following passage as a metaphor for textual encounters in the post-modern age. His subject will be the valency of literary temporality in the representational capture of 'reality', but it is possible to identify quite another kind of metaphorical capture at work in the passage, and to note the vestigial trace within the post-modern problematic of a much older and more troublesome strategy of cultural control. The spectacle of tattooed cannibals dancing in files before the astonished gaze of the adventurous First-World ethnographer embodies a remarkably effective figurative technology by which the project of cross-cultural imagination has been packaged as an imperialist propensity and marketed as an imperialist commodity; and so this passage, as it meditates on the tension between mobility and embeddedness in the contemporary reader of texts, also works to open a vista into the representational armoury of colonialism itself:

> There is a brief sequence at the beginning of the *sema* or turning dance of the Mevlevi dervishes, which embodies enchantment. Having lined up at the side of their sheik, the participants pass by him to receive his kiss or blessing. Then the soon-to-be-dancers, their arms crossed on their shoulders, gently, tentatively, start to turn. Before your eyes their arms rise into the characteristic Mevlevi position, one palm up to receive God's blessing, the other down to pass this blessing on to the earth; the skirts billow out; the men are dancing. 'This is it,' you find yourself saying in awe, especially if you have traveled six thousand

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[1] Cited in Wilson Harris, 'A Note on Zulfikar Ghose's "Nature Strategies"', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 1989), p. 176.

> miles to be a witness.... Something has become what it was intended to be.[2]

How are we to read such a passage, where the 'meaning' of things returns to the reader of signs as something that was always already 'there' in the landscape of the Other, and now is rendered available—an 'intention'—through the joint privileges of universal access and wry self-reflexivity? Meaning here is a spoil of combat, something you find when you follow a corridor down through the settled condition of cognitive fracture into the legacy of Empire: a world made Present, its figures of difference made signs of the half-remembered Self. Travellers, investigators, writers, we follow this passage to the brink of Foucault's 'continuous history', the 'guarantee that everything that has eluded [us] may be restored to [us]; the certainty that time will dispense nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject ... will once again be able to appropriate ... all those things that are kept at a distance by difference....'[3] There at last, at the Centre of Things, we come again into possession of that which has threatened to elude us in our condition of post-modern depthlessness: the gravamen of History, the sensibility of imperial Witness.

Western critical tradition has generally counselled two opposing strategies for reading the text of this encounter. The first is positivism: which requires a belief in the existence of an essential and fixed 'meaning' behind the turning dances of Otherness, a conviction that the powers of observation and cross-cultural interrogation can winnow that meaning free and available, and a trust that ethnography's machineries for record-keeping and description, whatever the order of figuration in their rhetoric, have the capacity to carry that meaning home. The second critical tradition is scepticism: which extrapolates an awareness of the gap between the sign and its referent to a suspicion of the apparatus that puts the observing Self before the panorama of signs, and issues into a radical mistrust of 'meaning' itself because of its use as raw material in the manufacture of power. Positivism claims that cross-cultural understanding comes with the ease of a rigorous and appropriative empiricism; scepticism claims that cross-cultural understanding is both undesirable and impossible. And since the Enlightenment, these two critical traditions—militant defenders of their respective Faith and its temples—have glowered bleakly at each other across an ever-widening gulf, insisting upon their own self-sufficiency

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[2] James Roy King, *The Literary Moment as a Lens on Reality* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1983), p. 1.

[3] Cited in Homi Bhabha, 'Representations and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism', in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. by Frank Gloversmith (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), p. 98.

and refusing dialogue with the alien spirit. They stare balefully into Empire's legacy of cultural fracture and appropriation, each of them working in its own way to ensure that whatever else happens in the negotiations over Knowledge, the cognitive apparatuses which sustain colonialist power remain substantially in place.

