

Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Wilson Harris: Seeking the Mystery of the 'Universal Imagination'", in *International Literature in English: The Major Writers*, ed. Robert Ross (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 447-459.

## Wilson Harris

Wilson Harris is a poet, novelist, and critic of Guyanese origin. He was born in New Amsterdam, 24 March 1921, in what was then British Guiana. He was educated at Queen's College, Georgetown, and became a government surveyor in the 1940s. He then led many expeditions into the interior to do mapping and geomorphological research.

Although he began to write as a young man and had close connections with a group of writers in Guyana whose work appeared in the magazine *Kijk-Over-Al*, his explorations into the interior and in coastal areas had a tremendous impact on his imagination and affected his vision of landscapes and peoples, to which he first gave expression in the "Guiana Quartet." He explained it himself as "the shock of great rapids, vast forests and savannahs—playing through memory to involve perspectives of imperilled community and creativity reaching back into the Pre-Columbian mists of time" (*Contemporary Novelists* 563). He discarded several novels before he felt satisfied with the form of *Palace of the Peacock*, published in 1960.

Harris emigrated to England in 1959 and lived in London until a few years ago when he moved to Essex. He is married to Margaret Whitaker, a poet and playwright. He is now the author of eighteen novels and two volumes of novellas. In 1967 he started giving talks and writing essays that are most profitably read in conjunction with his fiction and vice versa since they are mutually illuminating. Most of them express his intense concern for the future of civilization and the regenerating role of the imagination. He has been a visiting professor and writer-in-residence in many universities—West Indies, Toronto, Leeds, Aarhus, Yale, Mysore, Newcastle in Australia, California, and for a number of years he regularly spent a few months at the University of Texas at Austin in both capacities. He was Commonwealth Fellow at the University of Leeds in 1971 and received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973 as well as a Southern Arts Writer's Fellowship in 1976. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of the West Indies in 1984 and the University of Kent at Canterbury in 1988. He was the first recipient of the Guyana Prize for fiction (1985-87).

## SEEKING THE MYSTERY OF THE "UNIVERSAL IMAGINATION"

The universal imagination—if it has any meaning or value—has its roots in subconscious and unconscious strata that disclose themselves profoundly within re-visionary strategies through intuitive clues that appear in a text one creates. That text moves or works in concert with other texts to create a multi-textual dialogue.

—Wilson Harris, "Validation of Fiction"

At a time when the claim to universality has become very suspicious in post-colonial writing and criticism, because it is seen as the major instrument of Euro-American centered discourse to maintain its cultural hegemony over formerly colonized worlds, Wilson Harris asserts the power of what he calls the "universal imagination" to stimulate genuine creativity. As a matter of fact, from his earliest writings he has always dissociated himself from any clearly defined and, even more, from any militant notion of national or racial identity and, in this respect, his work differs markedly from most West Indian writing. My purpose in this essay is to attempt to show that the "universal imagination" informs his work as a whole—the shape of his narratives, characterization, and use of imagery—whose striking originality is not just the expression of his idiosyncratic approach to fiction but offers an unusually deep analysis of Old and New World civilizations as well as a vision of their potential renewal. What Harris means by "universal imagination" is not an easily definable concept, and most of his essays are basically reflections on the creative process itself, born of the need to explore its essential nature *after* being immersed in it while writing fiction.

In the poetry he wrote before moving on to fiction, Harris gave the name of Greek gods and heroes to his Guyanese personae. The effect then of this association between Guyanese and classical Greek worlds seemed mainly to give his characters an immediately recognizable mythical dimension while pointing to the significance for the community of the deprived figures he was thus elevating to a heroic or divine status. In retrospect, however, it also appears that the elements from Greek or other European mythologies in both poetry and early fiction belong, in his view, with New World pre-Columbian myths and coexist in a "universal unconscious," which assumes very different expressions as they are apprehended by artists of different backgrounds. For example, Harris himself has drawn attention to a parallel between Blake's "Tyger tyger burning bright/In the forests of the night," the tiger imagery represented on the Aztec calendar, and the tigerish stripes perceptible in natural Guyanese sceneries like striped reflections in a waterfall ("Validation" 42–43), while the tiger-imagery in *The Whole Armour* can be read as variations and a reworking of the tiger image in Blake's and Eliot's poetry.

