

Wilson Harris, *The Angel at the Gate* (London: Faber and Faber). £7.50.

Since *Palace of the Peacock* Wilson Harris's writing has developed considerably as his philosophical and aesthetic explorations gradually modified the metaphorical design of his fictions. The latest 'London' novels present a very different world from that of the *Guyana Quartet*. But one constant in his work, at first intuitively groped for, then consciously achieved, is the joint attempt to present a transformed vision of reality and to do so in a genuinely original form or language. Originality for Harris is not synonymous with difference or novelty, even if these characterize his work, but is rather an attempt to recover traces of an ancient or an eclipsed reality usually ignored by the factual recreations or descriptive analyses of much realistic writing. It implies a contrasting juxtaposition between what he sees as the realist illusion and the deeper reality — relations in depth — that the breakdown of the objective world can give access to.

Gradually also, contrary to the impression created for many readers by *Palace of the Peacock*, it has become clear that the purpose of the protagonist's quest in Harris's novels is

not a vision of totality or absolute truth, which in his eyes are associated with unbearable terror and beauty. A recurring theme in his recent fiction has been man's lust for infinity, for Paradise, for impossible utopias (a major temptation in *The Angel at the Gate*). This usually entails the idealization of a given reality and the assumption that it can be whole and self-sufficient. Harris's reverse view that truth is unfathomable, that no reality is final or sovereign has led in his fiction to a breakdown of the continuous objective narrative. Because reality is not one, it lends itself to a division into successive layers ('divisions within divisions' as the narrator says in *The Angel at the Gate*) between which the exploring consciousness moves. Hence the unrealistic plot and the frequent shifts in the narrative between 'objective' reality and the irrational, paradoxical but no less real associations and reversals of situation which become perceptible at a deeper level of consciousness. Similarly, the human personality is not one but a series of selves extending through experience to apparently lifeless objects (like the wheel and carpet sold together with a slave girl in the eighteenth century in this novel) as well as the natural and the animal world. Rather than clearly recognized and categorized areas of experience, Harris's protagonists explore a 'no man's land' between entrenched and opposed positions which he, as narrator, 'translates' for his readers.

The role of the narrator (W.H.) in *The Angel at the Gate*, as in *The Waiting Room*, *Companions of the Day and Night* and *The Tree of the Sun*, is to reveal the intensely real material that emerges from the subconscious of the protagonist, Mary Stella Holiday, through her automatic writing and her conversations under hypnosis with Father Joseph Marsden, a character first introduced in Harris's fiction in *Black Marsden*. The deep commitment and seriousness of the narrator's task makes him the very reverse of the 'fabulator' of much contemporary fiction. A major theme here is that modern society is diseased, our civilization dying, and a new sensibility is in the process of being born. The disease and the possible rebirth are both presented through Mary's experience, the malaise she suffers from and the hope embodied in her three-year old son John, the 'miracle child' born at once of her marriage with Sebastian, an unemployed drug-addict, and of her spiritual union with Joseph Marsden, who employs her as secretary at Angel Inn and thus supports her and her family.

As in most of Harris's novels, each bare fact offers the possibility of understanding what he sees as the 'variable forces' (angelic or daemonic and terrifying) at work in human beings and in the universe. Each event can lead to very different developments, just as similar actions can entail different or wholly unexpected results that contradict their motives. Reality is thus never imprisoned into an inevitable mould, and this constant capacity for openness and transformation gives the novel its form. The most striking example in the plot of *The Angel at the Gate* is the splitting of Mary Stella's diseased personality into Stella and Mary. Since Mary Stella is in a sense the muse of an ailing modern imagination, the splitting amounts to a 'fissur[ing of her] sovereign death-wish' (Wilson Harris, 'The Quest for Form', *Kunapipi*, V, 1, 26-27). The death-wish is enacted when Stella commits suicide, though after death she intensifies Mary's visionary powers and stimulates her imaginative quest into other cultures. This occurs through Mary's apprehension of the life and predicament of three 'angels', Indian Khublall, black Jamaican Jackson and British Wheeler, through her perception also of the ways in which catastrophic events in their lives (the death of Khublall's child-bride or the disappearance of Jackson's 'daughter of man') can be converted and become part of the conversion of the age. Individual tragedies and real or threatening disasters that may affect large numbers, such as atomic warfare, are evoked concomitantly and seen either to possess the seeds of change or a 'capacity for conversion of deeds to avert catastrophe' (p.88). In a remarkable

passage (see p.88) Marsden, who lies wounded on the pavement after being struck by a bale fallen from a lorry, emerges through the miniature world the bale has become and reveals through the prophetic grace he lights in Mary's body the possibility to transform the 'mesmeric quantity' of atomic fire into 'qualitative mystery', a new dimension in the mind (thus a revival of imagination) to cope with atomic fire and prevent the terror it arouses from blinding us.

This complex image (less paradoxical, however, in the light of the Fiery Furnace episode in the Bible) is one example among many of the way in which visions of apparently implacable catastrophes are reduced and seen to possess a constructive element. The surface fragmentation of the narrative is not an end in itself; it shows that the images in man's psychological space are all partial and must not be mistaken for a whole that remains elusive. Similarly, the shift of interest in the second half of the narrative from the deprived 'holy' family of Sebastian, Mary/Stella and John to Khublall and Jackson as Mary envisions their experience in the mirror of Marsden's Angel Inn is not so arbitrary as it may at first seem. The men are 'living masks' of Marsden whose spiritual authority has grown out of the suffering or 'slicing' imposed on him by fate in different parts of the world. Joseph (Marsden), not Mary, has the redeeming role. Like his mythical forbear two thousand years ago (a Yeatsian analogy), he is the protective and compassionate man who looks after Mary and cures her. But unlike Yeats's pessimistic prophecy, his 'annunciation of humanity' (p.31) is envisaged as a real possibility through Mary's encounter with other cultures, other forms of violence and deprivations the 'angels' (who are also 'prey of the furies') were involved in.

Actually, both Mary's 'son of man' and Jackson's 'daughter of man' have the same grand-father, Mack-the-Knife, an infamous character who with a set other personae, Lucy Brown, Sukey Tawdry and Jenny Diver (the mother who reappears in times of crisis) comes straight out of a Louis Armstrong song, itself inspired by John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Harris's well-known equation of writing with other forms of art has led here to his using music as a 'profound metaphor' actualizing through its mutes and voices the rhythms of Mary's consciousness and the movements of the characters who come into life within it when she effaces herself. Music plays the same role as painting in the earlier novels bringing together and creating a 'mutuality' ('Quest for Form', 22) between alien or seemingly incompatible characters and elements in their lives or the cultures they represent. The musical metaphor is the structural design which sustains what Harris calls 'a profound alteration of fictional imagery in narrative bodies' ('Quest for Form', 26). Possibly, in the alteration we find in novel after novel lies the secret of his inexhaustibly inventive genius.

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