Over the past thirty years, Wilson Harris has consistently turned his attention to this gap between seemingly unbreakable structures in colonialism's 'phenomenal legacy': the cultural gap between First World and Third World(s), the political gap between colonizer and colonized, the cognitive gap between Self and Other, the representational gap between the sign and its referent. Against the monolithic purchase of critical positivism and critical scepticism, Harris has offered an unshakable resistance to colonialism's strategies for cognitive possession, and has sought ways to bridge these gaps through a project of the imagination which he calls cross-culturalism. His dialectical project is to consider the *nature* of separation or distance in the phenomenal legacy, and to risk the hypothesis that the gap—or division, or fracture, or barrier—is not simply the semiotic marker of the cross-cultural violations of History but is also constitutive of a gateway into a genuinely 're-visionary' potential in the fields of cognition, culture, and politics. For Harris, this potential for 're-vision' is the *sine qua non* of radical change in the age of post-modern depthlessness. It resides in unsuspected ways within the effects of colonialist history, and when set in train it effects an alchemical transformation in the base elements of colonialist cognition. This 're-visionary' gateway of 'enduring cross-cultural spirit' is thus in Harris a gateway for the passage of a decolonizing energy in the field of representation: the promise of a radical and transformative *post*-colonialism at work in the literary text.

One of the ways in which we can trace this engagement—an engagement that is literally everywhere in his fictive and critical writing—is to examine Harris's position on the subject of 'realism' in cross-cultural reading and writing. The question of realism is of course at the heart of a long debate within mainstream literary criticism, but it is only in recent times that the terms of that debate have shifted away from abstract questions about veracity and convention towards the problem of realism's embeddedness within the apparatus of colonialism. If James Roy King's meditation on the problematics of textual encounter reveals the continuing liminal purchase of colonialist tropology within literary criticism's seemingly neutral discourse on the capture of cultural 'meaning', Wilson Harris's critical engagement with the question of literary 'realism' reveals both a clarification of colonialist power and a hope for a mode of cross-cultural engagement—a mode of cross-cultural imaginative representation—which dispels imperialist capture in the mask of History's muse. 'The block imprints of history need to be re-opened',

writes Harris;[4] and one of the most promising places to begin a reading of this opening is with the constitutive 'subject' of literary realism in Harris's own literary criticism.

II

> This is my ocean, but it is speaking
> another language ...
> I resist the return
> of this brightening noun
> Derek Walcott[5]

In a way, it is easy to think of Harris's work in literary criticism as lying at the crossroads of his thesis on the imaginative 'gateway' into dialogic possibilities. For literary criticism is necessarily a dialogical process, an act of cross-textual self-emplacement against the purchase of a 'reading' which precedes it; and as many critics have commented, each of Harris's fictional works performs a very similar act of dialogism, of dialectical 'reading', in its construction of narrative. In all Harris's writing, that is, a foundational activity of *reading* underpins the logic of the narrative or the argument; and always, Harris takes as his 'text' a literary work, a cultural sphere, a structure of *language* which is inextricably divided, cross-identified, and straining under the pressure of multiple allegiances and resistances.

I suspect that one of the things which interests Harris about literary criticism is the condition of constraint under which it is produced and consumed. Literary criticism is bound by the literary document it comments upon, and its field of communicative exchange is fixed by the disciplinary exigencies of 'literary studies' as a machinery of tertiary-level teaching and research. Criticism therefore owes its being to a contractual apparatus of 'usefulness'—to 'our' understanding of a canonized text or author, most often, but also to the inculcation of logic, or skill in argumentation, or rhetorical ability in students—and at the lowest level, this requirement of usefulness enforces on critical activity an essentially 'realist' contract centred on positivist interpretation in the mode of the *explication de texte.*

'Realism', of course, is a convention in representation and interpretation, not a marker of actual inhabitation in the sphere of the 'real'. It is a rhetorical trope, a readerly assumption, and in present-day critical theory the case against literary realism is usually made in one of three

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[4] Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 185.