This brief allusion to the importance Harris gives to strata of experience buried in the unconscious and what they have in common with a different kind of experience and its interpretation in other parts of the world is only meant to emphasize a major feature in his fiction, namely that, from *Palace of the Peacock* to his latest novel, Harris explores *intuitively* these deeper strata in order to unearth the eclipsed, buried, or repressed species of otherness ignored in centuries of so-called Caribbean

historylessness. "Otherness" in Wilson Harris's fiction is also mysterious to the perceptive consciousness. It certainly includes those he has called the "uninitiate," the victims of history or of present-day exploitation in *The Guyana Quartet*—that is, the vanished and vanishing Amerindians in *Palace of the Peacock*, the poor East Indian laborers in *The Far Journey of Oudin*, or the descendants of runaway slaves in *The Secret Ladder*. In the eyes of the victims, however, the "other" is the feared conquistador, like Donne in *Palace of the Peacock*, or the invader, like Fenwick, the apparently menacing though well-intentioned technologist in *The Secret Ladder*. Otherness can take on the form of god and man, the sacred and the profane, of social, historical, spiritual and psychological phenomena, and even the visible yet never wholly penetrated forms of the natural world. Harris approaches this mysterious reality at once with extraordinary audacity and the tentativeness of exploration. But except in a very momentary apotheosis of vision in *Palace of the Peacock*, the quest for it remains incomplete in his work, which is why, for all their variety in subject and setting, his novels can be regarded as successive stages in one unfinished quest. Nevertheless, whatever it represents, the "other" remains throughout the main-spring of creation.

*Palace of the Peacock*, the first part of the "Guyana Quartet," remains today the most widely read of his considerable work and, for many, his masterpiece, though Harris never stopped developing and some of his later novels, particularly *Carnival*, receive now as much attention. *Palace of the Peacock* is a landmark not just in Caribbean fiction but in fiction in English generally, exploding as it does all conventional approaches to narrative and modifying them far more radically than the early twentieth-century modernists had done, rejecting also much more critically the realistic mode of writing from which even the most experimental of these writers never broke completely away, and initiating a "species of fiction" uniquely his own. Harris's work is steeped in Guyanese history, which he regards as an indelible component of the Guyanese psyche and a ghostly presence or reality pervading the country's varied landscapes. He has a special interest in local myths, some of which he has rewritten in two collections of stories (*The Sleepers of Roraima* and *The Age of the Rainmakers*). But his mind and imagination have been nourished by Western art, literature, philosophy, and anthropology. So that in addition to his visionary perception of the human condition, it is this striking alchemy of the impact of history on landscape and people, Old and New World myths, "re-visions" of Western cultural legacies together with his bold stylistic innovations, which accounts for much of his originality.

*Palace of the Peacock* recreates quintessentially the repeated invasion of Guyana after the Renaissance, the abortive meeting between the conquerors and the Amerindian folk and, symbolically, the exploitation of land and people from time immemorial. It is a re-creation of all such expeditions initiated out of a misconceived idealism and thirst for power. Donne leads a multiracial crew on a nameless river into the interior in search of cheap labor for his plantation and of the legendary El Dorado. But as they meet one obstacle after another both on the river and in their conflicting relationships with one another, their pursuit of the folk turns into a struggle for survival and a quest for salvation. Through this simple narrative line Harris nevertheless disrupts most fictional precedents and deliberately eschews any

pretense to a supposedly objective historical reconstruction, though his subject is history or rather its traumas, whose deeper psychological effects he explores on the border between consciousness and the unconscious, or of life and death, like the reconstruction of Donne's death in chapter five. Not only do outer and inner psychological landscapes coincide and real landscape features spatialize inner states of mind, the concrete and the intangible often overlap as again and again the surface reality is breached to reveal the tormenting obsessions of the crew with power or wealth, with Mariella, the native woman (at once sexual object, symbol of the land and spirit of the place, and ambivalent muse), to reveal also the mixture of terror and beauty they experience in their journey towards death and rebirth. Here are a few examples:

