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**‘A Strange Synchronicity’: Lawrence Scott’s  
Landscapes in *Aelred’s Sin*.**

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**Abstract**

*Aelred’s Sin*, Scott’s second novel, tells the story of a younger man, Robert de la Borde, coming to terms with the death of his older brother, Jean-Marc. Robert also learns about his brother’s homosexuality and is thus forced to confront his own inherited homophobia. At the age of nineteen, in the early 1960s, Jean-Marc leaves his home, Les Deux Isles (Scott’s fictional name for Trinidad & Tobago), and joins a monastery in England in the hope of fulfilling his quest for spiritual perfection. This is where a simultaneous rediscovery of landscapes takes place. Jean-Marc’s eagerness to learn the language of the English landscape reflects his quest to find a ‘way to sanction a love the world as yet had no name for except names of hate, ridicule and disowning’.

My reading of *Aelred’s Sin* is work in progress and forms part of a chapter I’m currently drafting for my PhD thesis. This paper explores Scott’s use of landscape through the concepts of antiphony and synchronicity – features that are both complementary in that they encourage continuous dialogue and interpretation across cultures and civilisations, but they also have different uses. They both function at the level of the historical: the novel shows how cultures and landscapes are linked through migration, but I am suggesting that synchronicity fosters dialogue at a more profound level. I look to the works of Gerard-Manley Hopkins and Wilson Harris to explore these concepts further and to analyse how they illuminate Scott’s use of landscape.

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## ‘A Strange Synchronicity’: Lawrence Scott’s Landscapes in *Aelred’s Sin*.

### I

For those of you who aren’t familiar with Lawrence Scott’s second novel, *Aelred’s Sin*, I’ll begin with a brief synopsis of the story. The book is about a young man, Robert de la Borde, coming to terms with the death of his older brother, Jean-Marc – also known by the monastic name of Aelred. Aelred was a medieval Cistercian monk – I’ll talk about the significance of this later on. At the age of nineteen, in the early 1960s, Jean-Marc leaves his home, Les Deux Isles which is Scott’s fictional name for Trinidad & Tobago, and joins a monastery in England in the hope of fulfilling his quest for spiritual perfection. However, as the story unfolds we learn that his departure is fuelled by the death of his first lover, Ted. Both boys are brutally bullied because of their relationship. Ted dies in a diving accident trying to prove his “manhood” and the adults in the community keep the ‘unutterable’ (the boys’ sexuality) hidden beneath the surface of society.<sup>1</sup> The novel is frame-narrated and collated by Robert who comes to England shortly after Jean-Marc’s death and this is where the book begins. At the same time that Robert learns about his brother’s homosexuality, he is forced to confront his own inherited homophobia. In consequence, he begins to learn anew about their mutual past which in turn transforms his narrow heterosexual approach to difference.

### II

This paper explores Scott’s use of landscape through the concept of synchronicity. *Aelred’s Sin* raises issues concerning sexual and racial biases but is primarily concerned with the act of writing itself and the power of language therefore, synchronicity is significant in that it encourages continuous dialogue and interpretation across traditions, cultures and civilisations. However, the narrative creates dialogue at different levels. There is the way in which it functions at a historical level: the novel shows how cultures and landscapes are linked through migration, for example, colonisation, but it also occurs at a more profound or primal level, which is why Wilson Harris’ ideas are so pertinent here. Harris’ theory of synchronicity adapts the Jungian idea that there are commonalities between peoples of different civilisations and cultures revealed through the ‘collective unconscious’: the parts of the mind considered responsible for producing dreams, visions, myths and religious ideas. Harris renames the collective unconscious the ‘universal unconscious’ extending Jung’s application of his concept to the human psyche and faculty into: ‘voices that echo within the roots of nature as from the ancestral dead, from rivers, from rocks, from birds and other species, from the rhythm of landscapes, skiescapes...’<sup>2</sup>

