The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel

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The possible existence of a golden city in the South American heartland, has haunted men's imagination since the days when the conquistadores were hoping to make it the centre of the third and richest province of the Spanish Empire. The legend told of a king who every year covered his body with gold dust and dived into a lake. Quesada, the conqueror of Colombia, who was hoping to reach Manoa, succeeded in having himself appointed by the King of Spain as Governor and Captain-General of El Dorado, Guiana, the Great Manoa and the Island of Trinidad. Before dying of leprosy, he bequeathed the title to his nephew, Antonio de Berrio, and enjoined him to pursue the quest. Berrio, then a sixty-year old soldier, came to the New World to claim his inheritance, made Trinidad the base for his search and launched three unsuccessful expeditions before he was made a prisoner by Raleigh and left to die on an island on the Orinoco river. The legend was thereafter associated with the name of Raleigh, who appears to have been quite convinced of the existence of Manoa and wrote enthusiastically of El Dorado in his *Discovery of Guiana*. This was in 1595. Raleigh did not come back to Guyana until twenty-two years later, and the disastrous failure of his second expedition cost him his life.

The details of the story as it is told by V. S. Naipaul in his recently published book *The Loss of El Dorado*[1] do not sound very romantic. If Naipaul's interpretation of events is correct, the modern history of Trinidad, which began inauspiciously with an act of treachery on Raleigh's part towards the Spaniards continued so for three hundred years. Through the personal history of individuals who broke down one after another during their stay on the island, Naipaul shows the transformation of a dream into a mediocre reality. The myth of El Dorado served twice as an incentive to the colonization of Trinidad. The first time was when Berrio, then Raleigh, made it the launching ground for their quest. The second time was two hundred years later, when Trinidad, already separated from Guyana, and a Spanish province in itself, was conquered by the British. The main purpose of the latter was to overthrow Spanish power in the New World and to make

Trinidad a trading post for commerce between South America and London as well as a profitable plantation island.

Naipaul's narrative concentrates on the two highlights of Trinidadian history. In a sense, the second rush on Trinidad as part of the El Dorado province at the beginning of the nineteenth century was a revival of Raleigh's dream. He was not himself lured by gold mines so much as by the power and glory they promised England and by the wish to create a colonial empire. No greatness ever came to Trinidad, and the dream was wrecked a second time because of individual inefficiency, greed, cruelty, and hypocrisy. The colonization of the island was always a haphazard business, hampered by the conflicting interests of Spanish, French, and English settlers, by the intricacies of the slave society and by the abolitionist movement in England, already active when the English took over the island. Governors and officials apparently used Trinidad as a stepping-stone to better positions or to the acquisition of personal fortunes to the detriment of the island itself. It was thus a combination of personal ambition, lack of vision, and pettiness that set Trinidad on an irreversible course of mediocrity and nothingness. Even the once dynamic English radical community lost its impetus and for the next hundred and fifty years Trinidad was a remote municipality in which the complex cultural drives of the mother country were reduced to the simplicities of money and race. 'As a British colony', Naipaul writes, 'Trinidad was as much an error and a failure as it had been as part of the Spanish Empire, "these provinces of El Dorado" '.[2]

Berrio and Raleigh had set a pattern of failure: the former died a lunatic, the latter a deluded man. After them, the island developed into a 'land of failures', as Naipaul calls it in *The Middle Passage*, an 'unimportant, uncreative, cynical place' a place with 'no sense of community and no dignity'.[2]

The Loss of El Dorado is not the work of an historian. Nor is it a work of fiction, though Naipaul's portrayal of real people definitely bears the novelist's stamp, but of a novelist for whom human beings are in this particular instance either inefficient or bad. However, since it is partly an imaginative work, the work of an artist rather than a scholar, and one in which the mode of presentation is predominantly satirical, its relevance to his fiction is obvious: the one complements the other, and his description of the past in *The Loss of El Dorado* accounts for the picture of Trinidad that emerges from his novels.

