

Interview with Wilson Harris

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You have talked about how modern allegory enables new kinds of vision, and I'm interested in the question of post-colonial allegory, or the allegorising of Otherness. One aspect of the allegorical mode is that it automatically involves binocular vision or a kind of double vision, and binocular vision necessarily involves depth perception. In what way does the allegorical element in your writing contribute to this new vision you are trying to evoke?

The thing that activates my mind is how to conceive the reality of genuine change. I have never forsaken that even though I am not engaged in any political party and my politics tend to be not quite politics. But this press for genuine change remains deep-seated and fundamental in my imagination. That implies a transformative scale. What I discovered was that there is a persistent development, if that is the word, moving in the fiction I write, and to some extent it has to do with what I would call *the absent body*. For in my judgement, there can be no genuine authority, no mutual authority, without visualising the capacity of *inner space* to relate to motifs of landscape/sea-scape/sky-scape etc. (*outer space*) in such a way that a transformation begins to occur in an apparently incorrigible divide between "object" and "subject," between toys and baubles of myth and a density of roots from which such toys or baubles (that encrust our civilisation until they become meaningless) have sprung. No wonder there is a denigration of myth, and myth tends to be equated with lies. The divide to which I refer, the denigration to which I refer, diminishes the intuitive imagination, it measures the person in things, it freezes the original life of the past into a series of

museum figures. Modern allegory has its substance or pressure in live and vital, archetypal myth that erupts through absences-in-presences to validate the age-old yet paradoxically original imagination. Here lies in my view the reality of the modern. Modern, I feel, implies an ongoing and unceasing re-visionary and innovative strategy that has its roots in the deepest layers of the past that still address us. There is a mutual authority between absence and presence, between withinness and withoutness. You spoke of doubleness. One has to remember that in dealing with the post-colonial field, modern allegory seems to be pertinent when one begins to ask oneself questions to do with areas of tradition that have sunken away and apparently disappeared and vanished and yet that are still active at some level. It means that one has to make a distinction between *activity* as a kind of mechanical process and *movement* as something which is rooted in some faculty of the imagination, a combination of faculties in the imagination. The capacity in the imagination to make real what no longer appears to move or live. In other words there is a distinction then between frenetic, fiendish activity as it is pursued in the mechanical world and the kind of movement in which something is coming up that may assist us to alter our judgement of the obsessions that bind us. Those obsessions have to be fissured. When they are fissured it is obviously painful, but they may release a mood that I would call distance. And in that distance, the sensible body is extended, and intermissions to do with the absent and present body may then run closely together. This condition of withinness/withoutness may then become reasonably true — it can never be totally true — and when that happens one has to sense that there are genuine forces at work which I call intuitive forces. There are genuine intuitive forces at work that move within the imagination, and the form that seems to me closest to the verifying or validating of this is modern allegory. And even as I say allegory, I hesitate a little and wonder whether there isn't another term.

How does your notion of the sensible or absent body tie in with the project of allegory and your interest in the question of genuine change?

