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Alfred López

READING “BROKEN ARCHETYPES”: THE LESSONS OF
HARRIS’S *JONESTOWN*

One of the first problems one faces when discussing the work of Wilson Harris is the utter inadequacy of conventional critical terms, the near impossibility of finding the words with which to introduce Harris to the uninitiated. By turns classified as archmodern, postcolonial, Caribbean, multicultural, his work described variously as fragmented postmodern narrative, magical realism, and “imagination run riot” (in the sense, I take it, of a literature of imaginative *excesses*, one which in effect overflows the boundaries of traditional mimetic realism), Harris’s fiction certainly defies easy categorization. It is a body of work which refuses to fit neatly into marketing categories that have dominated the last two generations of so-called “Third World” literatures: respectively, the Achebean anti-colonial or “protest” novel and the post-Naipaul novel of “ambivalence” or angst (of which most of Salman Rushdie’s output is representative, with *Midnight’s Children* the quintessential novel of postcolonial disillusionment). It comes as no surprise, then, that the relatively wide readerships enjoyed by the above-named novelists have eluded Harris; or rather he has eluded them by spurning the conventions of Western narrative fictions (which Harris has himself variously referred to as “canons of realism,” “dogmas of social realism,” and so on) in favor of a fiction constituted by “a net of associations of ‘pasts’ and ‘presents’ and ‘futures’ . . . an epic net conversant with the European conquest of the ancient Americas but antecedent to European models.”

In *Jonestown*, Harris’s latest novel, we find just such a net of associations, or what Harris calls an “archetypal fiction.” The 1978 tragedy of Jonestown is but one of the many strands of narrator Francisco Bone’s fictional “Dreambook,” only the eponymous and most immediate subject of an intricately woven web of intertexts that includes ancient Mayan cities, the Spanish conquistadors’ search for El Dorado, the biblical tale of Jonah, a colonial history of Guyana, and *Moby Dick*, to name only the most prominent elements. But to

Jonestown, by Wilson Harris. (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

the extent that the novel is “about” any single thing, its focus is powerfully upon Jonestown as an overdetermined allegory or archetype of both apocalypse *and* redemption—that is, of both the horror of the Jonestown legacy and the untapped knowledges and insights that come from confronting such horrors.

Such a journey is that of Francisco Bone, the sole survivor of Jonestown whose “Dream-book” *Jonestown* ostensibly is (the novel begins with a “Letter from Francisco Bone to W.H.,” in which Bone asks Harris to “undertake the task of editing the enclosed manuscript or book”). Harris is at perhaps his most straightforward in this “preface,” as he (via Bone) relates in some detail the aims and methods of the “Dream-book,” and offers the tersest, most visceral descriptions of the massacre to be found anywhere in the novel (“Not all drank Coca-Cola laced with cyanide. Some were shot like cattle. Men, women, and children”). From that point on, however, Bone takes on his self-declared role as a “voyager of the Imagination,” embarking on a journey that only begins with his escape from the cataclysm of Jonestown. As Harris’s fiction refuses easy categorization, so do the events of *Jonestown* defy simple exposition; but Bone’s journey can be said to begin as he lay in a clump of bushes on Jonestown’s “Day of the Dead”:

I lay in a clump of bushes like a dead man. Scarcely breathing. My head rested on a cushion of stone. I dreamt of angels ascending and descending into Jonestown. Jonestown was above me in the skeletons of the stars. The stars now at midday. Only the sunlit dead on the ground. How incredibly soft is stone when one fears flesh-and-blood!

Jonah Jones was still alive with a gun. He would appear, I knew, at any moment in the Clearing.

There was a split leaf close to my nose through which—with slightly lowered head away from my pillow—I began to count the dead bodies on the ground. They lay not far from the rude church in which they had worshipped an hour or two ago. One swore one could hear their voices still rising into the Heart of the South American Forest that seemed now in me, yet as remote from me, as the Milky Way blotted out by sunlight.

