

Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Foreword", in *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Sydney & Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1991), pp. 9-11.

Foreword

This volume is a tribute to Wilson Harris to celebrate his seventieth birthday and thirty years of a remarkably fruitful career as a novelist. We wish to associate his wife, Margaret, to this homage. As the dedication of all his novels shows, and without having to extrapolate from his fiction, she is clearly connected to his creative endeavour. The contributors' warm response to this project is a token of their admiration and gratitude to the writer who challenged and stimulated them to a new vision and interpretation of life and art, and to the critic who has become so influential on post-colonial writing and criticism.

When *Palace of the Peacock* came out in 1960, followed in quick succession by the other three volumes in *The Guyana Quartet*, a few critics recognized its originality, its brilliance and the truly positive, alternative vision of the Caribbean experience it offered. Many readers, however, found the novels difficult and disorientating, as so often happens with genuinely innovating and thought-provoking writing. In the sixties, when Harris's fiction was making its first impact, West Indian readers seem to have been divided between those who recognized his genius and the intrinsically Caribbean source of his art, and those who found no immediate 'use' for their society in his fiction, a division which reflects a post-colonial dilemma. Gradually, however, Harris's work was reaching a wider audience in the Caribbean and the English-speaking world generally. He is now considered as a major twentieth-century novelist and thinker, both in his country of origin, where he was the first recipient of the Guyana prize for fiction in 1987, and on the international scene, as the contributions to this volume indicate. Its title, borrowed from Desmond Hamlet, acknowledges his integrity as an artist, his refusal to pander to the tastes of a large readership for the sake of fame. He never yielded to fashionable ideas or intellectual trends, and he never joined in one-sided commitments. Few writers have analysed with such devastating honesty and imaginative freedom the nature of the world in which we live and the mechanisms by which we react to it, or probed with his visionary insight the complex causes underlying the crisis of civilization in a conflictual and violent twentieth century.

Wilson Harris has always been intensely preoccupied with the great existential problems of our age: natural and man-willed catastrophes, suffering, guilt, the perpetual tension between freedom and fate, and the nature of creativity which alone, he thinks, can transform the world. His work is revolutionary in its careful and profound re-examination of usually unquestioned assumptions in the interpretation of individual, social and historical experience and its proposal of a new morally

creative response to regenerate a disintegrating world. It is even more so in its unique emphasis on imagination and language as freeing organs from given systems and from the codes by which human beings normally live and think, and on their power to alter preconceptions about the nature of fiction. The beauty and transformative power of his own language have often been commented on, yet no full exegesis has so far demonstrated its endless capacity for metamorphosis as the organizing agent of his prose, the mutation of concrete experience it potentializes, and the corresponding dynamism of the cosmic, natural, philosophical and even religious dimensions of his fiction. For all its flexibility, the English language has seldom been energized as it is by Harris's 'convertible imageries' or stretched to such density of meaning. The convertibility of language in his writing does more than actualize the re-visionary strategies with which his readers are by now familiar. It is also a feature of his persistently optimistic and hopeful belief in man's capability to disrupt consolidated and tyrannical structures despite his partial perceptions. The revising and self-revising process at the heart of Harris's writing is a recurring focus of interest in this volume, for the concept of 'infinite rehearsal' which has grown out of his fictional practice and, in retrospect, is seen to run from *Palace of the Peacock* to *The Four Banks of the River of Space* is now becoming both a critical tool and object of analysis in approaching his work and, more widely, in post-colonial criticism. More importantly, it calls for balance between the unacknowledged spiritual resources of the 'primitive' and the 'civilized' peoples as between Third- and First-Worlds, and so for an authentic cross-culturalism. It also points indirectly to the possible emergence of a creative solution to the world's evils from its so-called marginal areas.

Except for two or three novels, the essays collected in this volume cover practically the whole of Harris's work to-date which, as is well known, he considers as unfinished 'work-in-progress'. They also cover major aspects of his fiction and show how much Harrisian studies have developed in recent years with the analytical and theoretical approaches of younger critics. The essays are often complementary, and it is no wishful thinking to say that, in spite of some (fortunately) contradictory views, the critics do not just dialogue with the author but with one another.

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the book in what turned out to be difficult circumstances. Dangaroo Press came into being because she and Kirsten Holst Petersen were so impressed by the lectures Wilson Harris gave at the University of Aarhus in the early seventies that they decided to edit and publish them in a book called *Enigma of Values*. Dangaroo Press has since then played a major role in placing post-colonial writing and criticism on the international scene. This book also celebrates its anniversary.

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