

Maes-Jelinek, Hena: Wilson Harris. In Kirkpatrick, D.L. (ed.). *Contemporary Novelists*. 4th ed. London, Chicago: St. James Press, 1986, pp. 389-391.

Youngdahl, in *Wake Up, Stupid*, analyzes American literature in a statement epitomizing Harris's own work:

What is it that thrusts Mark Twain and Sherwood Anderson into one stream, and Henry James into another? . . . It has so much to do with a man's early relationship to the society of boys and games—that miniature of our larger society of men and business, with its codes and rules, its provision for imagination within these rules, with winning, losing, timing, bluffing, feinting, jockeying, with directness of aim and speech and with coming back off the floor again.

Harris's fiction is solidly within this tradition which translates social games into comedy, a comedy which explains our secret lives more clearly than any social or psychological theory.

—William J. Schafer

HARRIS, (Theodore) Wilson. British. Born in New Amsterdam, British Guiana, now Guyana, 24 March 1921. Educated at Queen's College, Georgetown. Married 1) Cecily Carew in 1945; 2) Margaret Whitaker in 1959. Government surveyor in the 1940's, and senior surveyor, 1955–58, Government of British Guiana; moved to London in 1959. Visiting Lecturer, State University of New York, Buffalo, 1970; Writer-in-Residence, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, and Scarborough College, University of Toronto, 1970; Commonwealth Fellow in Caribbean Literature, Leeds University, Yorkshire, 1971; Visiting Professor, University of Texas, Austin, 1972, and 1981–82, University of Mysore, 1978, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1979, and University of Newcastle, New South Wales, 1979; Regents' Lecturer, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1983. Delegate, National Identity Conference, Brisbane, and Unesco Symposium on Caribbean Literature, Cuba, both 1968. Recipient: Arts Council grant, 1968, 1970; Guggenheim fellowship, 1973; Henfield fellowship, 1974; Southern Arts fellowship, 1976. Address: c/o Faber and Faber Ltd., 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AU, England.

PUBLICATIONS

Novels

- The Guyana Quartet.* London, Faber, 1985.
Palace of the Peacock. London, Faber, 1960.
The Far Journey of Oudin. London, Faber, 1961.
The Whole Armour. London, Faber, 1962.
The Secret Ladder. London, Faber, 1963.
Heartland. London, Faber, 1964.
The Eye of the Scarecrow. London, Faber, 1965.
The Waiting Room. London, Faber, 1967.
Tumatumari. London, Faber, 1968.
Ascent to Omai. London, Faber, 1970.
Black Marsden: A Tabula Rasa Comedy. London, Faber, 1972.
Companions of the Day and Night. London, Faber, 1975.
Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness, and Genesis of the Clowns. London, Faber, 1977.
The Tree of the Sun. London, Faber, 1978.

The Angel at the Gate. London, Faber, 1982.
Carnival. London, Faber, 1985.

Short Stories

The Sleepers of Roraima. London, Faber, 1970.
The Age of the Rainmakers. London, Faber, 1971.

Verse

Fetish. Privately printed, 1951.
The Well and the Land. Georgetown, Magnet, 1952.
Eternity to Season. Privately printed, 1954; revised edition, London, New Beacon, 1979.

Other

Tradition, The Writer, and Society: Critical Essays. London, New Beacon, 1967.
History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas. Georgetown, National History and Arts Council, 1970.
Fossil and Psyche (lecture on Patrick White). Austin, University of Texas, 1974.
Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek. Aarhus, Denmark, Dangaroo Press, 1981.
The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination. Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1983.

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Manuscript Collections: University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica; University of Texas, Austin; University of Indiana, Bloomington; University of Guyana, Georgetown.

Critical Studies: *Wilson Harris: A Philosophical Approach* by C.L.R. James, Port of Spain, University of the West Indies, 1965; *The Novel Now* by Anthony Burgess, London, Faber, and New York, Norton, 1967, revised edition, Faber, 1971; essay by John Hearne, in *The Islands in Between* edited by Louis James, London, Oxford University Press, 1968; *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* by Michael Gilkes, Trinidad and London, Longman, 1975; *Enigma of Values* edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, Aarhus, Denmark, Dangaroo Press, 1975; *The Naked Design: A Reading of Palace of the Peacock*, Aarhus, Denmark, Dangaroo Press, 1976, and *Wilson Harris*, Boston, Twayne, 1982, both by Hena Maes-Jelinek; *West Indian Literature* edited by Bruce King, London, Macmillan, 1979; "The Eternal Present in Wilson Harris's *The Sleepers of Roraima* and *The Age of the Rainmakers*" by Gary Crew, in *World Literature Written in English* (Arlington, Texas), Autumn 1980; "Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb" by Nathaniel Mackey, in *Criticism* (Detroit), Winter 1980.

