

Other than Realism:

Magic and Violence in Modern Scottish Fiction and the Recent Work of Wilson Harris

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I. Popular Realism

Violence, magic and realism – the three terms offer various possible enquiries and I might begin by suggesting two kinds of violence – the depiction of violence in story or narrative, a shooting, knifing, murder of whatever kind – and on the other hand, a violence in the text of fiction itself. The first one is easy to comprehend. In modern Scottish fiction, the novel *No Mean City* (1935) evokes the image of a Glasgow of street-violence, knife and razor-gangs, a tradition of hard lives in urban poverty that runs right through to Peter McDougall's 1970s and 1980s television dramas *Just a Boy's Game* and *Just Another Saturday* and on to contemporary TV series like *Taggart*. But mention of that tradition calls up another kind of violence, the coercive structures of formulaic realism in narrative. No writer of any episode of *Taggart* is going to surrender its reliable genre securities just as the genre fiction of Ian Rankin has secured a niche that is commercially as well as aesthetically dependable. This is not to denigrate these writers but rather to note that the maintenance of these aesthetic and commercial priorities enacts a kind of violent constraint in itself. These are familiar enough contemporary examples. Perhaps we can go further back to imagine a bigger context for them.

II. Violence and Walter Benjamin

Violence happens when you force living things to become commodities. The greatest theorist of this kind of violence in the modern world is Walter Benjamin. He is both the earliest theorist to see most deeply into this practice and the one who, in his latest and most fragmentary work, *The Arcades Project*, sees into it most prophetically. There, he says this:
Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped. Grandville [the nineteenth-century illustrator and caricaturist who famously depicted bourgeois

Parisian spectators promenading on an interplanetary bridge and using the rings of Saturn as a balcony as they watch the world go by] extends the authority of fashion to objects of everyday use, as well as to the cosmos. In taking it to an extreme, he reveals its nature. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. [1]

This sounds pretty close to the world we inhabit, a world of global exhibition glorifying the exchange value of the commodity. As Benjamin puts it, 'a phantasmagoria which a person enters into in order to be distracted'. [2] It is an age of distraction.

In Wilson Harris's 2006 novel, *The Ghost of Memory*, the first person singular, the ghost, says that he finds himself climbing a ladder on a pinnacle with two sides, one of hope, the other despair. Revolutions of the past, he notes, have led to resurgences of tyranny: the American, Russian, Chinese revolutions have gone – 'nothing remains but a narrow conservatism, complacency, democracy under the banner of crude capitalism.' Harris proposes that what his ghost will do in this novel is 'dig deep...for reverses of violence...into Fear, Fear of the grave, and to stir a seed within the womb of Art...beyond every formidable portrait of command...'. [3] What Harris is suggesting here is a culmination of many of the major themes of his earlier novels and ideas, a dramatic evocation, because it is a novel and not a piece of philosophy, of how the 'enabling space' might be stirred unpredictably beyond the absolutes of authoritarian command. Those absolutes are evidently codified and easily seen in the priorities of capitalism and the ideological context of a mass-media saturated world with its strafing commercialism. Let's go back to Walter Benjamin for a moment:

The entertainment industry makes this [phantasmagoria of distraction] easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others. – The enthronement of the commodity, with its lustre of distraction...is consistent with the split between utopian and cynical elements... [4]

In *The Ghost of Memory*, the ghost is constantly pressing against the tendency to enact this split, constantly insisting on the partiality of vision, judgement and attitude. This contrasts with his main opponent, the spectator in the art gallery where the action of the novel is mainly 'located' (so to speak), who sees paintings specifically as commodities in a world of commodities.

So, what Benjamin is describing in the 1930s with reference to fin-de-siecle Paris especially, points forward to a globalised condition of twenty-first century western ideology drenched in mass-media which it is all too easy to recognise. Benjamin suggests that in the art of Grandville, under his pencil, 'the whole of nature is transformed into specialities' – that is, he presents commodified objects 'in the same spirit in which the advertisement...presents its articles.' It seems almost unnecessary to add as Benjamin does, that 'He ends in madness.' [5] It is also worth noting how appropriate the art gallery is as a location for Harris's novel, for nowhere in the world of the arts is commodity-fetishism more evident than in the commerce of paintings.