In *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* synchronicity is defined as ‘the simultaneous occurrence of events which appear meaningfully related but have no discoverable causal connection’.<sup>3</sup> It implies ‘strange’ or mysterious connections beyond the cause and effect logic of history: that which cannot be explained away

rationally or definitively. When Robert speaks of 'a strange synchronicity' with reference to a clearly discernible pattern or impulse: 'denial, punishment, death', in the histories and stories of the novel's central characters, for me it signals the deep and complex levels of meaning and reality that the book presents and which link to Scott's concern with how stories are interpreted and reinterpreted (AS 307). Synchronicity is considered here as a formal and thematic approach to difference. It is a useful way of looking at how the novel is constructed: the brother's stories unfold alongside one another as Robert responds to his brother's life and their childhood experiences in the form of an associative or antiphonal chapter arrangement, and as a means of interpreting its ideological and ethical approach to difference.

In the prologue Robert writes: 'allow me this hagiographic beginning, this preface to a brother's story. One story lies within another' which is indicative of the multi-layered narrative texture of *Aelred's Sin* (AS 24). In order to access the multi-layered narrative in *Aelred's Sin* and to help me explain its effects I'm going to talk about a chapter called 'The Portrait'. This particular aspect of Scott's novel pays homage to David Dabydeen whose fiction and non-fiction both approach paintings as texts to be deconstructed and reconstructed. The original house where the monastery stands was built on the proceeds of slavery. This is where we begin to see parallels between the novel's two main settings – the West Indian Estate called Malgrétoute and the once great house at Ashton Park; the former based on the idea of the latter. The example I've just given is synchronicity at a historical level. Jean-Marc discovers these linked histories through a fascination he develops with the portrait. I've got a copy of the portrait that influences this aspect of Scott's work. It's by John Riley and the title is *Charles Seymour – 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Somerset* and Dabydeen refers to it in his work: *Hogarth's Blacks*.<sup>4</sup>

The portrait shows a small black boy kneeling 'in a decorative manner at the duke's feet' and is described by Jean-Marc as 'diminutive [and] doll-like ... 'smiling up to the duke [who does not acknowledge his presence but] looks out over the world beyond' (AS 78). This representation of course inscribes the Duke's superiority while the boy is reduced to little more than a fashion accessory or toy: his eyes a reflection of 'the master's dog which knelt at his feet' (AS 78). As Jean-Marc gazes into the portrait he describes his face 'superimposed upon that of the boy whose face shone from beneath, so that the black face seemed to be his own' (AS 79). At this point simultaneous recalled memories tumble onto the page. Jean-Marc remembers the accusations of his black friends: 'all you French Creole', Espinet says, mocking his "superior" social status. This merges with memories of his black nurse Toinette who would tell stories of Mungo – an African boy who is transported to the Caribbean and who tries to escape slavery. A little further on in the novel Jean-Marc discovers a grave marked with the initial J and begins to create a slave narrative of the boy in the picture, whom he names Jordan.<sup>5</sup>

For me the portrait is like a gateway or pool through which synchronous dialogues at a primal level emerge. Lee and Hewson note how both picture and viewer encapsulate the triangular trade and in consequence the 'shared histories and movements' redolent of what Gilroy terms the 'Black Atlantic'.<sup>6</sup> However, we can also approach the portrait, and indeed the narrative, in terms of Wilson Harris' concept of cross-culturalism which suggests that there are latent connections and parallels between

seemingly disparate and adversarial cultures and civilisations, and that cross-culturality occurs at the moment when one civilisation recognises itself in the culture-bed of the other.<sup>7</sup> In order to explore these hidden connections we need to tap into ‘the diverse resources of our entire humanity’ if we are to cope with and possibly transform ‘crisis, conflict and deprivation’, as Harris puts it.<sup>8</sup> I think this sheds light on the relation between Jean-Marc and the portrait in that he recognises himself as both oppressed and oppressor as he gazes into the picture, in other words self-recognition in the other: that is in Espinet, Jordan and Mungo. This is one example of how the novel highlights the complex relationships between colonised and coloniser.<sup>9</sup>

The portrait and the story created from it (Jordan’s) are a source of strength and comfort to Jean-Marc because both he and the boy are – in varying degrees – victims of forced migration. Jean-Marc draws connections between the boy running away from slavery and his own escape from a homophobic community (Les Deux Isles), while simultaneously using Jordan’s story, as a means of recuperating his own past and thus coming to terms with a complex self.