Wilson Harris comments:

(1972) *Palace of the Peacock* through *The Guyana Quartet* and successive novels up to *The Sleepers of Roraima* and *The Age of the Rainmakers* are related to a symbolic landscape-in-depth—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.

I believe that the revolution of sensibility in defining community towards which we may now be moving is an extension of the frontiers of the alchemical imagination beyond an *opus*

contra naturam into an *opus contra ritual*. This does not mean the jettisoning of ritual (since ritual belongs in the great ambivalent chain of memory; and the past, in a peculiar sense, as an omen of proportions, shrinking or expanding, never dies); but it means the utilisation of ritual as an ironic bias—the utilisation of ritual, not as something in which we situate ourselves absolutely, but as an unravelling of self-deception with self-revelation as we see through the various dogmatic proprietors of the globe within a play of contrasting structures and anti-structures: a profound drama of consciousness invoking contrasting tones in the variable phenomenon of creativity within which we are prone, nevertheless, to idolise logical continuity or structure and commit ourselves to a conservative bias, or to idolise logical continuity or anti-structure and commit ourselves to a revolutionary bias. Thus we are prone to monumentalise our own biases and to indict as well as misconceive creativity. A capacity to digest as well as liberate contrasting figures is essential to the paradox of community and to the life of the imagination.

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Wilson Harris's short experimental novels undoubtedly form one of the major and revolutionary fictional achievements in English in this century. Their visionary character, the terseness and accumulated depths of his language, the progression of the many-layered narratives through significant moments of intuition and the gradual metamorphosis of their metaphorical texture rather than mere plot, his conception of character as a nucleus of selves or "community of being" rather than a sharply defined entity, these are some of the elements that link him with other great novelists in whose fiction form and vision combine into an original work of art. To the realistic novel which, in his eyes, "mimics" reality, consolidates a world view, and presents it as inevitable, Harris opposes the "drama of consciousness" which involves his characters in a process of breaking down of biases and self-deceptions as a preliminary to fulfilment. His work is a focus of cross-cultural traditions (English, South American, Caribbean). Its distinctive character in the first ten novels or so emerges from his confrontation with, and immersion in, the Guyanese landscapes and from his re-interpretation of the basic facts of Caribbean history. Harris is intensely concerned with the future of humanity: He sees the Guyanese (man's) psyche as a "spatial" reality equivalent to the phenomenal world. Both are the receptacle of lost generations of victims. Hence his exploration of hidden densities in both outer and inner landscapes. Harris's characters develop towards a nameless dimension of being similar to the void-like condition experienced by the Caribbean peoples but seen now as a starting point or a vessel of rebirth out of the hideous polarizations inherited from the colonial past. There are hidden resources, neglected possibilities inherent in any given situation which it is the function of art to redeem in order to transform the consequences of historical catastrophe. These need never be final but offer an occasion for change and renewal when re-lived imaginatively and "digested." Harris's deep faith in the capacity of art to save the world from despair and further catastrophe is paramount in his vision and sets him apart from prevailing trends in contemporary fiction.

Palace of the Peacock, the first novel of *The Guyana Quartet*, is also the first of all Harris's "novels of expedition" and contains in essence all further philosophical and formal developments. The recreation of a journey into the Guyanese interior conveys in startling poetic language the violation of landscape