The term *violence* applies to the use of force in the organisation of category and commodity, from crude examples to necessary political applications, to the most intimate and perhaps invasive subtleties of language and sound-perception. That is, understood in this way, we might consider it with regard to narrative structure and the very organisation of language itself.

Narrative design is crucial regarding any form of storytelling and has direct political connotation. In the words of Cairns Craig, following the now familiar formulations of Homi Bhabha, 'There is a profound similarity between the modern nation, with its implication of all the people of a territory bound together into a single historical process, and the technique of the major nineteenth-century novels, whose emplotment enmeshes their multiplicity of characters into a single, overarching narrative trajectory.' [6] If violence is implied by the severity of categorisation in those terms, it's worth remembering that the opposite might be the case, that unlike the confinement of genre fiction, for example, the overarching narrative trajectory of a different kind of story might be an encompassing, accommodating and largely enabling one. It is at least arguable whether it has any necessarily inherent disposition towards encroachment or censorship. Its violence may bring about a liberation.

III. Violence and Wilson Harris

Violence has been at the heart of Harris's vision from the beginning. It seems perhaps strange to say this in the sense that Harris has been described as one of the great redemptive visionaries of recent fiction, and as Michael Gilkes said, his work presents an emphasis upon creativity, the enabling space, the imagery of womb, egg, boat, cradle and curtained room. [7] Yet from the opening paragraph of *Palace of the Peacock*, literal violence has been at the forefront of the novelist's description:

A horseman appeared on the road coming at a breakneck stride. A shot rang out suddenly, near and yet far as if the wind had been stretched and torn and had started coiling and running in an instant. The horseman stiffened with a devil's smile, and the horse reared, grinning fiendishly and snapping at the reins. The horseman gave a bow to heaven like a hanging man to his executioner, and rolled from his saddle on to the ground. [8]

The ambiguity is built into the text itself – from the word 'breakneck' through the imagery of the wind stretching and coiling and running like a whip or rope to the horseman's bow to heaven, as if before his execution. The implication that someone has been hanged is pressing up into the writing, just as the shot that rings out and the image of the horseman rolling out of his saddle suggests that he has been the victim of a gunman. Since the novel goes on to present this murdered character awakening 'with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye...' [9] and then moves between a first person and second person narrative and takes you through a quest narrative in which the ambiguity is brilliantly sustained about whether this character and his

companions are alive and engaged in a mission of vital urgency, or whether they are dead, ghosts returning to re-enact a story that will be in a perpetual rehearsal, it seems clear that a reader accustomed to the securities of realism might be forgiven for asking, 'What's really going on here?'

This is a question that almost all of Harris's novels seem to beg. And yet if this appears to suggest a violence at work in the text, distorting the securities of realism and wrenching them away from identifiable imageries, I would like to suggest that here, too, the opposite might be the case: that it is realism, those very securities themselves, that may be the violent encroachments and pressurised coercive directives. The violence in Harris's writing is a liberation.

Modern fiction generally assumes that such realism is a reliable and welcome convention; genre fiction is predicated upon such securities – as we noted with reference to *Taggart* and Ian Rankin. All specialised and exclusive vocabularies in technologically-defined narrative media like film and television enforce the limits of such conventions. Yet the delight, the exhilaration, the real pleasure of Harris's great *oeuvre* is to engage with an imagination that seems to have no constraint of that kind.

Or perhaps it has. There is a question I will come back to. But first I would like to suggest a few ways in which modern Scottish writing deliberately grapples with these constraints.

IV. An Example from Scottish literature of the 1980s

I would like to give a brief example from the 1980s, then mention a couple more from the 1990s, before returning to Wilson Harris.