Jean-Marc’s imaginative rendering of the story of Jordan creates an alternative picture from the framed version in the portrait so that what Dabydeen calls the ‘polite image’ of art as a reflection of society is undone and a more disturbing story of alienation, loneliness and the struggle for survival emerges.<sup>10</sup> The violence and rape in Jordan’s story mirrors the way in which Ted and Jean-Marc are beaten and sexually abused by the schoolboys in Les Deux Isles. This synchronous pool, then, connects the cultures, and civilisations of Jordan and Jean-Marc at a primal level: Jean-Marc relates his own fears of alienation and his desire for safety to those of the runaway slave.

Importantly, in Jordan’s story, as in Jean-Marc’s, there is tolerance and understanding that Joe says ‘must be the basis of our change’ (AS 416). This reflects the purpose of Jean-Marc’s (and Scott’s) desire to excavate discredited or hidden histories. The little-known work of Aelred of Rievaulx is the kernel of Scott’s story. Aelred’s *Spiritual Friendship* and *The Mirror of Chastity* are “hidden” works which receive little attention outside monastic and specialist circles. Scott talks about how, today, the work of Aelred remains under lock and key in some Trappist libraries. Aelred’s writings are open to much interpretation, speculation and controversy because, says Scott, ‘[they] explore, amongst other things, male homosexual love and its integration with the quest for God in the monastic life’.<sup>11</sup> Aelred’s works, as well other intertexts (*The Song of Songs* and *Pied Beauty* by Gerard Manley Hopkins), are further examples of the novel’s synchronicity – always present alongside the contemporary story. By aligning his story, which in itself is controversial, with other ambiguous texts Scott is saying something about the importance of interpretation and the need to constantly engage with discredited or contentious narratives and discourses however much they challenge our beliefs or ideals. The novel’s epigraph is significant here. It reads ‘a life is not how it was but how it was interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold’. Furthermore, the work of Aelred is another indication of the novel’s cross-culturality in that the dilemmas and issues concerning religion and sexuality in medieval times are similar to those of the contemporary world.

In a 'personal reading' of *Witchbroom* (Scott's first novel) and *Aelred's Sin* Hena Maes Jelinek notes that the protagonist and narrator of *Witchbroom* is stimulated by "living landscapes" (in the Harrisian sense) and 'by varieties of sensations [that] lead to discovery'.<sup>12</sup> This type of discovery, she says, can also be found in *Aelred's Sin*, and I have already explored this in my discussion of the portrait which I think awakens a complex sense of self in Jean-Marc, but what about the concept of "living landscapes"? This is something Jelinek does not discuss in relation to *Aelred's Sin* and yet I think it has some relevance. I want to look at the penultimate chapter called 'The Storm' to discuss how we might read Scott's work in relation to the concept of 'living landscapes' and to what effect.

Firstly, it's helpful to remind ourselves what Harris means by 'living landscapes'? For Harris the landscape is alive; it is a 'living text' rather than a passive or uniform area subject to manipulation. Harris develops this sense of landscape over a long period of time working as a hydrographic surveyor in the interior of Guyana: a landscape that resonates with the voices of dead cultures. These ancient tongues which are deeply embedded in the English language in South America have been eclipsed by centuries and generations of biases and a language that corresponds, which means that novels dealing with landscape tend to reflect these biases and are thus one-sided rather than dialogic. Harris' language attempts to open all of our senses to the landscape so that we begin to realise that there are many different thresholds into it, ensuring that we see and hear things differently. Scott's language does not reveal connections and relationships in the same way as Harris' and yet there is a sense in which the landscape is alive.<sup>13</sup>