and people by a multi-racial crew in pursuit of an elusive Amerindian folk. Their leader, Donne (a name that evokes the Renaissance spirit and the creative imagination), is moved by the mixture of idealism, greed, and brutality that usually prompted conquering expeditions. His penetration of the Guyanese jungle and the successive deaths of the crew in the rapids of a nameless river symbolize and initiate a movement to be found in most of Harris's fictions: the disorientation of the characters, the *crumbling* (rather than consolidation) of their personality, which, terrifyingly, shakes them out of their fixed sense of identity but enables them to approach an "otherness," a buried sensibility, in themselves and their opponents and so to alter opposition into an awareness of mutuality. The *Quartet* creates a composite picture of Guyana, its various landscapes and racial communities. In each novel the protagonist is faced with the legacy of a terrible past that must be re-interpreted. Though a sense of social justice may be partly responsible for the change of his attitude towards victimized people, this does not stem from a social or political ideal but rather from a need for individual regeneration prior to a new conception of community. The emphasis is on an underlying unity and interrelatedness, on spiritual freedom and responsibility, all of which are envisaged through the recognition of the alien and weak element in the community as its true roots. The possibility of unlocking a fixed order of things and eroding the certainties in which the characters are self-imprisoned is central. Even their mode of apprehension is shattered and reshaped. Their only hope (the hope of humanity) lies in a regeneration of the creative imagination.

This shattering of rigid ways of being leads to partial and unfinished reconstructions of reality in the protagonist's consciousness, partial because there is no such thing as absolute truth, unfinished because the dynamic tension between dissolution and rebirth is in the very nature of existence and Harris refuses to invest absolutely in one way of being. In his second cycle of novels (from *The Eye of the Scarecrow* to *Ascent to Omai*) there is a double preoccupation with the creation of genuine, though never wholly achieved, community and the art of fiction Harris (and the narrator within the novels) attempts to create. Their subject-matter is, even more specifically, the working of the subjective imagination and of memory in order to transform the accepted view of history and the meaning of individual experience, which is presented as wholly internalized. The protagonist is an "agent of personality" through whom the past re-enacts itself as a free "construction of events." The result is a fragmentation of the surface reality (and of the narrative structure) concomitant with an accumulation of motifs and images, which are so many ways of approaching without ever fully achieving an underlying wholeness. A major impression created by these narratives is of the duality that arises from the sensuous evocation of concrete local environments together with the spiritual, universal dimension pursued by the characters.

In the two ensuing collections of stories, *The Sleepers of Roraima* and *The Age of the Rainmakers*, Harris re-interprets Amerindian myths and shows that they can elicit a new conception of life, for myth, as opposed to history, is shown to be a dynamic force that can convert apparently changeless deprivations. In the enlarged setting of the following novels Harris pursues his tireless search for the vanished "savage" elements (emotions, forms of art, cultures) which have contributed to the shaping of modern civilization or the modern consciousness but which they tend to ignore. *Black Marsden* takes place in Scotland and South America, *Companions of the Day and Night* in Mexico, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*,

CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS

The Tree of the Sun, and *The Angel at the Gate* in London, while *Carnival* is set in both South America and London. Experience is still largely recreated through the consciousness of the major character who realizes the need to bridge the gap between civilizations and bring to light the mutation by which eclipsed people(s) are beginning to emerge from their buried condition. In these novels Harris's always intensely visual rendering of both outer and psychological landscapes has developed into his use of painting as an exploratory metaphor. Da Silva is a painter who brings together on his visionary canvases models that represent the two faces of tradition, one assertive and oppressive, the other immaterial and hardly perceptible. The need for an imaginative balance between the two inspires his effort to create a "middle ground" between the contrasting figures he paints. The child in all three London novels stands for the renaissance or "annunciation of humanity" which Harris keeps presenting through his fiction as a real possibility.

Throughout his work Harris's major concern is with both a "new architecture," a translation of conscience, and the nature, the mystery of creativity itself. This twofold preoccupation comes to a head in *Carnival* which also fuses his exposure of man's incorrigible longing for absolute perfection (usually achieved at the expense of others), with his exploration of the underworld. Once more, Harris *transforms* a traditional form, here the Dantesque allegory through which his characters progress, by modifying the meaning of Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise. These are not separate or self-sufficient, since, as Harris illustrates it, the inferno of wasted lives runs parallel to and supports the glories of paradise. Through the characters' experience and the partial falling away of the masks they wear in the carnival of history and of existence, 20th-century Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso are *altered*. Even Paradise ceases to be an absolute and is envisaged as a revolution of sensibility in modern man, which makes possible a "complex marriage of cultures."

—Hena Maes-Jelinek