First, perhaps the most iconic modern Scottish novel, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981). Let me place this in a historical context first. In the 1980s, there was a significant body of writing and artistic production in other genres, especially painting in the work of Steven Campbell, Ken Currie, Adrian Wiszniewski and Peter Howson, and in literary and cultural criticism, which both demonstrated and helped to redefine the creative potential of Scotland and the historical achievements of the nation's cultural production. Scholarly histories of Scottish music, art and literature appeared in that decade by such as John Purser, Duncan MacMillan, Roderick Watson and others. The conventional or accepted story of Scotland's culturally marginalised status was being revised. Simultaneously, in creative writing in all the major genres various aspects of what might be described as hitherto conventional realism were being left behind. How closely these cultural works were related to the negation of the 1979 devolution referendum or the election of the Conservative government and the escalation of a disenfranchised Scotland following that is probably unquantifiable but assuredly, there was relation of some kind.

Perhaps this is the key point – writers in their work of the 1980s were saying that it was not enough to have history and the imagination in separate categories, that the work of the creative imagination is involved in the production of the future. Realism is a term bound up with the matter of perspective. Alasdair Gray in *Lanark* has his main character, the aspiring artist Duncan Thaw, set out to draw the locks in the canal:

He knew how the two great water staircases curved round and down the hill, but from any one level the rest were invisible. Moreover, the weight of the architecture was best seen from the base, the spaciousness from on top; yet he wanted to show both equally so that eyes would climb his landscape as freely as a good athlete exploring the place. He invented a perspective showing the locks from below when looked at from left to right and from above when seen from right to left; he painted them as they would appear to a giant lying on his side, with eyes more than a hundred feet apart and tilted at an angle of 45 degrees. Working from maps, photographs, sketches and memory his favourite views had nearly all been combined into one when a new problem arose.

[\[10\]](#)

The ‘new problem’ is how to depict people in this landscape. Perhaps the one thing everyone knows about *Lanark* is that it takes you through two narratives, one almost conventionally realist and one fantastical, mysterious, dream-like. The constraints of the ‘realist’ narrative enact violence not only upon the main character, who seems to be almost suicidal by the end of the second book, but also upon the other characters by insisting upon their limitations and constraints, personal, social, national and imaginative. These constraints and tensions are viscerally connected to the dynamics and pressures in the ‘fantasy’-story. Thus, it is not that one story precedes the other or predicates it, but rather that the work of the imagination liberates itself from the imprisonment of realism. In negotiating with publishers over a considerable period of time, Gray considered publishing the book in separate sections (he published individual chapters in periodicals), but finally, at considerable risk, he refused partial publication, insisting that it must be read as an integrated work. [\[11\]](#)

A crucial aspect of *Lanark* is the paradoxical achievement of the book itself, the long story of its composition over decades, which many people in Scotland’s literary world were aware of. In that story, a crucial element is the novel’s connection with its acclaimed precedent in Scottish fiction, Archie Hind’s great novel, *The Dear Green Place* (1966). Famously, Hind, who died in 2008, never completed another novel and the main character in *The Dear Green Place* abandons and destroys the novel he is writing. The achievement of *The Dear Green Place* is remarkable in itself, of course, but in this context it has a further significance as a precedent for Gray’s novel. It is consistently and masterfully a realist novel, syntactically secure and artfully observant of that security. It resolutely refuses to challenge the authority of that realism. When, in *Lanark*, we read that Glasgow is, like most modern cities, the place where many people live but few imagine living, we have one of the essential assertions of the value of imaginative life in modern literature. [\[12\]](#) In

The Dear Green Place, Mat Craig attempts to live up to that intuitive assertion of value and Hind records his struggle courageously. This struggle lies at the heart of Harris's fiction also. Violence in *Lanark* is social and one of the novel's deep enquiries is the extent to which social organisation involves pressurised channelling that produces violence. Archie Hind's brilliant depiction of the slaughterhouse where Mat Craig is employed is blood-drenched and, if it is realist in a literal sense in the narrative, it needs no emphasis as an implicit metaphor. Mat's world brutally forecloses his imaginative expressiveness. But what I want to emphasise now is the way in which the imagination might deliver different ways of living in these worlds, and in fact, changing them. Each one of these works, and not least Archie Hind's essentially because of the desperation and tragic failure it dramatises, is a memorable demonstration of this.