In the 'Storm' chapter Jean-Marc is highly sensitised emotionally and because of a tranquillising drug enforced on him by the senior monks so that he will not disturb the other novices with his 'radical' ideas. I should explain that Jean-Marc is threatened with expulsion from the monastery should his love for Edward, a fellow monk, cause 'a scandal'. It is not so much the act that disturbs the Abbott but Jean-Marc's refusal to interpret his love for Edward as a 'problem'. His meeting with the Abbott reveals how there is no space for dialogue so that despite Jean-Marc's dedication to his Faith and his protestations that love (including sexual love) is good rather than 'carnal' he faces this ultimatum.<sup>14</sup> The idea of leaving the monastery is unimaginable to Jean-Marc who knows 'no other life' and who 'had never imagined anything different since Ted and he had been so forcibly torn apart' (AS 399). I want to call on Harris' notion that language has resources which come from the land – in this example they are to be found in a stream. I'm hoping that this will demonstrate how Scott seems to activate the 'living landscape'. This is a passage from the book (Aelred is staring into a stream which flows into a pond):

As Aelred stared into the stream flowing over the blue stone, he saw his own face beneath the running water. His face was black. It was blue-black and it stared back at him. It altered its stare, its look. His face was the face of Ted. It was the face of Jordan (AS 407).

The pond invokes synchronous histories of persecution without, as Scott states, 'equating sufferings in any simple sense'.<sup>15</sup> Sarah Lawson-Welsh refers to this as 'a kinship [where] Aelred's perception of their common, but very different experiences of

“outsidership” at Ashton Park’ is conveyed.<sup>16</sup> In light of this we might also think back to the portrait as a kind of ‘living landscape’.

The stream and pond conjures up ‘a running figure’ whose ‘instinct ... was escape, to run away. Its horizon was freedom. It ran to maroon itself in the darkness’ (AS 408). The word ‘maroon’ is crucial here in that it suggests an individual left isolated in a desolate place and a descendant of a fugitive slave in, for example, the Caribbean so that once more bridges form between two landscapes. The figure appears through a vision in which dual deaths (Ted’s and Jordan’s) are invoked. This represents the second revelatory moment, which reinforces the first, and which culminates in self-realisation.<sup>17</sup> The first revelatory moment is brought about by a storm. Jean-Marc, distraught by his meeting with the Abbott, is: ‘running now, running, hooded, and wildly pulling up his habit above his knees so as not to trip and fall’, so that he too becomes the running figure of his vision (AS 403). In this powerful and dramatic elemental scene in which ‘black rain’ and ‘lightning’ electrifies the sky we are told that ‘Ashton Park, the Ashton Park he knew, was transformed’ (AS 404). This prefigures Jean-Marc’s own transformation. He looks back at the monastery from a distance and the elemental power of the retreating storm symbolises ‘the perils of the future that lay ahead for Aelred’ (AS 405). We learn later that these perils take shape in the form of social ostracism in the outside world and a disease which is magnified through ignorance and fear. In the aftermath of the storm and in the light of a new day Jean-Marc finally understands why he came to Ashton Park:

What it looked like from the *outside* was safety. He used to think, When I become a monk I will be different. I will be good. I will be perfect. The fear and guilt which grew out of a vision of Ted in his coffin would be absolved. He would be new. Ensnaring desire would be replaced by perfect love. (AS 405)

This chapter incorporates the notion of narratives or discourses written in or on the landscape and also the way in which the landscape writes (with a w), and importantly “rights” the body, that is to say how imaginative insight transforms readings of the body. The latter point contrasts the way in which the church and state seek to control the body.