The absent body is rooted in an understanding of presence which lies beyond logical presence. The absent body understands something that the present body fails to understand, and yet the present body may be visited by the absent body and vice versa. It is this kind of cross-cultural visitation that seems to me to open the doorway into modern allegory, because in the first place it means there is a kind of mutual authority which has to do with guides, and the validity of inner guides. Those inner guides are true, they work within the re-visionary imagination. They navigate within the text of a fiction, they are intuitive, they are utterly real, they bring fruitful distances into an otherwise hollow humanity. There is also a sensation that this distance which one perceives is a kind of distance in which for the first time the sensible body sees the cup or vessel out there, the cup or vessel of gold or whatever, but it (that vessel) acquires new horizons, new distances *within* itself that may alter certain prepossessions by which the imagination was encrusted. Encrustation gives way to a different awareness of self, a new self-confessional density of the roots of self in all creatures. The sensible, dense body awakens to a complex web of temptations to which it has succumbed, of responsibilities and creativities it had eclipsed. It is imbued then with scales of interwoven capacities to weigh the nature of greed to which it has succumbed time and time again. Perhaps the roots of greed arch through patterns of one-sided command so to speak. To test or break that chain of one-sided command is to test or alter obsessional codes that are deeply planted in regimes and societies, deeply planted within ourselves, without ourselves. The mood of distance to which I refer is akin to the revisitation of creative conscience within a hollow humanity that the absent body entertains in conjunction with the present body. So you get a kind of remoteness or aversion to complacent hope. True hope may lie in the way one plumbs despair, plumbs a hollow humanity that invests in greed, and converts that hollowness into a new or unsuspected spatiality or wealth of perspective. That aversion is converted into creativity in that the thing out there that a culture seeks to seize addresses us in a totally different way. It is a question of how one breaks the obsession, an obsessional space, how one breaks with obsession in the heart of imagination. One

can never wholly relinquish obsession (art has some if not all of its roots in obsession) but the *quality* of obsession may profoundly change.

Whether this is a revival of some theorem of allegory which has vanished I do not know. Francis Yates speaks of the difficulties of understanding allegory because the traditions that nourished Dante, Titian, and Shakespeare have largely disappeared. We know that there is a body of scholarship which has encrusted allegory with certain notions of museum artefact. How we discard such notions is part and parcel, I think, of the creativity of our age.

You have recently written about allegory in the New Left Review and have spoken about it in a talk you gave in Italy.¹ I wonder whether this interest you now show in modern allegory suggests new ways of reading your fiction—in other words, is this a discovery on your part that a kind of allegorical presence has always been at work in your writing?

It is difficult to say in a purely intellectual way how I began to see aspects of my fiction as bearing upon modern allegory. Modern allegory is an assertion of the inner, the intuitive guide. It comes back to the question of “withinness” and “withoutness.” How do you evaluate that? Well, in a realistic fiction, you may have people who seem to be distinct and apart from each other. “A” proceeds on this path and “B” proceeds on that path. They appear to be separate. The realistic writer can conceal his prejudices and biases, and he can arrange and give a kind of congruence and balance to them. On the other hand, within modern allegory it is possible, I am sure, not to disguise the biases or terrors of hideousness of an authorial civilisation that runs hand in hand with various barbarisms that reside in the most cultivated personalities, in ourselves as much as others. The imagination accepts this burden as native to itself and suffers and endures in a wholly different way than is the case in “realism.” In that capacity to endure and suffer, the fiction changes, the frames which contain the content of the fiction genuinely change, though in outline those frames seem to remain identical. The whole problematic of change lies in the way apparently identical frames of

landscape or whatever begin to secrete *new inner space content*. The ground within the frames begins to move, begins to shift, so that the foundation stones or the building blocks of a civilisation are seen quite differently — so differently that one opens up unsuspected corridors in space and time. The new inner space content in apparently identical frames of experience creates, I believe, a fiction which consumes its biases in some degree. The subversive strategy of modern allegory — as I feel and understand it — lies in the curious hollowing out, the curious excavation, that takes place within frames of identity until the new hollow secretes resources and potentials that have been long forgotten or eclipsed. That eruption of new resources may be as dazzling as unpredictable. The reader is deeply tested, perhaps overturned in a way, as the writer himself suffers, endures, knows a kind of strange ecstasy in the loss of ideal self-deception. That loss is another aspect of the fissuring of bias that opens into a new problematic, new dimensions, of being.