ways. The first of these critiques is that realism is a mode which attempts to pass off as 'natural' the signifying system within which the literary work is constructed,[6] and thus to stabilize the dominant social values of the work's time and place. As Scott Carpenter explains, realism appeals to a stable referent—a 'meaning' held contractually between author and reader—and because of this, realism can only allow 'meaning to be repeated and distributed, but not changed.'[7] The second critique of literary realism is that its order of figuration is incapable of effecting the question of the observer. In this critique, realism is seen as a mode of representation which is committed to a 'systematic ... description of given cultural and social units' and to 'discovering an encompassing totality' behind them.[8] Realism, that is, directs the burden of representation entirely onto the object under observation and away from the figure who is observing, measuring, and recording. It is thus the trope *par excellence* of the ethnographic endeavour: the traditional means by which Anthropology, for example, has worked to efface 'the constitutive role of the observer, the ethnographic 'I' or subject', in the production of 'knowledge' about Others.[9] The third critique is that realism is the figural agent of representational historicism. As Homi Bhabha explains, realism's emphasis on 'an organic, progressive approximation of reality' and on the *accuracy* of reflection grounds the mode in a discourse of authenticity and beginnings—a discourse which can be nothing other than bourgeois, individualist, organicist, and progressivist in nature. Such a discourse is 'historicist' because it posits an unfractured world of 'progressive discovery', order, coherence, and 'Culture'. And such a world is inherently imperialist, Bhabha argues, because it is incapable of recognizing the condition of broken semiosis and multiple layering which, as writers such as Wilson Harris see it, characterizes the world of colonial and post-colonial cultures.[10]

The figurative purchase of 'realism', that is, posits the dream of imperialism, and its contract of cognitive positivism, of social stability, and of sovereign subjectivity governs the activity of literary criticism as a form of cultural work. It is this *inherited* constraint on literary criticism, I think,

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[6] See Mieke Bal, 'Rediscliplining the Eye', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring 1990), p. 507.

[7] Scott Carpenter, Review of Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert*, *MLN*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (September 1988), pp. 935–939.

[8] Paul Smith, 'Writing, General Knowledge, and Postmodern Anthropology', *Discourse*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring–Summer 1989), p. 160.

[9] Edward Said, 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter 1989), p. 219.

[10] Homi Bhabha, p. 96.

which interests Wilson Harris, for a similar form of constraint—the 'phenomenal legacy'—also characterizes the condition of settled, monolithic overwriting which imperialism bestows upon colonial space, and which becomes the cognitive problem that colonial subjects need to work *through* in the project of writing *their* social 'reality' and decolonizing *their* modalities of literary representation. 'Are we not ... creatures', John Hearne has asked, 'of books and inventions fashioned by others who used us as mere producers, as figments of their imagination';[11] and here Hearne describes what has often been noted as one of imperialism's most salient technologies for the control of colonial cultures. For to live in colonial or post-colonial space is to inherit the *textualizing* machinery of imperialist containment; it is to be discursively sub/jected, thrown beneath,[12] the inscriptions that imperialist observers have written onto the world 'out there'. To live in colonial space is to live, to work, to write against the purchase of an articulate and systematic colonialist 'pre-text'; and in this way, the activity of literary criticism—which *necessarily* reads an anterior text and appears utterly constrained as it does so—functions as a powerful metaphor of cognitive activity itself in the post-colonial world.

In understanding Harris's specific engagement with the activity of literary criticism, then, it is instructive to examine what has happened in the First-World academy to critical writing on colonial and post-colonial literatures in the aftermath of the debate about realism. Essentially, the oppositional positions have hardened. On one side, a critical 'right-wing' faction has come out solidly in defense of the imperialist prerogative—the right, indeed the responsibility, to *know* the First-World's Others and to tabulate and codify their modes of cultural activity. On the other side, a critical 'left-wing' faction has found the entire idea of cross-cultural engagement so thoroughly enmeshed in its dangerous liaison with colonialist power—so inextricably embedded in 'ethnographic allegory',[13] the inscription of Self onto Other—that it has abandoned altogether the attempt to formulate *any* order of cross-cultural 'knowledges'. What remains, I think, is a lamentable pedagogy, one based on a binaristic structure of cognitive absolutism, and one which has serious implications for the critical project of dismantling the representational machineries of colonialist power. A valorized mode of anti-colonialist critical activity is being installed within First-World literary criticism: the sceptical reading of the

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[11] John Hearne, 'The Wide Sargasso Sea: A West Indian Reflection', *Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. V, No. 180 (1974), pp. 325–326.

[12] See Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[13] See James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 98–121.

master-texts of European imperialism, and the analysis of how colonialist power works in and through them. This activity, of course, is inestimably important in itself; but too often now it comes freighted with a categorical refusal to engage on any level with the kinds of texts that colonial and post-colonial subjects themselves produce in the name of anti-colonialism. The alien spirits of positivism and scepticism remain out of dialogue in the First-World academy, and literary criticism—the discipline of 'reading' the linguistic and cultural 'pre-text'—becomes one of the paradigmatic sites upon which the gulf between unbreakable structures in colonialism's 'phenomenal legacy', if anything, grows even wider.