V. A.L. Kennedy, Robbie Kydd: Spectatorship and Violence

The work of A.L. Kennedy and Robbie Kydd, in the context of recent Scottish fiction, seems to me highly relevant here. Consider Kennedy's non-fictional work, her extended essay entitled *On Bullfighting* (1999), advertised as a dissection of 'the ultimate spectator sport'. The paradox with which I began this essay – Benjamin's description of the phantasmagoria of commodities in an age of distraction – is precisely what Kennedy forces herself to address in the opening pages of this book. After Hemingway, after the development of the whole ideology of spectator-sport in a mass-media context, how does she begin to approach her subject, to focus on the fact that 'a man faces his death while a crowd looks on' (back-cover blurb) ...?

When Kennedy begins her essay *On Bullfighting*, she startles you with an unpredicted description of her own peculiar vulnerability on a Sunday afternoon in a tenement flat in Glasgow, looking out from a high window and contemplating suicide by jumping. 'It's only me I want to kill' she says: 'I don't want anyone looking when I fall' – however, what pulls her back into the impossibility of her committing suicide is the not-so-distant singing of a man's voice, delivering what Kennedy describes as a 'piece of pseudo-Celtic pap' called '[Mhairi's Wedding](#)' (pp. 1-5). As the jaunty rhythm of the opening lines echo across Kennedy's grim sense of mortal confrontation –

Step we gaily, on we go,
Heel for heel and toe for toe,
Arm in arm and row on row,
All for Mhairi's wedding –

– she tells us that this preface to the book she is about to present to us is by way of a promise, that knowing she cannot equal the commitment of the matadors who confront their possible death every time they enter the bullring, she will try to deliver her best considered thought as a spectator with this reality imaginatively in her mind. It is, in other words, an explicitly deliberate

attempt to foreground the connection between her own life and imagination and the life and imagination of the so-called 'sport' she is about to describe as a spectator. [13] Kennedy's painstaking qualification of her act as spectator, her dwelling on her limitation or incompetence as participant, her acute observation of the responsibilities conferred upon the person making the self-conscious choice to be a spectator of violence, is deeply suggestive. It is not simply that she is describing violence in fiction but rather that she is witnessing violence in reality. But this also prompts the question of the role of writing. In writing (self-consciously crafted, literary writing, as opposed to specifically linear reportage), there is also a responsibility conferred in the choice of subject. How does a writer represent violence without merely exploiting sensational effects?

Robbie Kydd's *The Quiet Stranger* (1991) is subtitled 'the Life and Times of a Scottish Merchant, known to the world as Richard Mason, who was born in the Island of Tobago in the Year 1767, and who died in the Island of Trinidad in the Year 1849'. [14] It is thus a self-conscious chronicle ostensibly written in the first half of the nineteenth century and the account it gives of its first-person narrator growing up, his love for the slave-girl Betsy, his relations with his tyrannical father and his French Creole mother, and his tomboy sister Tony is a palimpsest of Victorian realist fiction. What makes it self-evidently not an imitation Victorian novel, implying a realist reading, is, first, that Richard's sister Tony is in fact Antonia, the woman who will become the first Mrs Rochester and reach an international readership through not only Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) but also Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). So far, so familiar: we have another example of postcolonial metafiction and intertextuality. But what also makes the novel self-consciously different from conventional Victorian realism, is the emphasis placed in the early chapters on language, and the specifically Scots language of the major characters. Richard elucidates:

I should explain that our family used three languages: we spoke English with Father and his overseers (though they often spoke to each other in incomprehensible Gaelic); we spoke metropolitan French with Maman; and we spoke St. Domingue patois with the Negroes, for most of them had been brought from that island. [15]

It's telling that Betsy, the slave-girl who is Richard's only childhood friend and finally becomes his wife, is told by her mother that she must only speak English to Richard when nobody else can hear them. When she offers him some 'jumbie-beads' he asks, 'Are they magic?' only to be told in a phrase Betsy has picked up from Tony, that he is 'a silly goose' and 'these are for playing games with'. [16] The emphasis in the early chapters of the novel on language, the transference of language, and the development of secrets, magical significance and playfulness, all serve to give

texture to the childhood scenes of the main characters as they grow into the world of their adult peers.