The discrepancy between men's longing for material wealth or spiritual fulfilment represented by the myth of El Dorado and the pitiful outcome of their quest is nowhere better illustrated than in Mr

Biswas, the anti-hero of the novel which remains so far Naipaul's most impressive achievement.[3] Mr Biswas is a little man whose attempts to acquire dignity and self-respect through his work are repeatedly frustrated. A descendant of Indian indentured labourers brought to Trinidad to replace the Negro slaves and contribute to the enrichment of the island, he is presented as a fairly typical product of his environment. Like the world to which he belongs, he remains hopelessly amateurish, torn between fear and insecurity on the one hand and his tragi-comic audacity on the other. The depressing squalor of village life in Trinidad, the ramshackle architecture of the city and the utter absence of beauty and comfort are symbols of the futility and meanness of the colonial society. The double failure of Mr Biswas to become successful and to give his life significance is the failure of the island to come up to the norms of efficiency and achievement implied in the novel as an impossible ideal.

In Naipaul's latest novel, *The Mimic Men*, the sense of lost opportunity and wastefulness is even more obtrusive. It is a story of disorder at all levels, based on fear, the inescapable legacy of the slave society which makes people suspicious of one another. It corrupts them from their very childhood, making them dishonest, irresponsible impersonators who perpetuate the island's tradition of inefficiency. Significantly, the narrator, a former politician forced into exile, is a would-be historian who once intended to analyse the restlessness and disorder in the world at large. Instead, he is left to write his own history which, to some extent, is also that of his native island of Isabella, presumably Trinidad. The central symbol in the novel is that of shipwreck, which applies both to the narrator's life and to the island cut off from the stream of life in the real world. 'To be born on an island like Isabella,' Naipaul writes, 'an obscure New World Transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder.'[4] And further: '. . . in a society like ours, fragmented, inorganic, [there was] no link between man and the landscape.'[5] The inner chaos on the island arises from 'the unnatural bringing together of people who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors'.[6]

In spite of Naipaul's restrained and sensitive style *The Mimic Men* falls short of his previous achievement because the narrator comments on his past and on the state of Isabella but does not always bring them to life. Even the shipwreck metaphor is explained and not worked out in the narrative. But this novel is more explicitly than any of his work an exploration of spiritual disease in individual and society. The satirical impact of Naipaul's fiction is due to the discrepancy between

men's aspirations and their ineffectual, often comic, attempts to achieve them. The vision of an El Dorado hopelessly out of reach is always implicit in his novels. In retrospect it is even possible to see that all the characters of Naipaul's novels form a long gallery of 'Mimic Men' whether we think of Ramsumair in *The Mystic Masseur*, of Harbans in *The Suffrage of Elvira*, or of all those who achieve a fake success in their second-hand world. When his characters are genuine, they are inevitably failures, and not even tragic ones because there can be no tragedy in a society which, in the author's words, 'denies itself heroes'.[7]

This attitude is very similar to Evelyn Waugh's approach to his characters in his pre-war novels. Like Waugh, Naipaul satirizes his characters for having no fixed standards of conduct and for their comic misunderstanding of the benefits of civilization. Like the English writer, he sees his countrymen involved in a hopeless conflict between civilization and barbarism. But Waugh's satire arose from his reverence for the English past and English traditions, whereas Naipaul believes that the barbarism of his countrymen is due to the island's want of a historical past. This is after all logical, if we remember that Naipaul always questions the value of achievement. Even Mr Stone thinks, 'All action, all creation was a betrayal of feeling and truth'.[8] My impression, however, is that his obvious contempt for the colonial society is typical of his attitude to men in general. For all his assertions that real life, fed on values and achievement, is to be found in the old world, his picture of London in *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* is not very attractive. In *The Mimic Men* the disorder of Isabella also stands for the disorder which prevails in the world at large. If Trinidad, as part of the province of El Dorado, did not come up to men's expectations, it is because they themselves never live up to their dreams. According to Naipaul, 'All landscapes eventually turn to land, the gold of the imagination to the lead of reality'.[9]

Not all Caribbean writers look upon El Dorado as a myth which generated only disillusion and a second-rate way of life. Nor do they necessarily consider their history as something to be ashamed of. Some of them have explored and re-interpreted their Caribbean past, and made this search for roots, a necessary if painful, requisite for self-knowledge *and* achievement. The myth of El Dorado was given a new significance by such writers, who made it a symbol for a new quest closely related to the history and landscape of the country in which the legend may have originated – Guyana.