The outboard engine and propeller still revolved and flashed with mental silent horror now that its roar had been drowned in other wilder unnatural voices whose violent din rose from beneath our feet in the waters. (24–25)

I stifled my words and leaned over the ground to confirm the musing footfall and image I had seen and heard in my mind in the immortal chase of love on the brittle earth. (31)

Something had freed them [the crew] and lifted them out of the deeps, a blessing and a curse, a reverberating clap of thunder and still music and song. The sound was jubilant and obscure and tremulous in their ear like a dreaming sword that had cut them from the womb. (55)

The narrative is largely told by a nameless first-person narrator who mostly “dreams” the seven-day reconstruction of their journey at several levels of perception even at the very beginning of the novel when his opening vision of the shot horseman immediately afterwards shifts to a vision within a dream: “I dreamt I awoke” (19). Though perceived as separate individuals since the narrator sees Donne, his brother, outside himself, they make one, sharing “one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye” (19), but they also contain the multiracial crew who embody various aspects of their community of being, just as the crew Fenwick leads into the Canje in *The Secret Ladder* are so many selves equally sprung from “one complex womb” (*Palace* 39). Keeping in mind that the crew belong to all the races to be found in contemporary Guyana, this phrase clearly shows that they are both victimizers of the folk they pursue and victims themselves of the historical circumstances that brought them or their ancestors to Guyana. This suggests that there is no going back on history as indeed the crew realize in a moment of vision: “They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued together, and they knew they would perish if they dreamed to turn back” (*Palace of the Peacock* 62). That they should also be part of Donne, the skipper with the English Renaissance name, whose imagination benumbed by will-to-power revives after acknowledging his own egotism and the folk's existence, emphasizes their heterogeneous and human, rather than national, identity. The novel as a whole is

an imaginative “re-vision” of the expedition, which progresses through intuitive thrusts as the narrator allows people or phenomena formerly ignored or taken for granted to impinge upon his consciousness:

I saw—rising out of the grave of my blindness—the nucleus of that bodily crew of labouring men I had looked for in vain in his [Donne's] republic and kingdom. They had all come to me at last in a flash to fulfil one self-same early desire and need in all of us. (27)

The effect of the narrator's intuitions and glimpses of what he calls “the true substance of life . . . the substance of the folk” (52), together with the violent ordeals on the river and in his mind—as depicted at the beginning of chapter six—is to crumble the crew's hard carapace of prejudice and polarized thinking, making possible the apprehension of that third nameless dimension (or “otherness”), which all the protagonists in Harris's fiction approach from different angles in their attempt to achieve what proves to be the real purpose of their quest: the genesis or regeneration of the imagination. In *Palace of the Peacock*, Harris initiates the process in which most of his characters were to be involved: the disruption of their self-sufficient personality until a terrifying void is reached, similar to the psychological void suffered by conquered Amerindians and transported slaves, which Donne experiences in chapter ten and from which the construction of his new vision can begin. In addition to his personal experience, the void is also the so-called “historylessness” of the Caribbean, typical of a condition of “invisibility” anywhere (also represented in *Black Marsden*) because the people concerned are unseen or eclipsed. Harris considers that the experience of those who have been “forgotten” by history is as much part of a country's (and the world's) heritage as the recorded or celebrated feats of acknowledged heroes. This experience is the unseen face of tradition, which must be explored and brought to the surface to modify the consolidated plane of tradition that alone is usually recognized (*Tradition* 28–29). He therefore links the self-assertion or indifference of those who ignore eclipsed people(s) with what he regards as the uniform and authoritarian character of realism, its predominantly one-dimensional representation of reality, whereas the apprehension of the unseen is for him the prime mover of a “heterogeneous complex of the imagination” (“Interview” 70). The unseen source of inspiration in *Palace of the Peacock* is the invisible fugitive folk eventually constellated into stars in the peacock's tail while the reborn crew appear at the windows of the palace, even though “the inseparable moment . . . of all fulfilment and understanding” (116) is an evanescent vision.

