

There hasn't been any comedy by Richler with a greater force of the writer's iconoclastic conservatism.

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Natural and Psychological Landscapes

Wilson Harris, **The Sleepers of Roraima: A Carib Trilogy**, Faber, 1970, £1.25; and **The Age of the Rainmakers**, Faber, 1971, £1.25.

The function of myth is to account for a creation, for the origin of the elements or the beginnings of a civilization, with another creation born of a growing consciousness and imagination. In his collections of 'fables' Wilson Harris traces the genesis of natural and psychological elements, and of an apprehension of the world which, like myth itself, might yet evolve from an individual conception to a more generalized view of the mainspring of creation. One's first impression of the stories, particularly of *The Age of the Rainmakers* is of a dazzling puzzle which one tackles nevertheless with a growing sense of excitement, tempered with an awareness that one must resist the sheer melody and visual suggestiveness of words to make sure of their meaning. Yet the stories are not mere pieces of virtuosity in the use of language. But they challenge our ingrained view of the world by throwing an imaginative bridge across history and reviving an ancestral time rich in ignored possibilities. The myths are re-created from the inside in accordance with their own inner logic, so much so that the author sometimes appears as a mere instrument of their self-transforming power. For instance, in each story of *The Sleepers of Roraima* a boy is being initiated into the legacy of the past and inspired by the original myth, told in a prelude, to experience in an imaginative 'dream' the very events which gave rise to the myth or legend. So that the latter grows, as it were, from its own centre, disclosing to those who explore 'the night of history' the smouldering life of a past which is only dead and barren by virtue of a narrow and one-sided interpretation.

The myths of the Carib trilogy are unrelated but merge with three successive episodes of the Caribs' slide towards extinction: tribal war, invasion of the territories which bear their name, retreat into the South American continent and appearance of the first 'native'. The breaking

of the law and its consequences by Couvade's parents have convinced his grandfather that their own tribe and their enemies are doomed to an endless game of hunter and hunted. Though Couvade's quest for identity seems to corroborate this view, he discovers paradoxically, thanks to the lizard, his grandfather's totem, that 'our enemies . . . are *our* own fierce nostalgic creation'.

Like Couvade's grandfather, who fears that his people 'will vanish from the face of the earth', Quiyumucon dreads 'the irresolution of horizon', but hardens far more against weakness and yields to that inexorable death-wish which, together with pride, was the Caribs' undoing. He also has broken the law, first by marrying a Carib who had followed the men of her race disguised as a warrior, then by refusing to look at her after killing her by order of the priests in the name of duty and order. By killing his like ('warrior to warrior like day to day, night to night'), Quiyumucon, himself 'First Cause or ancestral time', breaks the original unity of the world, just as the original egg of creation was broken and birth resulted thereafter from a marriage of opposites. In another sacrificial mood he had killed one of the royal parrots which linked his people to their original homeland and ancestral time. Like the upheavals of the elements in terms of which their conquering deeds are described, the Caribs provoke the disruption of their world, but also the birth of a new one. For, their irruption on their 'ship of doom' into the Caribbean corresponds to a passage from ancestral into linear time, corresponds therefore to the creation, to the reduction of Quiyumucon, First Cause, to 'a grain of sand'. Animated by the artist's imagination, Quiyumucon becomes the creator of a 'knife-edged balance', a 'causeway' between the old world and the new.

At a later stage in the Carib epic Yurokon also serves as a gateway between two worlds. He is the last Carib, and he identifies himself with his sixteenth-century namesake and with the Bush Baby spirit which appeared among his ancestors at the time of their defeat by Spain. Like Couvade, he penetrates the secret of his name and of his tribe's reputation as cannibals or 'huntsmen of bone'. Yurokon is at once the undying rebellious spirit of the tribe and its growing conscience. He makes one with his kite, which, as an instrument of exploration, participates in the life of the elements and makes him perceive a dislocation in the natural landscape that anticipates the cleavage in the psychological landscape of the Caribs. This psychological cleavage finds expression in the flute, fashioned out of the bones of their enemy by the defeated Caribs to reduce them to 'a morsel in [their] mouth'. But it becomes an instrument of release for that 'timeless element in all places and things', smouldering under the ashes of the chain of

fires lit by the Caribs in their retreat inland. If the break in the landscape reveals the harmony at the heart of the cosmos, so the flute's aperture may give voice to a harmony of contrasts among men, to a creative conjunction of Yurokon's Carib inheritance with his Christian faith.