This is the 'ocean' which Harris inherits from literary criticism and its engagement with colonialism, but his critical practice is marked by a consistent resistance to the oppositional imperative. Harris's critical project is to engage with *both* positivist and sceptical claims in the crucible of reading, and to seek 'alchemies of image and word'[14] through a sustained *negotiation* with the contract of realism. As a metaphor of the post-colonial condition, literary criticism, for Harris, entails an internalization through reading of the contradictions, the fractures, and the divisions of colonialist discourse, and it results in a form of critical writing which eschews the traditional critical rhetoric of linear form and coherent explanation. Harris's critical project, that is, comprises an exploration into the 'gateway' between texts, between cultures, between received philosophical and epistemological traditions. But at the same time his literary criticism comprises—to use his own phrase—a 'dark masquerade'[15] of post-colonial sub/jectivity to the always anterior 'pre-text' which imperialism writes upon its Others, and the question of how one 'reads' the document remains in Harris's critical work an allegory of how one negotiates with, and seeks to transform, the phenomenal legacy of colonialist power.

III

> so what if the hand of the Empire is as slow as
> a turtle signing the surf when it comes to treaties?
> Genius will come to contradict history ...
>
> Derek Walcott[16]

The text I want now to focus upon is a characteristically short piece of Harris's criticism, entitled 'A Note on Zulfikar Ghose's "Nature Strategies"' and published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1989. De-

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[14] Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space*, p. xx.

[15] Wilson Harris, 'A Note on Zulfikar Ghose's "Nature Strategies"', p. 175.

[16] Derek Walcott, in *Collected Poems*, p. 500.

spite its brevity, the 'Note' is a remarkably interesting document; for as its title suggests, this article can be read as a deeply strategic engagement with social constructions of the 'natural' in the apparatus of literature—specifically, the constructions of the realist tradition—and consequently with the inherited condition of colonialism's textual encounter as it prevails both in Zulfikar Ghose's poetry and in the tradition of literary criticism itself. Harris's critical 'Note' effects a working *through* of this received condition of post-colonial readerliness—the condition of subjectivity at the close of imperialist textuality. And in a carefully structured arrangement of exploratory potential, the article arrives at a possible 'gateway', a 're-visionary' reading strategy, which contributes substantially to a theory of the post-colonial text.

The 'Note' begins with a reflexive gesture to Harris's *previous* engagement with Ghose's poetry, published in *The Womb of Space*. On one level, this gesture performs a simple explanatory operation and emplaces the following act of critical writing in a specific critical 'history'. But strategically, I think, the gesture also embeds the critical act in a seemingly diminutive structure of conditionality or secondariness: it suggests that the following is a 'note' upon an anterior 'text' which is itself a 'note' upon an anterior 'text'. The gesture marks a condition of distance between the immediate inscription and the textual Source; and metaphorically, this invokes the condition of post-colonial conditionality in relation to the 'pre-texts' of imperialist inscription. The article thus opens with an inceptionary recognition of a division, or gap, or fracture in the field of textuality, and it establishes a diminutive and concealed gesture of re-cognition. In Harris's dialectical logic, this simple frail gesture will nevertheless prove to be constitutive of a gateway for 'revisionary' potential in the act of post-colonial reading.

Harris's 'Note' then turns immediately to a critique of the contract of literary realism. As the argument is presented here, 'realism' comprises 'a negation of the complexity of language' and thus a 'denial of the unconscious as a complex vessel of evolutionary form'. It is the figural manifestation of a cognitive condition which presumes that the 'real' is circumscribed by the language of 'mass-media communication', and it issues into a 'sophisticated logic of silence', a 'cult of despair', or a 'sickness of being' in both the First and the Third World. This sickness is symptom of a propensity towards 'ritual habit' in cultural formulations and an addiction to 'normality' in the fields of meaning and identity.[17] In the First World, this addiction appears most visibly in the low-grade ethnographic