A major example of the way in which the realistic texture of experience is altered in *Palace of the Peacock* occurs in Part III, “The Second Death,” when the body of the crew begin to disintegrate through the sacrificial death of Carroll, the youngest among them. In another context Harris has suggested that the “second [death] is a psychical design to fissure inner paralysis” (*Womb* 47). As the crew approach dangerous rapids, their ears are stopped as were Ulysses' crew when he navigated past the island of the Sirens while Ulysses himself, bound to the mast, could hear their enchanting song. Here, however, the Siren is among the crew in the shape of the

old Arawak woman made prisoner by Donne, who is momentarily transfigured into a young enchantress (the youthful Mariella). The crew are also momentarily blinded as they silently accuse one another of wishing to rape her. But Harris reverses our expectations of the significance of the myth for she is a victim, even if an ambivalent one—both daemon and saving muse. Perhaps only Carroll can hear her song as he stands up to help his companions and disappears silently into the water, arousing compassion in the crew, unsealing their eyes of the cloud of “cruelty and self-oppression” and unstopping their ears. Carroll’s death is immediately followed by the temporary rescue of the crew, and the old woman who all this time made one with the roaring rapids of the river (“Her crumpled bosom and river grew agitated with desire. . . . The ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew.” 62) now recovers her wrinkled appearance. But from then on the pursuing crew begin to perceive formerly neglected possibilities of fulfilment in their relationship with their respective “Mariella” or native woman. Thus Harris gives new life and a moral significance in a Guyanese context to a Western myth, which he was to “rewrite” in a more complex way in *The Waiting Room*, using it metaphorically through the novel to render the condition of poise when the exploring consciousness surrenders the self without allowing itself to be engulfed by the other: “he dared to lean as never before (without actually falling) upon the abyss of invention and confront the . . . hollow within which she stood” (*The Waiting Room* 52).

All Harris’s fictions bridge continents imaginatively and show that the catastrophic encounters between peoples could have led to a fruitful dialogue between cultures instead of destruction, oppression, and a never wholly digested enmity. As he has himself pointed out, “catastrophe is part-and-parcel of genuine change and of the difficult transformation of habits of power and fixtures of greed” (*Explorations* 98). We have just seen that his “translation” of a Western myth breaks down an apparently fateful actual event, the rape of the Amerindian folk, which another novelist might have been presented realistically. Through most of his fiction there is also a conjunction of myths from different cultures or a revival of ancient gods in contemporary circumstances, such as the Norse god Odin in *The Far Journey of Oudin* or Poseidon in *The Secret Ladder*, who heralds “a new divine promise born of an underworld of half-forgotten sympathies” (379). In Cristo, the protagonist of *The Whole Armour*, merge a shamanistic experience and a re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice. Rebirth in *The Secret Ladder* takes place through the experience of Guyanese Perseus and Andromeda (Bryant and Catalena), while Fenwick slays the head of the Gorgon (Jordan, the representative of adamant, misplaced authority), whose terrifying mask is being “translated” and metamorphosed through *Tumatumari*. In *Companions of the Day and Night*, which largely takes place in Mexico, the dateless days of the Mexican Calendar convey the timeless dimension into which the Aztecs and their civilization have fallen, though here, too, pre-Columbian layers of civilization and the instrument of their eclipse, the Spanish conquering Christ, yield to a Mexican Christ whose susceptibility to the accumulation of trials imposed on the Mexican people creates in him “a combination of levels . . . that gave him the magic of universality” (31). In his latest novel, *The Infinite Rehearsal*, Harris “rewrites” the myth of Faust, which lends itself particularly well to an evocation of

European will-to-power but is here associated to the pre-Columbian myth of Quetzalcoatl. This novel further explores the nameless condition first actualized in *Palace of the Peacock*, then personified in “Idiot Nameless” in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* and *Companions of the Day and Night* and now in *Ghost*, the character in whom the void or hollowness is again presented as “the ground of creative conscience and value” (*The Infinite Rehearsal* 51).