Kydd's novel is not really challenging conventional realism as narrative technique in a textually experimental way. The details I've noted are gestures towards verisimilitude which are confirmed by the book's dedication, to the author's wife, 'a true Trinidadian, without whose knowledge and help I could not even have started it'. However, it is important to note the deliberation with which these aspects of the novel have been selected. As a novel in which Scottish identity is specifically Gaelic, historicised, and hidden under the cover of English-language identity, the matters of language, monetary value, violent authority and enforced social hierarchy are not valorising national identity nor asserting exceptionalism. When Richard, in old age, dreams of reclaiming his ancient Gaelic identity as a clan chieftain, both the Edinburgh lawyer and Betsy dissuade him. The past cannot be reconstituted in identical structure and form. Yet there is a persistence of memory – a ghost of memory – that haunts Richard, even as he settles into a comfortable domesticity in a happy marriage that belies its unconventionality. Richard's domestic triumph – and even more so, Betsy's – is to reject the conventional categories and the racial commodification their society – and indeed their business interests – insist upon. The commercial world makes them rich because they observe these conventions while their home life makes them happy because they remain true within it to the secrets and magic they learned together as children. The book does not expose them as hypocrites but it holds up the contradictions with a balance of sympathy and ironic distance.

As we noted, Michael Gilkes has drawn attention emphatically to the centrality of imageries of 'enabling space' in Wilson Harris's writing. I think this is closely related to Wilson Harris's sense that for his writing to be responsible to the lives of the illiterate men he lived and travelled with in the forests of what was then British Guyana, realism was not enough. Departures from realism and the intuitive understanding that realism was not enough, I am proposing, has been an important part of the development of the tradition of modern Scottish literature.

VI. Wilson Harris and *The Ghost of Memory*

Resolutely gentle in his own use of language, the determination of Wilson Harris to confront questions of violence and to find ways of evoking the potential of imagination and magic is remarkable. Political violence has been highlighted in his recent fiction, most explicitly perhaps in *Jonestown* (1996), but I'd like to focus on *The Ghost of Memory* for the moment.

Let's go back to our well-intentioned but unknowing reader, who asks, 'What's it about?' At a hundred pages, it is more a novella than a novel, in six chapters. It begins rather like the opening

of *Palace of the Peacock*, with a man – it seems – being shot, and falling. There is no need to specify the historic occasion which is evidently evoked by the opening of the novel. In the ‘Author’s Note’ Harris says this man ‘is shot as a terrorist’ but ‘claims he is no terrorist and sees himself as a sacrifice for the failure of a civilisation to recognise how it is aligned to ancient rituals that feared the Sun might never rise again and Darkness would engulf the world for ever.’ [\[17\]](#) This is almost all we get of reference to a specific event and I think Harris is characteristically sensitive and adroit at starting from a point which anyone who was reading the news or watching television around the time the novel was published would recognise. Harris moves away from that point rapidly into an imaginary drama which surely addresses what we like to think of as the real world in a different but connected way. In this, imagination and material or historical reality are as closely connected as in the work we’ve considered by A.L. Kennedy in the 1990s or Alasdair Gray in the 1980s. Other examples from this period might be given from different genres, in the plays of Liz Lochhead or the poetry of Edwin Morgan, to name but two.