The history of that other part of the El Dorado province has been reconstructed in Edgar Mittelholzer's *Kaywana Trilogy*, which retraces the development of the country from the time of Raleigh's second

expedition to the twentieth century. In spite of its shortcomings, particularly the author's inability to deal with the moral problems he illustrates, this saga offers a fairly clear picture of the workings of the slave society and of the changing relationship between slave and master in the course of two centuries. Most important of all, it accounts for what Wilson Harris has called the 'complex womb', i.e. the composite ancestry of the Guyanese people which in the eyes of many appears today as an obstacle to the creation of a national consciousness. As a tale in which violence and sexual aberrations of all kinds are predominant features, Mittelholzer's trilogy might equally have produced a picture of lost El Dorado. But it evokes a sense of achievement even if the courage and purposefulness of the Van Groenwegel family are sometimes romanticized. In a sense this work illustrates the duality of the symbol. For, obviously, whether El Dorado suggested gold mines or a colonial empire to those who were looking for it, their quest was associated with a kind of idealism even when it was motivated by greed and involved cruelty and exploitation. This was already true of Raleigh, as clearly appears from the *The Discovery of Guiana*, and it is also true of the modern 'pork-knocker', as the Guyanese gold-miner is called, who is said to lose his heart to the jungle and never becomes rich.

It is perhaps not surprising that the myth of El Dorado should keep haunting the Guyanese imagination: it is still nourished by the existing deposits of gold and by the country's geographical complexion. Guyana must always be discovered anew, and the call of El Dorado is also the call of the unknown. Almost inevitably, the sheer physical hardships of the journey into the forest submit the traveller to a test, or a process of initiation, of a moral kind, even when idealism is completely absent from the initial purpose of the quest. Now, the journey through the forest, through an unknown underworld, is a commonplace symbol of moral or spiritual trial. But as a way of access to El Dorado and what it stands for, it has become the instrument of a new approach in the exploration of man's consciousness and of the conflicting values of life in the Caribbean. For the Guyanese writers in particular, even though the myth is an essential part of their history, the search for El Dorado implies more than the remembrance of the past. The myth remains as much a challenge as it ever was. The backward trip it invites man to undertake through an undefiled world does not merely evoke a particular period of history; it is a return to the very origins of the world. As we shall see, by discovering a new world, man feels he is given a new chance to start all over again. That is why the myth is so often related to the notion of creation and why

it urges man to look to the future as much as to the past. Indeed, the writer whose characters travel up the river, which is also the river of time, is less concerned with the past as such than with the relation between man and the world he discovers. He may account for that relation in the past, for the kind of community created by those who came or were brought from all over the world to master the land, but there is always present the potentiality of, and the urging to, future achievement. Past, present, and future are inseparable in the imaginative experience inspired by the myth.

The first novel with which I wish to illustrate this new approach is not the work of a Guyanese. *The Lost Steps*[10] was written by the Cuban novelist, Alejo Carpentier, but it exemplifies both the enduring fascination of the myth on Caribbean writers and its universal appeal. Travelling to the heart of the South American continent, the narrator moves back to the original world and during the journey develops a new sensibility which will enable him to escape the cold intellectualism and sensuality of the modern technological age. He is a musical composer who, out of boredom and to satisfy a whim of his mistress, agrees to go in search of rare musical instruments used by Indians in the jungle. As he is of South American origin, this trip is a return to his own past, but it soon becomes a pilgrimage through the past of humanity during which he gradually casts away the false values he has acquired in the intellectual circles of a big American city. His development is woven into the thick analytical texture of a narrative which teems with his views on the meaning of art and life, as these are aroused by the circumstances of the journey. As he enters the jungle, however, the narrator's attention concentrates on the relationship between his discovery of an unspoiled world and his own awakening as a man and an artist. Quite literally, he is faced at the different stages of his voyage with ways of life and customs which enable him to trace the historical development of a world from the modern period through the Middle Ages and back to pre-history. He feels he is actually living this backward flight in time by identifying himself, and the party of gold-miners with whom he travels, with the Spanish conquerors in search of El Dorado, until they eventually discover what he calls the 'World of Genesis'. This gives him a bird's-eye view of man, a picture which transcends the peculiarities of time and makes him reject what he comes to see as the futile aberrations of modern urban life.