I have already suggested that Harris’s protagonists are not limited to the self-sufficient, clear-cut personality of characters in realistic fiction. At the end of *Heartland* Stevenson, the major character, sees that the ordinary social self is but a “self-created prison-[house] of subsistence” yet also “the confusing measure of vicarious hollow and original substance” (90). This phrase points again to the void as an essential stage in the creative process and the perception of “original substance.” It also helps us understand Harris’s approach to characterization. The void is both a state that the character reaches before or as he becomes more sensitive to the reality of others (comparable to Keats’s notion of “negative capability”) and the state of those others, an apparent *tabula rasa* from which they are being retrieved, as Harris shows so well in *Ascent to Omai* and *Black Marsden*. Therefore characterization in his fiction largely proceeds through the protagonists’s perceptions or failure to perceive what is essential in others. So that vision and understanding become moral criteria replacing the often limiting codes of a given society. It must be emphasized, however, that Harris’s concern with vision in depth goes together with a sensuous rendering of the characters’ experience and does not deny the natural world. Rather vision is reached *through* that world as in the opening scene of *Ascent to Omai*, in which a sunbeam pierces the mists and the “rain-sodden atmosphere” to reveal “the figure of the scarecrow, ruined porcknocker,” a ghostly “faceless face,” partly real, partly envisioned by the protagonist who ascends an actual mountain in the Guyanese interior.

The increasing self-reflexiveness in Harris’s novels is also a major aspect of his method of characterization, almost inevitably so since his characters are involved, as indicated above, in a genesis or rebirth of the imagination. In the so-called London novels (*Da Silva da Silva’s Cultivated Wilderness*, *The Tree of the Sun*, *The Angel at the Gate*) visionary self-reflexiveness merges with sensuousness into the painting metaphor. Da Silva da Silva, a major character in two of these novels, is an actual painter who keeps “revising” his paintings and discerns in “a uniform cloak of paint” a mutation of history, “the mutation, born of the arousal of suppressed cultures, suppressed tones of feeling” (*Da Silva da Silva* 10). In his earlier novels and some of his own posterior comments on his conception of fiction, Harris saw his protagonists involved in a “trial” of self-judgment (see *Heartland* and *Ascent to Omai*) or in a “drama of consciousness,” a phrase which explains his frequent use of terms related to drama like “play of the soul,” “theatre of arousal,” “comedy,” or “infinite rehearsal”—the title of his latest published novel in which the hero’s aunt stages plays “revising the histories of the world” (35). Da Silva’s revisions of his paintings are a kind of “infinite rehearsal,” by which Harris means the necessarily repeated, deeper, and multiple approaches to given experiences. They are necessary because any single approach is partial and limited, so that the quest for truth and wholeness is by its very nature infinite and unfinished. Hence the constant revision and “infinite

rehearsal" by which the protagonist constantly "revises" his own positions while, at a further remove, Harris himself constantly "revises" his own fictions and sometimes other writers' (like Dante's *Divine Comedy* in *Carnival* and Goethe's *Faust* in *The Infinite Rehearsal*). Da Silva da Silva eloquently sums up this process:

Each ancient frame becomes a vacancy to sustain many canvases, many incarnations, unpredictable densities, that appear and disappear to reappear in order to immerse one in a new and just dialogue between what is apparently strong and what is apparently weak. I am apparently weak. I am afflicted by recurring voices. I hear them at the heart of this great city, the regional accent of birds and bells, the voices of the past, the voices of the present. (10–11)