Material or historical reality is present in Harris’s work as a matter of responsibility. There is an invaluable essay by T.J. Cribb on Harris’s work as a surveyor in the forests of British Guyana in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Cribb draws attention to Harris’s keeping faith with the people he worked and travelled with, whose names – Carroll, Vigilance, De Souza, Schomburgh – appear in his fiction. As Cribb points out, Harris said that he became aware of what mattered to these people, and noted that: ‘realism was not the answer. Their own resources went deeper than their predicament. I became an agent for them, and they understood that – If I were to betray the vision that I have for an instant then I would betray them. But I have not. I am certain that in all my writing I have kept faith with those men and women.’ [\[18\]](#)

In Harris’s latest work, the first-person narrator describes himself as the titular character, the Ghost of Memory, and he falls into a painting in an art gallery in a big city, where he embarks on a journey along a river, through a forest, but also through the factual textures of paint and pigment, the artifice of art, its stillness and its movement. He is observed by a man in the gallery who gives his name as Christopher Columbus – not the historical Columbus but someone who has taken his name and stands for absolute objectivity in his definitions of what he sees, absolute authority in religion, and absolute security in what is real. Two other characters appear, George and Andy, to wander through the gallery, look at the painting and discuss various things with Christopher and the narrator. The narrator has now somehow slipped out of the painting and is able to suggest ideas to George and Andy, and to have a passionate, confrontational conversation with Christopher. In the end, Christopher takes a knife and destroys the painting, but the sliced-up canvas holds fragments that catch the eye, hold the memory, evoke further thought, and in the final paragraphs, although Andy departs, George remains and studies the fragments

that remain: 'It was a skeleton of lights. It may have been there a million and more years before Man appeared on planet Earth. How could it be anything one now knew?' George, empowered by this stellar spectrum, embarks on his wandering, 'following a hazy skeleton of lights he could not identify.' [19] So, like *Palace of the Peacock*, the novel begins in violence and ends in revelation. It opens with a first-person narrator and ends with third-person narration. It is based on, or begins from, reference to actual historical people and events, things that happened, but it then enters a space of dream, fantasy or magic narrative.

Stated baldly, the plot seems minimal and decidedly unrealistic, yet it is complex and rich with imagery that interconnects in unsuspected, unpredicted ways. For example, the violence enacted by Christopher, slashing the canvas with a knife, hints back at an imagery of 'slicing' – Harris uses the word repeatedly – and dismembering a torso to produce contrary images of violence and music. In one passage, Jason (the mythical hero but also an urban boxer) is practising his punch. George tells us, 'I dreamt I saw a man punching/striking a headless, limbless body – a stuffed balloon if you like – that was hanging from the ceiling.' [20] In another, a group of Arawak women emerge from the painting: 'They carry the sculpture of a woman who is headless, limbless, and whose remaining body in their hands is violin-shaped and beautiful. They worship her as a goddess.' The question is 'whether she has been sculpted as a form of cruelty or love?' [21] The two images echo each other – each dismembered torso leading to violence or to music and love. In an unpredicted, elaborate exfoliation of images, the novel develops a vision of the imaginative exploration of the partial, taking what seems absolute and seeing it in relation to other things which then emphasise the contingent, the arbitrary, the evocative. The novel is tight and the confrontations between the Ghost and Christopher are tense, full of exclamation and the portent of violence, so there is always this sense of a world of whispers, unfinished possibilities and openness.

VII. The Skeleton of Imperialism

The partial identities Harris discloses in the novel are revealed through partial formulations of paragraph-content. It is difficult if not impossible to predict where the tension in Harris's writing arrives from. I said I would come back to a question that is unresolved. Harris in numerous essays and interviews has drawn attention to the multivalent or multidimensional aspect of language and writing, suggesting that in many ways postcolonial writing generally is an over-writing, a writing back over the skeletons of colonial or indeed imperial narratives. In the very title of their seminal work on postcolonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin imply and endorse this relation between imperial colonies and the impositions of imperial narratives. [22] Colonial writing revises the skeletons of imperial history. If

there is a grand, encompassing trajectory, then Harris's works revise it, riddle it with difference, subvert its priorities and redirect established propositions towards hierarchic power. The question that arises from a reading of Scottish writing in the context of Harris is this: where does that leave the contingent literatures that wish to dissociate themselves from the imperial, colonising master-narratives? In some respects, the work we have considered by Alasdair Gray, A.L. Kennedy and Robbie Kydd all address this question. Each author self-consciously wishes to dissociate himself or herself from imperial master-narratives, yet their writing enacts the reliance upon the authority and power of imperial certainties even as it questions them. Consider Gray's exploration of the problem of perspective in the world of the artist: who is looking? From what angle of approach? With what degree of superior height? Consider Kennedy's deliberations about spectator-sport and violence. Consider Kydd's representation of the era of slavery and the degree of sympathy or critical distance he and his readers might have towards his central characters.