His new outlook takes shape gradually as he becomes familiar with the jungle and the men who roam in it: the pork-knockers. Entering the jungle itself is no easy task. Carpentier describes it as 'a world

compact, complete ... A hidden nation, a vast vegetable kingdom with few entrances'.[11] 'To penetrate this world', he writes, 'the Adelantado had had to find the keys to its secret entrances: he alone knew of a pass between two trees, the only one within a circumference of fifty leagues, leading to a narrow stairway of stones by which it was possible to descend to the vast mystery of immense telluric baroques.'[12] This is a concrete representation of the strait gate and the narrow way leading to real life, a life which the narrator experiences after a series of trials and his discovery of the unsuspected greatness of the land of the plateaux. Facing a landscape unsubdued by man, so disproportionate to human dimensions, he is humbled and forced to look upon himself with new eyes.

His approach to life and even to art is also influenced by the gold-miner, the Adelantado, whose own achievement in the jungle serves as an example of genuineness in the act of creation. The Adelantado is rumoured to have come upon a lode of gold. He has, indeed, but he is no longer interested in it. 'Gold', he says, 'is for those who go back *there*.'[13] *He* has founded a city in the jungle, which is not Manoa, not El Dorado, but in a sense is the first city as Enoch's city was. With the help of the Indians he has created a world in which the reverse side of the pork-knockers' dream has materialized. For the building of this city in the heart of the jungle is like the fulfilment of the soul in man's innermost being.

For most of the miners as they are represented in the Caribbean novel, the lure of gold becomes almost a pretext for living in the jungle. Having once tasted of this life, they cannot go back to the limitations and insincerities of life in society, which makes them perhaps the only people who actualize the symbolic meaning of the myth of El Dorado. Hence, the 'ruling wisdom' which, as Wilson Harris suggests in *Heartland*, characterizes them. In Jan Carew's *Black Midas*,[14] Aron Smart says:

> Pork-knockers were a strange race of men. They took hardship and danger for granted, made and squandered fortunes, left the forest with thousands in their pockets swearing never to return, but they always came back, sometimes with only the shirts on their backs to call their own ... These men were adventurers. The forests, the rivers, the mountains, the high savannahs which stretched and tumbled, raised themselves to the sky or spread flat across the heart of a continent reduced men to the size of a speck of dust. But they saw themselves as giants subduing a wide world ... They had a lust for gold and diamonds, because, in searching for them, they could cut loose from everything that tied men down to life on the coast. During my first month with the pork-knockers, I realized that both Santos and I had

too much of a sense of greed in our hearts, of a craving for security and order, to share the pork-knocker's dream wholeheartedly.[15]

It is by sharing this dream that Carpentier's narrator recovers his manhood. He composes a *Prometheus Unbound* which expresses his feeling of resurrection and is associated with his flight from the world. Eventually, he finds that he does need the world and goes back to it, bringing with him the instruments he found in the Adelantado's city as the reward of his pilgrimage and as tokens of a new integrity in his art.

The Guyanese Jan Carew describes in *Black Midas* an experience in the jungle which is equally formative. Unlike Carpentier, who slowly elaborates his character's introspective journey in parallel with his journey into the heartland, Carew relies on action to convey the moral significance of his tale, and presents in concrete terms the antithesis between material and spiritual achievement. Moreover, Aron Smart's adventures, his restlessness, his response to the magnetism of the jungle, are distinctly those of a Guyanese sensitive to the atmosphere and the moods of the landscapes of his country. As long as he lives on the coast Aron feels one with it: 'The sun was in my blood, the swamp and river, my mother, the amber sea, the savannahs, the surf and wind closer to me than the smell of my sweat.'[16] When he enters the jungle, however, he feels that he had been shut in on the coast, 'cramped between the sea and an ocean of forest'.