The actualization of the revisionary process in the texture of Harris's narratives occurs through his protean metaphors or what he himself recently called "convertible imageries" (*The Guyana Quartet* 10). His rewriting of the myth of Ulysses and the Sirens discussed earlier is not only a "rehearsal" and reinterpretation of that myth, the evolutionary use of the water imagery in this episode and the chapter as a whole is "convertible imagery." So is the sun metaphor in *Palace of the Peacock*, whose changing effect from blinding disk to shattered fragments of light to visionary stars and organs of vision conveys the development of Donne's consciousness. It is not just that the meaning of metaphors develop and that one kind of reality is transformed into another; they express the extraordinary contrasts and variety of the visible world, like the "wilderness" metaphor in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*. But, as already mentioned, the world of the senses they evoke is a gateway through which other densities are reached. The word "through" is a frequent pivot in the narrative, which suggests the possibility of conversion. Again, when Da Silva "paints" his way around the Commonwealth Institute in London and circumnavigates the globe imaginatively, he gropes "into an abyss . . . confronting the half-human status of man . . . a gulf of animal losses . . . as though that gulf were an opportunity for, and an expedition into, illuminations one needed to find" (68). Similarly, the "Carnival" metaphor in the novel by that title evokes a universal "carnival of history," while the repeated penetration of the outward masks of reality leads to the discovery of partial truths or of other realities, themselves of a dual or even more complex nature.

The coexistence of opposites in any phenomenon, natural or human, and the possible conversion of one kind of reality into another are expressions of a fundamental irony in the heart of all life, a creative irony that Harris sees as part of the "Universal Imagination" and that runs through his fiction. It implies a capacity to discriminate between "like yet unlike forces," which assume an infinite number of shapes in his narratives. In *The Infinite Rehearsal*, for instance, Faust is an ambivalent character, both tempter and guide for the I-narrator who acquires a capacity "to mirror yet repudiate and breach" conventional and automatic behaviors. First of all, there is irony in the fact that what seems most obvious, conventional, or taken for granted in appearances, actions, or thought, can be the very doorway through which the protagonist has access to another dimension of being. There is also irony

in "like yet unlike forces" in that, depending on the intention behind them, apparently similar forms of behavior can have different effects or their effects can be modified in the course of action.

As a conclusion, I shall quote one example among many of the ways in which this stimulating irony functions in a limited passage to transform a character's understanding. It occurs in *The Angel at the Gate* when the heroine feels separated from her alter-ego by a rising wall:

Her obsession with "the wall" was a way . . . of identifying sexual nightmares and racial, class-fixated, economic riddles. It was a way of identifying hardened inferiority complexes, hardened superiority complexes, dogmas of inequality. Equally, it was a revelation of doomed lives, doomed graces or non-graces, on either side of the wall that needed to be re-interpreted as an epitaph of the imagination through which to resume a conception of universal, endangered cradle in imagination. . . .

It was a wall she felt . . . she must herself have composed within layers and layers of self, and through which she must seek a door into what lay uncannily close at hand, uncannily far away, and beyond. In certain senses it was less a divide between herself and others and more the paradox of space that divided yet enclosed—enclosed yet released—its inmates . . . forever. *Forever* was itself a crack, a flute, a trumpet, an echo of blood and sea, bone and ice, sky and flight, wheel within wheel shaping itself into gesture, radical gesture of hope. (52–53)

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- Harris, Wilson. "Validation of Fiction: A Personal View of Imaginative Truth." *Tibistril*. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1989. 40–51.  
 ———. *Tradition, the Writer and Society*. London: New Beacon Books, 1967.  
 ———. *The Womb of Space, the Cross-Cultural Imagination*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983.  
 ———. *Explorations*. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981.  
 Munro, Ian, and Reinhard Sander. "Interview with Wilson Harris." *Kas-Kas*. Austin: University of Texas, 1972.

#### WILSON HARRIS'S PUBLISHED WORK

##### Poetry

- Fetish*, 1951  
*Eternity to Season*, 1954

##### Fiction

- Palace of the Peacock*, 1960  
*The Far Journey of Oudin*, 1961  
*The Whole Armour*, 1962  
*The Secret Ladder*, 1963

(The novels above form the "Guiana Quartet." They were reprinted with minor changes in one volume as *The Guyana Quartet*, with a "Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*" by the author, 1985. This edition was used in the essay.)