[17] Wilson Harris, 'The Fabric of the Imagination', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 1990), p. 181. Hereafter, all unmarked quotations are to 'A Note on Zulfikar Ghose's "Nature Strategies" '.

capture of cultural and cross-cultural difference by the comforting script of technological positivism. In the Third World, it appears most visibly in 'the addiction to protest realism',[18] where a politics of refusal against the language of imperialism—a 'technology of protest that is conditioned by what it protests against'—actually works to normalize centre/periphery models of subjectivity and to reinscribe a colonized sense of subservience to 'immune identity' and 'unchanging reality'.[19] Whatever its location, however, the cognitive contract of realism, in Harris's argument, works to promulgate a nihilistic system of representation which at root amounts to a repudiation of the idea of the 'cross-cultural imagination'. And as a consequence, ' ... the divide between extreme or wasteful affluence and extreme or endemic poverty grows wider and deeper year by year'.

This critique of realism—this reading of the 'text' of cognitive positivism—is immediately coupled, however, with a countervailing critique of cognitive scepticism: the conceptual apparatus which Harris (elsewhere in his criticism) identifies as the signature of post-modernism. 'It is true that within the arts and poetries and drama of the absurd', the 'Note' argues, 'theatres of the rich do contemplate and reflect upon the poor who wait in their extremity for Godot'. But this order of reflection, Harris argues, works so frantically to expose the arbitrariness of cross-cultural knowledge—the linguistic impossibility of arriving at an external referent to the play of ethnographic language, the necessarily self-reflexive nature of First-World cross-cultural production—that instead of promoting cross-cultural exchange and imaginative engagement, it 'reinforce[s] the helplessness of faculties of the imagination in twentieth-century civilization'. 'A post-modernism that is bereft of depth or of an appreciation of the life of the intuitive imagination', Harris writes in 'The Fabric of the Imagination', 'is but a game for a dictatorship of technologies aligned to sophistry and nihilism.' And 'cross-culturalism needs to breach nihilism'.

Like the contract of realism, that is, the contract of post-modern scepticism promotes conceptual nihilism in regards to cross-cultural representation, and in both cases the result is political stagnation: the promulgation of the colonialist apparatus in twentieth-century cross-cultural relations. Realist positivism ('the ideology of the conditioned mind') inscribes a testament of cross-cultural violence, while post-modern scepticism ('the ideology of the theatre of the absurd') performs an ordination of cross-cultural silence. Each in its own way is thus instrumental in the act of political subordination, and each of them works to 'diminish the resource of language as a medium of profound dialogue with alien spirit and complex reality'. In the field of literary criticism, each of these cognitive

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[18] Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space*, p. xx.

[19] Wilson Harris, 'The Fabric of the Imagination', p. 181.

traditions offers a beguilingly efficient methodology for encountering the 'text' that stands in at the object-point of the critical gaze, but neither of them contains the generative capacity to 'shift the gravity of expectation within the conditioned mind'. What the 'Note' is therefore in search of, is a system of interpretive *negotiation*—a modality of reading 'in cross-cultural rapport'—which can disrupt received traditions of cognitive purchase and open a 'gateway' into cross-cultural *imagination* and thus into genuine cultural *change*. But as is always the case with seeming totalities in the oppositional imperative, the middle terms in binaristic closure are enormously difficult to articulate, and require conceptual *strategy* in order to set them in train.

Harris's 'Note' begins this strategy by 'turning aside' from the traditions of cognitive binarism, and focusing instead on three poets whose work constitutes a kind of imaginative 'pre-text' to Ghose's poetic engagement. The poets are W.B. Yeats, St.-John Perse, and Aimé Césaire: three poets who taken as a whole are variously, and in the end *ambivalently*, placed within colonialism's seemingly closed binary system of colonizer and colonized, observer and observed, and poets whose collectively 'uncertain' position within the armature of Empire articulates a kind of residual 'memory' for the writing *position* that Ghose—outside of any narrow question of literary 'influence'—will come to occupy in his writing. The strategy here is to gesture once again at the pre-textual condition of post-colonial writing, at its inherently *overwritten* status. The strategy is to constitute—imaginatively, of course, but squarely in lines with the 'textual' history of post-colonial cultures—an archaeological field within which a numinous, shimmering *difference* inside Ghose's poetic language can begin to be heard.