The variety of landscapes in *Black Midas* is matched by the variety of characters and of the races to which they belong. These characters tend to be romanticized, like the plot itself with its moralistic overtones. Aron finds gold and makes a fortune very quickly, squanders it as quickly in Georgetown, learning all the while that the city is more of a jungle than the bush. It is this jungle which makes him most aware of his weakness and brings home to him that he has always run away from himself and has always sacrificed other people to his own needs. It happens again during his second search for El Dorado when, like the man who was responsible for his father's death, he endangers another miner's life to get all the gold he can. The miner is killed and Aron loses a leg, substantiating the simple moral of his friend: 'When you take thing out the earth and you en't put nothing back the land and the river does claim sacrifice.'[17] Aron understands at last the parable told him by his old teacher, whose meaning is that 'the best of God's gift ha[s] to be something no eye can see'.[18]

Black Midas illustrates the fairly plain proposition that 'gold and diamonds make monsters out of men' and that the search for El Dorado is out of the reach of 'mimic men', for in the jungle it is impossible to

cheat. For Carew, the richness of Guyana does not lie in its lodes of gold but in its people: he perceives close links between them and the landscapes in which they have been toiling and suffering for several centuries, and he thereby contributes, albeit tentatively, to the shaping of a Guyanese consciousness.

It is in the work of Wilson Harris that the myth of El Dorado has been given the richest interpretation. Not only do his novels epitomize the different meanings of the quest offered by Carew and Carpentier, they explore in a highly idiosyncratic language its possible implications on the individual, social, national, and even metaphysical planes. When analysing any work of Harris's one must bear in mind his conception of man's position in the universe. Contrary to Naipaul, who writes in *An Area of Darkness* that man is an island,[19] Wilson Harris believes that man belongs to the 'great chain of being'. This means more than fitting into an organic whole, though he does illustrate in *Heartland*[20] the order and diversity of the phenomenal world in relation to an 'Unmoved Being'. It also implies, so to speak, the sharing by men of their humanity, the 'membership one of another', as Harris says.[21] It means the abolition of all barriers not only between human beings but between men and their environment; it suggests the interdependence of all forms of living and even of life and death, for death is seen as the mere passage from one mode of being into another. At this stage we can already see how influential this interdependence is on his view of man's ancestry as part of his present and his future. Moreover, the reappearance of the dead among the living is a frequent occurrence in his novels, which intimates that the dead live on among us and in us and modify our consciousness.

Another major concept illustrated in his work is that of the dual nature of any form of being. It is perceptible, for instance, in man's spiritual or moral development: each individual carries within himself the seeds of good and evil and is constantly faced with choice between the two, though the potential inverse of his choice remains within his reach. This duality also determines his relation to his environment. Man is always acting, and at the same time submitting to the action of others. He is both victimizer and victim, hunter and hunted. In *Heartland*, for example, the main character, Stevenson, is watcher of a depot in the jungle, yet he is also watched by someone unseen whose presence he feels. At a particular moment, when the sense of being exposed and watched succeeds the feeling of security he has just experienced, he becomes aware that utterly contradictory moods can both urge him forward and restrain him in his progress through the jungle and towards self-knowledge:

He was beginning to look into the obscurity he had once turned away from as if he now knew . . . that every climate of terror and . . . clearing of security were actually the same umbrella, capable of providing spiritual cover or becoming equally just another naked inhospitable material pole.[22]

There are always several layers of meaning in Harris's compact sentences. The one just quoted refers at once to the contrast between darkness and light, fear and security in the jungle, and in man's soul. It also states that the meaning of experience is what one makes of it.

Stevenson does not seek El Dorado as others search for gold in the literal sense of the word. But as he becomes immersed in the forest, he identifies himself with all those who did and with their 'pre-Columbian spiritual ancestors [in search of] a heartland which had been created for them and which they had lost'.[23] He has come to the jungle after the bankruptcy of the family business, and his father's suicide. His journey into the heartland reveals him to himself and makes him see that he shares in the responsibility both for the bankruptcy and the death.

Harris's approach to his subject invites comparison to Conrad's in *Heart of Darkness*. The themes of the two stories are not dissimilar. As Marlow travels deeper into the forest, feeling, like all those who enter the jungle, that he travels back 'to the earliest beginnings of the world', Conrad's imagery evokes ever more insistently the darkness in the jungle, in the world, in the heart of Kurtz. The forest is a prison, a hell whose wilderness stands for the wilderness in man's heart. Kurtz's moment of self-recognition is inspired by his vision of death and eternity. But the forest remains a symbol for the darker side of man's nature.