Finally, I want to return to the running figure that Jean-Marc envisions in order to clarify this particular use of landscape in *Aelred’s Sin*.<sup>18</sup> The figure:

Sought to inhabit animal or plant so that it might live freely in this world of men. It sought to be nothing but shadow, part of the air, an illusion of the light. It was learning to prefer this element to the light of the world that had enslaved it to a life of cruelty and pain, had enslaved it as a part of commerce, as a chattel, as a crop: coffee, tobacco, sugar, cocoa, molasses, rum. (AS 408)

The above quotation reminds us of Harris’ concept of landscape in that it suggests that there are multiple forms of being – inner worlds, or, using his phrase ‘inner realities’ formed, for example, through an intuitive relationship with the landscape, so that one can transform totalising systems and ideologies. At a recent conference dedicated to Wilson Harris’, Fred D’Aguiar suggests that the Caribbean writer’s engagement with the landscape necessitates a passing through it and at the same time allowing the

landscape to pass through the body so that some kind of change takes place. This is a useful way of understanding the above quotation. The running figure becomes elemental in preference to being part of the “enlightened” world which, of course, refers to ‘western’ Enlightenment; the way in which scientific law, rationality and religion provided the justifications for human bondage. The figure, then, accesses the irrational world. Similarly, after his vision, Jean-Marc forms a bond with the elements: ‘he felt he belonged here with the rain, grass and mud’ (AS 409). The suggestion here is that both belonging and identity is elemental, that is to say that it is fluid and mutable. Jean-Marc’s attempt to fix his identity within a socially/religiously acceptable framework fails because, as his reference to Thomas à Kempis reveals: “a change of place did not change a man” rather ‘he had brought his nature here on to the ship’ (the ship being a metaphor for the church as a protective space transporting Jean-Marc from the ‘dangers of homosexuality’).

The “sin” of *Aelred’s Sin*, as Jean-Marc understands it, would be the failure to reconcile the multifaceted, ambivalent and contradictory sides of his identity – his ‘tropical collective colonial unconscious’ which both fears and loves the other; his sexuality and his faith. The fragmented nature of the novel does not mean that the reader cannot reach an understanding of Jean-Marc’s and Robert’s pasts; on the contrary the kind of syncretic completeness achieves what Jean-Marc desires which is to ‘yoke together the disjunctions of identity’ (AS 433). It is reasonable to suggest that this is something the book achieves through simultaneous or synchronous narrative and narration, which as I’ve tried to show applies to different levels of dialogue. Furthermore, synchronicity enables us to see, in Harris’ words, ‘the fiction of absolute knowledge’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Scott, *Aelred’s Sin*, (London: Allison & Busby, 1998), p.40. Further references to this work, hereafter ‘AS’, will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. by A.J.M.Bundy, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p.201

<sup>3</sup> Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble, eds, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (Oxford University Press, 1996)

<sup>4</sup> David Dabydeen, *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art*, (Manchester University Press, 1987)

<sup>5</sup> The name Jordan is significant here because it implies rebirth and multiplicity. Jesus, as the Bible reveals, is baptised here and the river itself has its source in several springs in the North and East of the country. It is reasonable to suggest that the portrait is the site at which Jean-Marc is re-born. It will become evident in my discussion further on that, like the River Jordan, Jean-Marc becomes, to use Gilroy’s phrase, both ‘routed’ and rooted.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Easton and Kelly Hewson, ‘Returning to Repair: Resolving Dilemmas of the Post-Colonial Queer in Lawrence Scott’s *Aelred’s Sin*’, (unpublished paper, Calgary University, 1999). .

<sup>7</sup> *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, *ibid.*, p.38

<sup>8</sup> *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, *ibid.*, p. 58 & p.89

<sup>9</sup> Amy and Toinette provide further examples of how the novel thinks outside orthodox postcolonial discourse.

<sup>10</sup> *David Dabydeen, Hogarth’s Blacks*, *ibid.*, p.32

<sup>11</sup> ‘Face to Faith: Man’s love for man’, *Guardian*, 19 September 1998, p. (unknown)

<sup>12</sup> ‘Lawrence Scott’s Caribbeaness: A Personal Reading of *Witchbroom* and *Aelred’s Sin*’ in *The Vitality of West Indian Literature: Caribbean & Indian Essays*, Narasimhaiah, C.D et al (Ddhvanyaloka: unknown, 2000), p.122-123, 132.