When the 'Note' at last turns to its ostensible subject, Ghose's 'nature strategies', then, it does so from a critical vantage point which positions post-colonial difference—in textuality, in cultural apparatus—as its concealed but energizing moment. It reads this difference back into Ghose's poetry in terms of a dialectical oscillation 'between void and constellation', but it registers this oscillation as an imaginative strategy for critical *reading*, one which figures not only the line of sight which this critical article elects now to take, but also the ambivalence in Ghose's own emplacement within colonialism's binaristic equation, and the opposition between the void of scepticism and the false plenitude of positivism in how the apparatus of Ghose's 'England' constructs the field of 'nature' in the production and normalization of meaning. Harris comments on Ghose's 'curious evocation of ambivalences', on Ghose's distance from and yet partial 'attachment to a sovereign, European tradition'; but by now this ambivalence, this difference, in Ghose's poetic production is working as a sign of post-colonial ambivalence itself, and as a marker of

the gap between the unshakable traditions of cognitive engagement and their oppositional purchase in the post-colonial world. Here then, on the overwritten field of post-colonial experience, these oppositions *necessarily* enter into dialogue with one another; cognitive lines of flight necessarily intermingle and coalesce. A 'hint of disquiet' enters into Ghose's 'comedy of manners', and a denaturalizing critical energy begins to dismantle the realist contract which underpins Ghose's poetic language.

The order of critical reading produced by this methodological strategy is noteworthy, for its object of attention is never quite Ghose's language, his poetics, or his 'meaning', but is instead the shadowy presence which looks *through* Ghose's language and which obtains *inside* the gap between the intractable traditions of post-Enlightenment cognition. The poems which Ghose has produced from within an inheritance of ambivalent allegiance and resistance are read as 'dark masquerades' of colonialism's 'phenomenal legacy', and their images are troped into thematizations of the oppositional structure that has worked historically to preserve the autonomy of colonialism's monolithic machineries of representation and interpretation. In Harris's critical 'turning' of the material, then, the physical garden which Ghose portrays in the poem 'Friends' becomes an 'ironic garden in which nature mirrors society, society nature, until their mutual reflection becomes a shadow lurking in the heart of place.' It is this shadow, not the received substance, which the 'Note' is really attempting to explore: a place where the antinomic principles of presence and absence simply *have* to intermingle—and this as a metaphor for the shadowy and ambivalent realm *between* cognitive structures and binary oppositions into which post-colonial cognition, if it is to decolonize representation, needs to move.

Harris has written widely of his desire in criticism to fracture the transparency within hardened conventions and to seek 'a new density in words'. He has likened the opposition between unshakable cognitive traditions to a 'claustrophobic ritual' which inscribes a monolithic notion of History and which shuts out the 'cross-cultural capacity' to activate 'ceaseless dialogue' between adversarial cultures, figurative structures, and orders of 'meaning'.[20] 'A Note on Zulfikar Ghose's "Nature Strategies"' builds to the point where it begins to *perform* this fracturing and destabilizing modality of 'reading', but at precisely the moment at which this order of interpretation begins to run smoothly across Ghose's poetic oeuvre, the 'Note' deploys a new strategy in its criticism, one which returns the moment of the paper to its negotiations with the contract of 'realism'—and by extension, to its negotiations with the cognitive apparatuses of colonialist power.

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[20] See *The Womb of Space*, pp. xviii–xx.