In Harris's *Heartland* the jungle is also a symbol of moral blindness but only as long as Stevenson, the watcher, remains blinded by his fear of the 'directionless depth of the forest' and of his own heart. In the second part of the novel when he walks towards the storehouse of the heartland (which also stands for the storehouse in his heart), the forest plays an active role in bringing him to consciousness and making him acknowledge his former egotism and self-deception. The bush is humanized and man is described in the imagery of the jungle so that each becomes an extension of the other. Stevenson's spiritual and physical advance become one:

It was extraordinary what unchartered poles arose out of the jungle which forced one to venture into an interior where one saw oneself turned inside out.[24]

Stevenson realizes that in spite of the close correspondence between

the discovery in himself and in the storehouse of the forest, he cannot easily break through the prison of his limited self. He must choose between attempting to reach an end that is greater than himself, materialized in the grandiose landscape around him, and remaining incapable of true self-realization. It is only when he has received several shocks which throw light on the events of the past and confront him with his guilt that he lays bare his heart and sheds the last layer of self-deception.

This is an oversimplified summary of *Heartland*, but I hope to have drawn attention to two important features of Harris's interpretation of the quest in the forest. One is that the forest as such is not used as a mere symbol corresponding to, but not directly involved in, man's inner development. The other is that man's self-discovery is not seen as a progression towards a fixed ideal. True, its final aim is the liberation of the self in view of a mystical union with the One, or what Harris might call the passage from season to eternity. But the stress is on the quest itself, which brings out on the one hand the duality of man's reactions, the complexity and ambiguity of his states of mind, and on the other the necessity of the choice with which he is repeatedly faced. It is from these contradictions and from the renewed assumption of responsibility inherent in the choice, that change originates. There is no standing still in life. The first and second parts of *Heartland* (called respectively 'The Watcher' and 'The Watched') merge into the third entitled 'The Creation of the Watch', at the very end of which Stevenson enters an ancient river bed to proceed further in the forest:

> The longest crumbling black road Stevenson followed ... was but an endless wary flood broken into *retiring* trenches or *advancing* columns, all moving still towards the *fashioning* of a genuine medium of conquest, capable of linking and penetrating the self-created prison-houses of subsistence ...[25]

Stevenson's understanding at the end of the novel is thus not an end but a beginning. The emphasis is on such words as 'retiring' and 'advancing', which both contribute to the 'fashioning' of a medium of self-conquest. El Dorado is rightly called by Harris an 'open' myth; it is not for him a static object but rather the apprehension of the ever-shifting reality of the soul.

West Indian writers often feel that, unlike African artists, they lack the support of a traditional society with an heroic past and a common ancestry. One might answer to this what Gerald Moore writes in *The Chosen Tongue*: '... even if the West Indies had created nothing else, they have certainly created a people.'[26] One of the important themes of

Harris's *Guiana Quartet* is precisely the creation of a people and the discovery of its unique and complex soul as the outcome of the search for El Dorado. *Palace of the Peacock* might be considered as an allegory of all El Dorado expeditions, one which epitomizes the many implications of the quest. On the surface the story describes the progress of a skipper and his crew on a nameless river in Guyana. The setting of the novel (the savannahs, the dangerous river and rapids running between high cliffs and the thick walls of the jungle towards the huge waterfall) at once reflects and stimulates the physical and spiritual advance of the pilgrims. The journey on the river unfolds in the narrator's consciousness. He and Donne, the skipper of the crew, are the two selves, the one spiritual, the other material, of the main character. Donne is the 'gaoler and ruler' of his spiritual twin. His motto, 'Rule the land . . . and you rule the world'[27] betrays the true spirit of the conquistador and indeed recalls Berrio's assertion, reported by Naipaul, that 'the devil was the patron of his quest'.[28] The name of Donne and that of his men match those of a famous long-dead crew drowned in the same rapids. Each member of the crew represents one of the races of Guyana and the spirit within each racial strain and mixture. But we soon come to realize that they are also embodied in, and make one with, the dual personality of Donne. In other words, they stand for the various features, tendencies, and potentialities within one man, as well as for the latent possibilities of the Guyanese people.