*Heartland*, 1964  
*The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 1965  
*The Waiting Room*, 1967  
*Tumatumari*, 1968  
*Ascent to Omai*, 1970  
*The Sleepers of Roraima, A Carib Trilogy*, 1970  
*The Age of the Rainmakers*, 1971  
*Black Marsden*, 1972  
*Companions of the Day and Night*, 1975  
*Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, 1977  
*Genesis of the Clowns*, 1977  
*The Tree of the Sun*, 1978  
*The Angel at the Gate*, 1982  
*Carnival*, 1985  
*The Infinite Rehearsal*, 1987  
*The Four Banks of the River of Space*, 1990  
 (This novel forms a trilogy with the two previous ones.)

### Criticism

*Tradition, the Writer and Society*. London: New Beacon Books, 1967. Rpt. 1973.  
 First basic formulation of Harris's conception of fiction, his rejection of realism, his personal view of tradition, of the role of myth, particularly in Caribbean society and in literature. Critical assessment of West Indian writers. Very useful to anyone approaching Harris's work for the first time.

*Explorations, A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966-1981*. Edited with Introduction by Hena Maes-Jelinek. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981.  
 Contains fourteen essays and covers Harris's critical development over fifteen years. Further explores the respective roles of myth and history, the "making" of tradition and initiates his continuing inquiry into the nature of imagination. Also contains essays on Guyanese Poetry, Janet Frame, Patrick White, Wole Soyinka, Jean Rhys, and Joseph Conrad.

*The Womb of Space, The Cross-Cultural Imagination*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983.  
 A more complex investigation into cultural heterogeneity, the cross-cultural sources of imagination, its functioning and multifarious expressions, particularly through an analysis in depth of fiction by William Faulkner, Edgar Allan Poe, Jean Toomer, Paule Marshall, Juan Rulfo, Patrick White, and Ralph Ellison.

### SELECTED CRITICAL READINGS

This list of studies is very selective but attempts to cover most of Harris's novels as well as major aspects of his work. Except for pioneers like Michael Gilkes and Kenneth Ramchand, West Indian critics were rather slow to respond to his fiction though they are now doing so (see, among others, Marc McWatt and Jeffrey Robinson in *The Journal of West Indian Literature*, which started publication in 1986). Harris, it seems obvious, is an artist ahead of his time and has a reputation for "difficulty"—both stylistic and in the concepts he devises because they are not, or not exclusively, rational. However, any new novel of his now arouses considerable attention in Europe, in the West Indies, and in the rest of the English-speaking world. It is not just his fiction that elicits commentary; critics interested in literary theory are discussing his concepts and personal critical approaches to fiction and their relevance to postcolonial criticism. However, all aspects of Harris's work are closely

interrelated. Now that exegeses of most novels to date have been published and their most striking features commented upon, what is needed at this stage is an overall study showing the link between those features and Harris's use of language, his idiosyncratic style. Also, in spite of a very few essays on the "prophetic" or "shamanistic" side of his writing, most critics have been shy of discussing those aspects that cannot be explained rationally.

- Adler, Joyce. "Tumatumari and the Imagination of Wilson Harris." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 7 (July 1969): 20-31. Perceptive analysis of *Tumatumari*. Raises fundamental questions implicit in Harris's fiction.
- Drake, Sandra. *Wilson Harris and the Modern Tradition. A New Architecture of the World*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986. Discusses Harris in connection with the modern tradition and argues that he is a third-world modernist. Offers perceptive analysis of four novels: *Palace of Peacock*, *Tumatumari*, *Ascent to Omai*, and *Genesis of the Clowns*.
- Durix, Jean-Pierre. "Crossing the Arawak Horizon." *Literary Half-Yearly* 20 (1979): 83-92. An excellent study of the formal aspects of "Arawak Horizon."
- , editor. *Symposium on Wilson Harris*. Special issue of *World Literature Written in English* 22 (1983). Apart from Harris's own essay on Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* and an interview, contains articles on his poetry and early writings, on *Palace of the Peacock*, *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, *Ascent to Omai*, *The Tree of the Sun*, and on "Structure and Vision in the Novels of Wilson Harris." A stimulating collection analyzing major phases in the author's development.
- Gilkes, Michael, editor. *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*. London: Macmillan, 1989. Apart from Wilson Harris's own essay on "Literacy and the Imagination" contains eleven essays by different authors on his work approached from various perspectives and grouped under three headings: "Phenomenal Space," "Language and Perception," and "The Dialectical Imagination." Extremely useful.
- . *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel*. London: Longman, 1975. Very good introduction to Harris's novels up to *Black Marsden*. Places Harris's work in its Caribbean context and gives special emphasis to theme of psychic reintegration.
- Howard, W.J. "Wilson Harris's *Guiana Quartet*: from Personal Myth to National Identity." *Ariel* 1 (1970): 46-60. Reprinted in *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*. Edited by William Walsh. London: Oxford UP, 1973: 314-28. Places *Guiana Quartet* in symbolist tradition and points to affinity with Blake and Yeats. Harris transforms history into myth.
- James, C.L.R. *Wilson Harris—A Philosophical Approach*. Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1965. Relates Harris's thought to existentialism, particularly Heidegger.
- Lacovia, R.M. *Landscapes, Maps and Parangles*. Toronto: Black Images, 1975. Presents numerous extracts from Harris's work to demonstrate that he creates a "reticulum of resonance" by superimposing images.