<sup>13</sup> What I’m trying to say rather clumsily is that Scott’s voice is not Harris’ and neither does it desire to be as the creative writer’s aim is to develop his/her own unique voice/style but that both authors recognise that language and landscape are linked. See footnote 16

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Marc reflects on the meaning of the word carnal: ‘it meant meat. It meant dog, because dog was *canis* and it sounded the same’ and its parallels with the word his peers at school used to describe him ‘buller ... it was wrong to be a buller man. Carnal meant dogs and bulls, what he saw the cows doing in

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the fields, backing, bulling each other ... but he was not an animal. This was pure. And, anyway, what animals did was good' (AS 402). I quote this in detail because Scott is pointing again to the 'meaning words confer on things' (AS 401). This points to the need for a renewed language to describe homoerotic love in the religious and secular worlds (queers is another word Scott draws on). For Harris' this language is found in living landscapes. Scott's poetic language reveals a reverence for its synchronous landscapes and as such seems to transform the language of bias and intolerance.

<sup>15</sup> E-mail from Lawrence Scott to Emily Wroe.

<sup>16</sup> 'Out in the Open: 'under-represented sexualities' in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and Lawrence Scott's *Aelred's Sin* (1998), (Scott to advise source), pp208-231 (p.215).

<sup>17</sup> 'Lawrence Scott's Caribbeanness', *ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>18</sup> Scott is one of many writers from the Caribbean and elsewhere who reflects on the 'colonial image' of England in comparison to the experiences of arrival in that landscape and the strangeness of rediscovering ones world in another. As Jean-Marc learns the language of the English landscape in order to give it meaning, he also rediscovers his past written in the landscape of his childhood home, Les Deux Isles (AS 98). Language and landscape are thus inextricably linked in the novel, as Jean-Marc suggests 'words are a world' (AS 98). Similarly, when Robert comes to England he finds his world in his brother's journals and is forced to recall memories which have hitherto been too painful and shameful to recall. As the stories unfold it becomes apparent that Robert became embroiled in the bullying that affects Jean-Marc and which is linked to Ted's death. Robert feels he betrayed his brother and hopes that 'because words were important to him, this [meaning the story] will make a difference' (AS 246). The creative act of writing is thus cathartic as well as symbolic of the potential for social change. Robert borrows his brother's words and describes how they begin to merge with his own. This brings about a process of displacement and transformation in that Robert's narrow heterosexual outlook is broadened. Jean-Marc's awareness of the power of words to construct meaning reflects his quest to find, as he says, 'a way to sanction a love the world as yet had no name for, except names of hate, ridicule and disowning' (AS 415). Scott's use of landscape, then, reflects the notion of 'migrating for meaning' which in the context of the novel involves re-interpreting, amongst other things, the landscape. I think this quotation clarifies my point: 'the new blossom suggested other colours, other shades, other names: poui, bougainvillea, flamboyante. In his mind the colours were too lurid for this light; smells were too rank for this soft powdery air' (AS 98). There is this sense in which learning the differences between various colours, names and scents of flowers enables Jean-Marc to embrace his own difference and to make sense of his identity and experiences in another space. The issue of belonging mirrors Jean-Marc's own desire to belong, he asks 'where in the world is there a place for us?' (AS 356). This phrase has racial as well as sexual connotations, for Jean-Marc's experience in both landscapes reflects the 'creole dilemma'. In England he's marked an exotic and in Les Deux Isles an 'Englishman'. For Jean-Marc learning the language of landscape is symbolic of the need to 'make meaning' of his, racial, spiritual and sexual identity, which have so far been at odds with one another.

Scott's synchronous worlds have meaning beyond issues familiar in postcolonial literature: the disruption of national and essentialist boundaries and categories highlighted through terms such as hybridity, transculturality and multiculturalism, and extends its connections to the mysterious or Divine through landscape. Robert writes: 'he had entered this new world and was learning to name it, but through the poetry he was reading he read the landscape with exhilaration and gleaned the glory of his Lord' (AS 178).

<sup>19</sup> *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, *ibid.*, p.61

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