The conventions of literary criticism—as I argued above—impose specific constraints on how its strategies of 'reading' may be written and performed, and at heart critical writing rests on a foundational contract of total analysis, of systematic explanation and uncovering, which is in essence the same contract as that which underpins the convention of literary 'realism'. In practical terms, this means that Harris's critical analysis of Ghose's poetic writing should be constrained by the possibilities that Ghose's poetry *actually* throws forward; but at this crucial moment in the 'Note' 's unfolding argument, Harris performs a double gesture in 'reading' which has important consequences for the metaphorical association between literary criticism and post-colonial subjectivity that is being carried in this essay. The first term in this gesture involves the critical *recognition* of the realist contract—here figured as an admission that an untranscendable limitation marks Ghose's poetic performance, a limitation which *in its own terms* forecloses upon the 'evolutionary' possibilities of 'live fossil' and 'numinous proportion'[21] that Harris wants to actuate. '[O]ne cannot evade the impression,' the 'Note' argues, ' ... that the English tradition is Zulfikar Ghose's home, however modified by ancestral levitations or charged by every departure to other landscapes'. The energizing 'distance' in Ghose's 'nature strategies', this order of reading has to admit, becomes at a certain level of analysis a stable, 'consistent reflection' rather than an ironic one—an inert communicative structure, and not a dialogical one. This limitation in the 'pre-text' obviously has consequences for Harris's critical activity—consequences which echo into the metaphorical register of the critical performance, where how one 'reads' stands in for the question of how one might seek to decolonize the field of post-colonial subjectivity. And Harris's strategy for responding to this limitation is to effect the second term in his reading gesture, which is dialectically to *break* with the contract of critical realism, to canvass the archaeological structure of radical (post)-colonial ambivalence and temporality which he has assembled for the reading, and thus to *import* to the reading of Ghose's now 'transparent' and flattened lines 'a sensation of implicit curvature' and 'fractured transparency'. In other words, Harris's critical strategy for 'reading' imaginative, decolonizing possibilities in Ghose's poetry is to re-insert Ghose's *emplacement* as a writer back into the history of cognitive colonialism and its resistances, and to arrive at what remains in post-colonial culture 'a central, unresolved tension' between oppositional cognitive traditions and cultural affiliations.

The point of profound critical engagement which the 'Note' is in search of, then, occurs at the moment of abrogation in the critical contract of realism, and through a renegotiation of post-colonial subjectivity to a way

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[21] Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space*, p. xx; 'The Fabric of the Imagination', p. 176.

of reading 'pre-texts' which may seem 'wholly tragic' but can nevertheless be viewed from the fracturing perspective of non-complicity with the great 'conquistadorial legacies'[22] of cognitive tradition. For here, Harris can carry his 'reading' of Ghose's poetic emplacement into the 'anatomy of space' *between* the massive binary poles in colonialism's 'phenomenal legacy', and can deploy that reading to the articulation of a cognitive apparatus for the 'rebuttal of stereotypes', the 'rebuttal of complacent order or expectation'. Harris's critical analysis *stays* with Ghose's poetry, but it now reads that poetry at the *intersection* between the critical traditions of realistic fidelity and cognitive scepticism, and along the lines of a *motivated* critical engagement which works metaphorically to map out a decolonizing strategy in the field of cultural representations. With this breaking of the realist contract, this eschewing of criticism's 'natural' function, the seemingly secondary order of the critical engagement—that metaphorical level upon which the 'Note' is *about* cultural decolonization, *about* the inscriptions of colonialist tradition and the construction of an anti-colonialist cognitive critique—is able to come to the fore, and 'A Note on Zulfikar Ghose's "Nature Strategies" ' is able to move at last into the 'invented landscape' of a purely *post*-colonial engagement: a strategic 're-turning' in the language of Empire, a prying open of cognitive absolutes into a gateway consciousness of 're-visionary' reading.

'I am implying the ecstasy of complex counterpoint between partial origins, between partial imprints of unfinished genesis, partial absolutes', Harris writes in 'The Fabric of the Imagination'; and as critics and readers of Harris's writing, it may well be more crucially our role in critical engagement to seek such counterpoint between the Harrisian 'pre-texts' and our *own* specific pedagogical and political motivations as it is to fulfil the inherited critical contract of realism by conveying to others a sense of what Harris's work, on the flattened field of dehistoricized textuality, might simply seem to 'mean'. This *Festschrift* is a testament to one of post-colonialism's most important writers; but what makes Harris important is not simply the astonishing cadence and grip to his fiction, but also the enormous importance of the *questions* that his writing so consistently seeks to address. I have attempted to argue here that the work we should be celebrating in this volume is *also* Harris's literary work as a *critic*—in the profoundest sense of the term. If we are to read Harris's critical work *critically*, it may well be that we need to *break* with the contract of critical *explication* in our analysis of Harris's fiction—in order to fulfil that more enabling cultural contract: which is the promise of 're-visionary' post-colonialism, and the commitment towards cognitive and political change.

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[22] Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space*, p. xv.