One may speak, I think, of “authorial civilisation” — as I did above — to imply the burden that the imagination may accept and wrestle with in modern allegory. It is the burden of a multifaceted, universal civilisation affecting all cultures whether we like it or not. In that wrestling process the “author” becomes as much a fiction as the “characters” in the text he writes. A living text. By that I mean that a living text is a text of density in which the author is challenged by his or her own creations. A swift illustration of what I am saying in political terms may be stated as follows. At various times countries which would appear to be truly powerful (or the authors of human destiny) would seize on a kind of cornerstone which they considered inviolable and thus no real dialogue took place with the native cultures they governed. They were fastened to a foundation stone which for them was absolute, unchangeable. *So whatever changes occurred around them did not affect them*. This is still happening today in contexts of authorial realism and power, whereas these so-called authors of human destiny should be at some profound level genuinely involved in responding to the weak, the non-powerful, the victim, the scarecrow, if they are to understand the crisis that afflicts humanity. They may be able to open themselves up to traditions

within themselves that they have undervalued or lost. In fact they may be able to illumine crisis in a way that the non-powerful themselves may have difficulty in doing. If they could do that then the whole scene could begin to change, and the all-powerful would themselves begin to change because they would know that their task is no longer simply the task of *defending territory*.

Equally the burden of "authorial civilisation" may need to be borne or re-interpreted or re-visioned within the creativity of marginal rather than established or powerful figures.

The allegorical dimensions in your work have never been more in evidence than in your recent novel, Carnival. Why is this?

There has been a distrust in the critical establishment of the kind of fiction that attempts to explain itself. I was drawn into allegory in *Carnival* not because I wanted to do that — I've always in a sense been doing that — but because I felt that there is a justification in tradition for doing that in terms of allegory. There are also different ways of seeing things as you rehearse them through the interplay of the inner guides.

In Carnival, Everyman Masters is the necessary inner guide, but so is Doubting Thomas. In fact, there are several guide figures. Does the post-colonial context in some sense require this kind of plurality?

That question brings us right into the twentieth century, where the necessities may in fact exist for what I call modern allegory. There is a part in *Carnival* that deals with this very thing: "I was unsure of Thomas, unsure of labels, but I loved him and felt his predicament inwardly and keenly. I knew I was ignorant of the inner problematic of sainthood, as of the religious torment in touching a wound that may fertilise a carnival bond with frustration, anguish, jealousy, violence in subject cultures. He seemed to me as indispensable a guide through the Inferno of history as Masters himself was." Now that carnival bond with frustration, anguish, jealousy, violence in subject cultures is the colonial and post-colonial context. The question is that every time Thomas touches the wound you have a number of implications in it. There is a carnival bond with subject cultures that have suffered vari-

eties of frustration and anguish. There is the question of the wounds within a society, wounds which apparently disappear as that society becomes more and more locked within its possession, within its privileges — and it intends to defend those at all costs. I am saying that at a certain blind level a religious guide buried very deep in the culture is active. I believe that revolution has its seeds in religion. I believe that religion, using the word religion in its deepest and most remarkable context, cannot be content with the state of the world. Religion is not here simply to promote the status quo, though it may appear to do so. Religion must be concerned with immense truth. It must be concerned with values that go beyond greed, and when a society becomes blind in itself, the religious seed festers at a very deep level and throws up a perverse kind of saint. That religious seed goes deep, it goes into the savage world, the pagan world. It is nurturing itself at a variety of levels. The whole civilisation becomes blind to the implications that have to do with real justice, with real processes in which, for example, starving people can be drawn into the body of humanity. And then you get this perverse figure who comes up like a perverse saint, a perverse demon, and kills. Unless the society understands what is happening to itself it will simply polarise itself more and more from the dispossessed, from those who strike at society. After a time it will have nothing to do but place guards everywhere. Now it's the politicians who have guards and police. Soon it will have to be the civil servants no doubt. Then you have to descend to the Minister of Religion, if you want to use the word "descend." You may have to put guards around all your members of faculty when they go home and come to work, and gradually, step by step, the whole society will have to guard itself against a stroke that is coming from within itself as well as without itself.

Carnival begins with the idea of a post-colonial state as an abortive culture, a culture that has been raped by the outside. But you seem to be showing that such figurations of colonialism — ones you find often in post-colonial writing — are only partial figurations of history.