I shall not dwell on the details of the quest nor on its various possible interpretations but shall merely refer to those characteristics in the narrative which show how Harris achieves universality through his interpretation of a national myth and experience. One must bear in mind that throughout the journey the allegory is woven into the 'reality' of the narrator's vision and reality as such. The alleged purpose of the crew is to pursue Mariella and the tribe to which she belongs to get cheap labour for Donne's plantation. Actually, the boat in which the dead characters travel explores their own underworld until they reach the centre of their inner kingdom: their soul and consciousness. The journey to the waterfall takes seven days, the seven days of the creation, during which the crew re-live their past and re-enact their former trip. They discover that each is capable of the feelings and actions of the others, and they become increasingly frightened at the prospect of their 'second death' and at the loss of individuality it implies. When Donne, the last of them to die, falls from the ladder he is ascending at the side of the waterfall, they are said to have 'all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk'.[29] While they were pursuing the elusive tribe, Donne had begun to feel

that they must find a new relationship with them: ' "The only way to survive", he said, "is to wed oneself into the family." '[30] He did not perceive then that his spiritual salvation depended on his integration into the community. Now on the seventh day the narrator, who has superseded Donne, or his material self, is seen taking part in the resurrection with the crew. Man and nature come alive, quickened by the 'undivided soul and anima of the universe'.

The last and most important symbol in the narrative, the 'palace of the peacock', is the clue to the novel, which by this time has become purely allegorical. It is an all-embracing symbol. Harris himself writes in the fourth part of the *Quartet* that 'Palace of the Peacock' is El Dorado, the city of God, the city of gold. But what does the city stand for?

At the moment of Donne's resurrection the 'tree of life' he had seen in the waterfall turns into flesh and blood and the sun at its head breaks into stars which clothe the tree like an enormous dress until these stars become peacocks' eyes and the tree of flesh and blood is metamorphosed into a peacock. 'This was the palace of the universe', Harris tells us, 'and the windows of the soul looked out and in'.[31] Palace and peacock are thus identified, and by looking through the eyes of the peacock's feathers the narrator and the crew look through the windows of the palace, that is to say of their soul. The 'multiplied vision' of the peacock stands for the manifaceted soul of the crew, of the Guyanese and even of humanity, while, the construction of a palace, of a house, or a temple, i.e. of a 'centre', is a cosmogony, an act of creation. You will remember that the construction of a city by the gold-miner in Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* was also the reiteration of a cosmogony.

In *Palace of the Peacock* this creation of a world is in fact the creation of a vision, a coming to consciousness which makes the crew see themselves as a whole. But the multi-racial crew and the nature of Guyana are also reborn in a symbol of immortality. Indeed, if the peacock stands for vanity and conceit, it represents in various religions immortality, the power of transmutation, the eternal bliss of the soul facing God. And this is an aspect of the myth which we cannot neglect.

One essential theme of the novel is that by discovering the elements in his past and in his ancestry which have contributed to his making, man acknowledges what he is. He can then purge himself of the past and be reborn to a new life. This is symbolized by the 'second death' or 'baptism' of the crew, while after their rebirth their individual and collective soul is projected in the 'palace'. But if the hardships these people of different races have shared on the river of life have given

rise to a Guyanese consciousness, clearly, this shaping of a Guyanese entity must be of a spiritual kind. In other words, the creation of a national consciousness is a necessary stage, but only a stage towards cosmic integration and the regeneration of humanity as a whole. I don't think it is possible to ignore the streak of mysticism in Harris's novels; it is foreign to my present subject, but we should note that most of his characters become aware of the potentialities of achievement for the Guyanese as a result of a spiritual conversion. He himself has given significance to the Guyanese predicament by making it representative of humanity. He is not concerned with national consciousness in a limited sense. What his characters gain is a sense of responsibility and spiritual freedom – a kind of open-mindedness which makes it possible for them to respond to, and bring to maturity, every part of their nature, including what is derived from ancestry and environment.

This is also the significance of experience in the three other novels of the *Quartet*, which bring into play different landscapes of Guyana, different generations of people, different races and social classes. In each of them the forest plays its formative role; it is the theatre of an ordeal, the setting which stimulates their dreams and provokes their fear and uncertainty. In *The Far Journey of Oudin* the flight through the forest becomes a 'second birth'; Oudin emerges into his 'constructive self' and assumes his true revolutionary character. In *The Whole Armour* Cristo, who is accused of a crime he has not committed, gives himself up after his experience in the forest and sacrifices himself for the coming generations, thus redeeming the community from its murderous past. In *The Secret Ladder* Fenwick, stationed in the jungle, gauges the river Canje from his dinghy called 'Palace of the Peacock'. He sees the rivers of Guyana as rungs in a ladder, on which he hopes to explore the past and visualize the future of the country. Here again, the myth of El Dorado, though not directly represented, is an underlying dynamic reality. It inspires Fenwick's 'reading' of the gauge, i.e. his endeavour to achieve a synthesis of the primitive past and a future to be shaped by technology. As in *Palace of the Peacock*, it takes seven days to climb the ladder of conscience, and the fruit of Fenwick's attempt, conveyed in T. S. Eliot's words, reiterates the essential meaning of *Palace of the Peacock*: 'In our end is our beginning.'