Mackey, Nathaniel, editor. *Hambone* 6 (Fall 1986). Issue with a special focus on Wilson Harris. Apart from Harris's contribution ("Character and Philosophic Myth"), contains essays by Jerome Klinkowitz, Hena Maes-Jelinek, Jean-Pierre Durix, and Joyce Adler on *The Angel at the Gate*, intertextuality and "The Art of Translation," *Carnival*, and "Female Figures and Imagery in Wilson Harris's Novels."

———. "The Unruly Pivot: Wilson Harris's *The Eye of the Scarecrow*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20 (1978): 633–59. Perceptive study of the form of *The Eye*. Insists on the increasingly self-reflexive nature of Harris's fiction.

Maes-Jelinek, Hena. "'Inimitable Painting': New Developments in Wilson Harris's Latest Fiction." *Ariel* 8.2 (1977): 63–80. Concentrates on painting as an exploratory metaphor and on notion of tradition in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* and *Genesis of the Clowns*.

———. *The Naked Design. A Reading of Palace of the Peacock*. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1976. General introduction to Harris's fiction and detailed study of the language and imagery in *Palace of the Peacock*.

———. *Wilson Harris*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. Traces the development of Harris's fiction from *Palace of the Peacock* to *The Tree of the Sun* through a detailed analysis of each novel up to *Black Marsden*, which initiates a new phase illustrating Harris's notion of "The Novel as Painting." The novellas and five novels in that phase are discussed in one last chapter.

———. "Wilson Harris." *West Indian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1979. 179–95. General introduction to Harris's work in the context of fiction in English. Traces his major development through major phases.

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McDougall, Russell. "Wilson Harris and the Art of *Carnival* Revolution." *Commonwealth* 10 (1987): 77–90. A sensitive and excellent Bakhtinian interpretation of *Carnival*, drawing parallels between different forms of art (painting, music) and analyzing in detail the formal aspects of the novel.

Petersen, Kirsten Holst, and Anna Rutherford, editors. *Enigma of Values: an Introduction*. Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1975. Apart from Harris's essay on Melville's "Benito Cereno," contains a very useful introduction by the editors to many of his basic concepts. Also includes essays on *Palace of the Peacock* and *Tumatumari* as well as discussions of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Golding's *The Inheritors* in the light of Harris's ideas.

Ramchand, Kenneth. "The Secret Ladder." *An Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature*. Jamaica: Nelson Caribbean, 1976. Extremely good and illuminating detailed study of this novel, written specially for students but useful to all readers.

Slemon, Stephen. "'Carnival' and the Canon." *Ariel* 19.3 (1988): 59–75. As in previous article on *Carnival* (*Kunapipi* 9.3) discusses allegory in this novel but explores this aspect in greater depth and uses a more theoretical approach.

#### Interviews

With Michel Fabre. *World Literature Written in English* 22 (1983): 2–17.

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With Stephen Slemon. *Ariel* 19.3 (1988): 47–56.

With Jane Wilkinson. *Kunapipi* 8.2 (1986): 30–45.

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