Towards the end of *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, one of Harris's most opaque novels from 1965, we read this:

The education of freedom...begins with a confession of the need to lose the base connection men seek to impose when they talk of one's 'native' land (or another's) as if it were fixed and anchored in place. In this age and time, one's native land (and the other's) is always crumbling: crumbling within a capacity of vision which rediscovers the process to be not foul and destructive but actually the constructive secret of all creation wherever one happens to be. [\[23\]](#)

I would read this not as absolute rejection of national identity nor as utopian universalism but as an urge towards recognising the need for openness to the partial and transforming nature we are part of. The darkness or the difficulty of its diction and tone remind us that these matters are not to be glib about. It endorses a realism, or rather, a responsibility to the real world, that allows for the unpredicted and magical. We may yet find ourselves crumbling towards new forms of self-determination out of the ruins of a former state. In the recorded conversation I had with him in 1990, published in *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, Harris said that he wondered whether the Scottish ethos had permeated the imperial ethos because of the involution of Calvinism and Imperialism. 'There are these different Europes. And Scotland in a way might be a microcosm of them all, more so than England perhaps. You have a whole theatre in Scotland, don't you?' [\[24\]](#) This is effectively an affirmation of a national identity characterised by a history of partiality and incompleteness, attachment to imperialism and difference from it, providing the imagination with 'a whole theatre'. So if Harris's vision seems in some ways to contrast with the national or even nationalist priorities in some of the texts we have considered here, maybe that distinction should not be exaggerated or polarised.

We can end on a note of optimism. To quote Cairns Craig once again, 'The national imagination [...] is a space in which a dialogue is in process [...] in a territory [...] whose borders define the limits within which certain voices [...] are listened for, and others resisted [...]'. [25] That is close to a description of a world in which the dissolution, the crumbling, of certain narratives, coincides with the creation of others in 'a capacity of vision'. At the same time, it recognises the need to resist certain voices. Alasdair Gray's famous directive that we should work as if we were living in the early days of a better nation is perhaps not so far removed from the hope implicit in Harris's vision of the 'crumbling' context of all creative work. That creativity remains to be fought for, in fiction, poetry, plays, all the arts – and indeed also in the social realities with which we surround ourselves and through which, hopefully, we keep moving.

NOTES

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 18-19.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[3] Wilson Harris, *The Ghost of Memory* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 11.

[4] Walter Benjamin, p. 7.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[6] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 9.

[7] Michael Gilkes, *Creative Schizophrenia: The Caribbean Cultural Challenge* (Coventry: The University of Warwick Centre for Caribbean Studies, 1986) p. 13.

[8] Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960; reprinted 1981), p. 13.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

[10] Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1981), p. 279.

[11] Rodge Glass, *Alasdair Gray: A Secretary's Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), pp. 136-137.

[12] Gray, p. 105.

[13] A.L. Kennedy, *On Bullfighting* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2000), pp. 1-16.

[14] Robbie Kydd, *The Quiet Stranger* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1991), [p. i]

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[17] Harris, 'Author's Note', in *The Ghost of Memory*, pp.vii-ix (p. vii).

- [18] T. J. Cribb, 'T.W. Harris – Sworn Surveyor', in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. XXIX, no. 1 (1993), 33-46 (p. 44).
- [19] Harris, *The Ghost of Memory*, p. 100.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 55
- [22] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989)
- [23] Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; reprinted 1974), pp. 101-102.
- [24] Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, ed. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liege: L3 – Liege, Language and Literature, 1992), p. 64. See also Alan Riach, 'The Scottish Element in *Black Marsden*', in *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Sydney, Australia and Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1991), pp. 159-169.
- [25] Cairns Craig, p. 31.

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