Yes, they are partial figurations. One has to bear in mind that

running alongside the false shaman and rapist is a recognition of the true shaman who also strikes a blow — a blow of creative implications, not a disfiguring blow. If these matters were not partial, then societies would have no alternative but to become fortresses.

And what about the question of post-colonial history, which seems one of the inheritance of fragments rather than sovereign wholes. Does this relate to the nature of carnival itself? There is carnival in the sense that Mikhail Bakhtin uses it — having to do with the reversal of roles or frames — and also the sense in which Carnival is rooted in a Caribbean and South American cultural practice. Are you dealing with a notion of colonial fragmentation in this novel, and is your concept of “carnival” grounded in that kind of consciousness?

Well, this word “carnival” has crept into various fictions of mine from time to time. But here it did seem to me that in the twentieth century, which is so implicated in colonialism, “carnival” was the best system of values one could involve. The carnival frame goes on but allows different content to play through. So from the outset, mask figures were vitally important. All the characters are mask figures in a way. That means that the burden of what is being played can be transferred along the board. It may become horrific in some instances, but it can be transferred. “Carnival” allows one to ask: what is the mask? And you can’t pin down the mask exactly. The mask is a function of spirit — not absolute function, *partial* function.

Traditionally allegory tends to have in it figures that are partial but that somehow together make up the whole person or the whole soul. I wonder whether or not you are departing from that tradition. When your characters operate as partial figuration they never seem to add up to any kind of whole. Is this perhaps because part of the groundwork for the kinds of partial figuration you employ derives not from traditional allegorical practice but from the post-colonial world of fragmented traditions? And rather than trying to stitch these fragments into an overarching fixed or sovereign whole, are you in fact trying to set them into play in a kind of decentred and unbounded carnival time?

That is true. One is not involved by any means in a totalising thing because there is an incompleteness that can never be overcome, because that incompleteness is the issue that leaves the future open. That is why the roles of the understudy figures are so important in the novel. All these different parts can occupy different positions. A part could be hideously biased, but the parts undergo transmutations, and these transmutations have to do with a transformative scale.

It seems to me that post-colonial cultures, or cultures that have gone through the colonial encounter, may perhaps have inherited from the phenomenal legacy not so much a sense of wholeness, nor a sense merely of eroded tradition, but a sense of fractured tradition. And so, in that assembly of discontinuous fragments from an enormous number of mythic centres, there lies in post-colonial cultures a potential for revision and rethinking — one which in theory may be available everywhere in the world, but which strikes with especial force in the post-colonial context.

I think this is true, and that is why one has come into the kind of fiction one writes. In other words, you are within and without. The post-colonial situation lends itself to this withinness/withoutness, it seems to me, as no other position does, because you may live somewhere in the world and you know you are not fixed there. Wherever one lives, this whole view of partialities and the way they are excavated and transformed, releases a capacity to get these distances — absences, presences, withoutness, withinness — and these positions can change.

So in allegory, we have a mode of writing that deals inevitably with partial elements, which tradition has conned us into believing can be assembled into wholes. What has to be rethought into the basic structure of allegory is the notion that those partial elements are always in a state of flux and are always moving between frames. So that when you combine the mode with the post-colonial fact, a very powerful kind of transformation within apparent stasis takes place. The basic manoeuvre of allegory, which is transformation, gains new authority or new credence within a new kind of cultural grounding that redefines it.

I agree with that entirely. In other words, a tradition that may have seemed to be off the rails as far as ruling scholarship is concerned may be revived so profoundly that it can bear fruit of a remarkable significance that may tell us something of the tradition that is lost.

NOTE

- ¹ "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity," *New Left Review* 154 (Nov.-Dec. 1985), 124-28; "Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View of the Revival of Dantesque Scenes in Modern Fiction," Paper given at the VIIIth Annual Conference of A.I.A. (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) at the University of Turin, 29 Oct. 1985.