Already one can begin to glimpse the nature of Harris's "archetypal fiction," as Jim-as-Jonah Jones soon dies in "the Whale of the Sun" at the hands of Deacon, another of Jonah and Bones' Jonestown colleagues. But *Jonestown* is less about the apocalypse itself than its aftermath, or more precisely about the fact that, for Bone, there is an aftermath at all. And for Bone such an aftermath (or *after-math*, not only a reckoning but literally a calculation of what has happened and his own responsibility for/complicity with it) must necessarily begin with the fact of his survival: "WHY ME? WHY HAVE I SURVIVED?" And then: "Dying ages do not entirely die when there are diminutive survivors." The most traditional element of this otherwise dense, elusive, labyrinthine novel is its narrator's search for meaning: the meaning of Jonestown, of its place within an entire history of fallen civilizations, of his survival of that fall, and by novel's end of the very categories "meaning" and "history."

All of which is to say that, even by Harris's standards, *Jonestown* can be a difficult read. At 234 pages, it is among Harris's longer works (his best-known novel, *Palace of the Peacock*, is a little over half that length at 117 pages); yet given its scope and ambition, that such a novel isn't closer to double that length serves as an indication of the density of its prose. The "web of associations" that Harris weaves through the text carries a cumulative effect; key terms such as "Memory Theater," "the Predator," and "Carnival Lord Death" accumulate meanings and contexts as the novel progresses, to the point where their very mention conjures up the most complex play of associations this side of *Finnegans Wake*. This interplay of archetypes and intertexts can become daunting at times, as it does in the longer chapters and especially during Bone/Deacon's climactic moment of "judgment" at the end. But the novel both demands and rewards careful reading, and one must be patient enough to sift through its many narrative shifts and transformations—Bone's journey "back from the future" to the Albuoytown of his childhood, the multiplicity of Marie Antoinettes, Bone's own transformation into Deacon, etc., etc.—to experience the fragmented richness of Harris/Bone's "composite epic."

Francisco Bone confesses to having been not only a disciple of Jim Jones ("Jonah" for the purposes of this archetypal fiction) but also a close associate, who nevertheless does not partake of the mass poisoning and escapes with his life as Jonestown's sole "diminutive survivor." The question of Bone's complicity in the tragedy of Jonestown, then, and his own ambivalence as he journeys toward a reckoning with that complicity, is of crucial importance in the novel and provides some of its most powerful moments. In *Jonestown's*

long final chapter, Bone “becomes” or inhabits (or as Harris/Bone puts it, assumes the “flesh-and-blood Mask” of) Deacon, a college friend who, together with Bone, help Jones found his ill-fated community in the rain forests of Guyana. Bone’s moment of reckoning conflates with Deacon’s in the novel’s climactic scene of judgment, in which Bone acknowledges his place in the web of associations that culminate in the tragedy of Jonestown:

“I am not Deacon,” I cried for the last time in the Play.

“Who then is to be tried and judged? If not Deacon, who? Does no one claim the part? Is everyone innocent, no one guilty or responsible?”

I was still. I was a mere Colonial. Not an Imperialist. My limbs had aged nevertheless under the burden of Eclipses of Memory. Are Colonials the only potential creators of the genius of Memory theatre? I was weak but I had gained the other side of the Dream.

“Who then are we to judge?”

“Judge me,” I said at last. “I am here before you. I have nothing. I am poor. Judge me. It is no accident.”

Nor is the fact of *Jonestown* ending with Bone’s moment of self-recognition an accident. More than just the logical conclusion of any such *bildungsroman*, in Harris’s hands it is the literary concept of the “novel of maturation” itself which is transformed into archetype during the course of the narrative—a wise and telling allegory of the journey faced by so many nations of the so-called “Third World” as they learn to reclaim and confront their own colonial and pre-colonial histories. To read the residues of the colonial legacy that linger in the postcolonial present, to question our collective stakes in, and complicity with, “the Predator” in all its manifestations (and for Harris there is almost no end to these in the current “mass-media reductive age”), such is finally the task before the “diminutive survivors” of Jonestowns everywhere. And for those who accept the task, those who would partake of the reading and writing of such pasts and futures, there will be books such as these to challenge and infuriate and comfort.