The cosmos in its most humble and awe-inspiring manifestations is for Harris an inexhaustible metaphor. He thinks of man's consciousness and imagination as space: the human mind has its own geologic ages; it has its earthquakes, landslides, and volcanoes, and its landscapes thrive or wither under the influence of rains and drought. Here metaphor is not a mere figure of speech, since it coalesces matter and spirit, moved and modified by identical forces, into one reality. Hence the complexity of an extremely concise language unifying two distinct areas of experience into a single sphere of life. Such a use of language is particularly suited to convey the interrelatedness of all creation fundamental in Harris's vision of the universe. It also fits in with the nature of myth, which finds an answer to the mysteries of human existence in the natural world and its fauna and flora. Couvade's meetings with his animal ancestors, Quiyumucon's handling of the elements, and the manifold shapes assumed by Yurokon's kite are but a few examples.

In *The Age of the Rainmakers* Harris's concept of an architecture of consciousness, evolving 'through darkneses like conflagrations' from the interplay of opposite elements, is most arrestingly conveyed by a chain of images which grow out of one another like the concentric rings of the spiral which, in some of his novels, represents a growing consciousness. Around the basic images a multiplicity of forms shapes the deceptive or liberating features of the heroes' environment, as each of them becomes an arch of communication between the primitive and the modern imagination. The fundamental assumption in each fable is that the void resulting from a discontinuity in history and a loss of 'imaginative scale' contains, nevertheless, an invisible seed that can be fertilized in a spirit of compassion and humility.

In the first story young Kaie is the latest representative in a long line of guerillas, whose warfare with government patrols is responsible for 'the long drought of an age'. His own fight against a patrol is re-enacted through the dialectics of opposites between ancestor Kaie and the bat or 'great spirit' Makonaima, which in Macusi legend gave birth to Kaieteur falls. The hand of the rainmaker is the 'ambivalent fabric of sky and earth' resting on both sides of eternity. In each story the hand of god is to be found in creation itself: in the land, the sea, night, day, or, as in 'The Mind of Awakaipu', on the seashore, the riverbank, in valley or on ridge. It can also be the 'ambivalent flesh' of the five dead

men lying in fanwise formation, whose other self fell 'on the other side of time'. The age of the rainmakers is an ancestral time in which men saw the gods among themselves, in the life and death of dynamic nature with which they made one. If the gods can become idols, they can also open the way to freedom, as does the rainmaker, who gives Kaie to understand that the gamble with life and death can be the 'wager of freedom'. Arbitrary fortune is one of the gods, and with imagination man can help fertilize the gifts of fate.

In 'The Mind of Awakaipu' it is also the medicine-man who shelters 'across the gamble of the centuries' the 'seminal tear', faint tremor or 'die' overlooked by the Indian's employer when Awakaipu was bitten by a snake. He thus saves for the future a residue of sensibility that will persist through the age of the dead, during which Awakaipu's people will be confined by history within a fixed character. The tear becomes the 'pearl of heaven' and darkens into 'the seminal sponge of ages' capable of absorbing Awakaipu's tears and of precipitating 'relief, new seed, new birth'. Again in 'The Laughter of the Wapishanas', the most poetic of the fables, the rainmaker is the 'merchant of fate' who comes to 'beguile or redeem', as Wapishana travels back to the source of laughter, that element of fertility at the heart of opposites, which will save her tribe from extinction. Wapishana's extension into the fluid forms and phenomena of nature reminds us that all things partake of the same essence, of that otherness which the artist explores in 'Arawak Horizon'. In this story, Arawak 'Zemis', which were supposed to be the dwelling places of the spirits of nature and of ancestors, fuse with the ten original numbers which, in pythagorean philosophy, stem from one source and are the essence of all things. Through a series of metamorphoses they provide the anatomy of the process of creation and liberation in which the artist is involved. They furnish the rooms of that otherness which the artist will inhabit as a transient link in a chain of consciousness akin to 'the subtlest breakthrough in the endless compositional rhythms of life'. It appears, from the meeting between the primitive and the scientific imagination in each story, that humanity and its phenomenal environment never stop growing from a balance of multitudinous opposites identical to a musical dialogue. The combinations of the mutable numbers or Zemis in 'Arawak Horizon' are like musical scores whose interpretation is in ourselves.