The faith of Harris's characters in the future is not the effect of blindness to Guyana's complex past and present or to the sense of alienation and frustration experienced by some West Indian artists. Nor does that faith spring from an optimistic belief in man. Violence, hatred, greed, and fear are never absent from the world he portrays.

But his characters come to realize that their prison is 'self-created', that freedom is possible, though seldom attained except in death. It is up to them to fructify their heartland or let it run to wasteland. In each of his novels Harris presents the individual, and by implication the Guyanese people, as if they were at a turning point in their life or history. He lays bare their soul at the critical moment and explores the complexity, variety, and possibilities of human response. It is this inside view which gives his characters substance. Harris renders his vision of wholeness through his bold and original use of language. He achieves unity by an association of words, symbols, and images which express the inter-relation in time between men, and between men and the universe, as well as between the 'Near' and the 'Far'. It is significant that this experiment with form and meaning should be carried out by a writer from the New World, who not only universalizes the situation of his countrymen but projects a new light on man's position in the universe, and illustrates the relativity of that position.

The various interpretations of the myth of El Dorado I have examined indicate that the search for El Dorado leads to self-knowledge and a better understanding of past and present; the myth itself urges man to search beyond his limited self a reality which transcends his own. Though *The Loss of El Dorado* disparages this search, it does imply Naipaul's regret that the quest did not produce a better world, and one suspects that, like many satirists, he is an inverted idealist. It would be possible to show that Naipaul's vision of despair is shared by other West Indian novelists. The other trend, that to which Carew and Harris belong (but which is not specifically Guyanese) includes writers who, like other artists in the New World, seek in their own country the germ of a positive meaning in art. These writers bring to light the specific bonds existing or taking shape between their country and its people and show that both can participate in the creation of a complex and cultivated sensibility of universal value. For all those artists, each man carries in himself his own El Dorado.

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Editor's Note: This article is based on a paper that Mme Maes-Jelinek read on 27 February 1970 at a Seminar on Commonwealth literature held at the University of Leeds.

NOTE

[1] V. S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado*, André Deutsch, 1969, p. 316.
[2] V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, André Deutsch, 1962, pp. 41, 43.
[3] *A House for Mr Biswas*, André Deutsch, 1961.
[4] *The Mimic Men*, André Deutsch, 1967, p. 141.
[5] ibid., p. 246.
[6] ibid., p. 37.
[7] *The Middle Passage*, p. 41.
[8] *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, André Deutsch, 1963, p. 149.
[9] *The Mimic Men*, p. 13.
[10] Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, translated from the Spanish by Harriet de Onis, Gollancz, 1956.
[11] ibid., pp. 126–7.
[12] ibid., p. 127.
[13] ibid., p. 193.
[14] Jan Carew, *Black Midas*, Secker & Warburg, 1958.
[15] ibid., pp. 113–14.
[16] ibid., p. 42.
[17] ibid., p. 277.
[18] ibid., p. 213.
[19] *An Area of Darkness*, André Deutsch, 1964, p. 198.
[20] Wilson Harris, *Heartland*, Faber, 1964.
[21] Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, New Beacon Publications, 1967, p. 53.
[22] *Heartland*, p. 56.
[23] ibid., p. 31.
[24] ibid., p. 48.
[25] ibid., p. 90; my italics.
[26] Gerald Moore, *The Chosen Tongue*, Longmans, 1969, p. 8.
[27] *Palace of the Peacock*, Faber, 1960, p. 19.
[28] *The Loss of El Dorado*, p. 29.
[29] *Palace of the Peacock*, p. 143.
[30] ibid., p. 58.
[31] ibid., p. 146.