

# The Writer as Alchemist: The Unifying Role of Imagination in the Novels of Wilson Harris

H E N A   M A E S - J E L I N E K

The point I want to make in regard to the West Indies is that the pursuit of a strange and subtle goal, melting pot, ... is the main steam (through unacknowledged) tradition in the Americas. And the significance of this is akin to the European preoccupation with alchemy, with the growth of experimental science, the poetry of science as well as of explosive nature which is informed by a solution of images, agnostic humility and essential beauty, rather than vested interest in a fixed assumption and classification of things.<sup>1</sup>

As he has repeatedly shown in his novels, this definition by Wilson Harris of the main tradition in the Americas applies both to the individual and to society in Caribbean life and literature. It obviously points to what he considers as the essential role of the West Indian writer, namely to awaken his countrymen to their true nature and to make them realize the power of imagination to conceive and to generate a truly revolutionary life. Imagination, for Wilson Harris, is not the exclusive privilege of the artist; it must come alive in each person if modern humanity is ever to achieve the 'reversal' which its present, antiquated mentality calls for.

The transforming power of imagination played a key role in the alchemist's attempt to achieve a unity which was symbolized by gold but was as much of a psychological as of a physical nature. For the alchemist projected his own psychic background, his Unconscious, into the matter on which he experimented, so that the latter became as it were his other self, with whom he entered into a living relationship equivalent to an 'inner dialogue'.<sup>2</sup> It will be obvious to anyone familiar with Wilson Harris's work that his characters are involved in a similar process of discovery and self-discovery. It is clear from his use of symbols that his writing is steeped

in alchemical thought and that his characters' progress towards their goal recalls the stages and difficulties of the alchemist's search. From the *Guiana Quartet*<sup>3</sup> to *Tumatumari*<sup>4</sup> the search for unity in man and society has led Wilson Harris to probe increasingly deeper into the power of imagination to stimulate the individual to a sense of responsibility towards himself and his fellow-men through a better understanding of his personal and historical background.

Because of the glaring contrasts in its landscape and its highly diversified population Guyana may appear as an ideal "vessel of experience" to the modern alchemist, intent on discovering a way to harmony within the human community. However, social harmony as indicative of a wider universal unity can only be achieved through the individual. Like D.H. Lawrence, Wilson Harris insists that social salvation lies in individual regeneration alone. Man must first come to terms with himself and his environment before he can ever hope to change society. That each person is responsible for the state of the world is suggested by Abram in *The Whole Armour* when he tells Christo, who is accused of a crime he has not committed, "Nobody innocent". In this novel, significantly prefaced with Goethe's words "I am glad to have ideas without knowing it and to see them with my very eyes", the spontaneous relation of reciprocity between the fundamental opposites, spirit and matter, finds expression in the reciprocity between man and the landscape. In *The Whole Armour*, as in its original context, the Goethe quotation refers to the underlying unity between matter and spirit as well as to the concrete reality of ideas: these are projected in nature and can therefore be 'seen' or discovered by man. The landscape in Wilson Harris's novels always acts as a prime mover to consciousness because man discovers in it a reflection of his own unconscious state with which he must eventually come to terms. In *The Whole Armour* the spiritual confinement of the people is paralleled by their position in the region, caught as they are between the sea and the jungle. By achieving self-knowledge and hence assimilating his personal and historical past after his experience in the forest, Christo is able to point to the possibility of release and to the latent oneness of the Guyanese people while he himself becomes the symbol of that unity, the "backbone of the land ... a watershed of hope between ancient terror and newborn love". The natural environment plays a twofold role in Wilson Harris's novels. It is first a mirror reflecting man's dual role and as such is subject to the same

process of division, death and rebirth, which explains why it is capable of stirring man's imagination and of helping him to define himself. Secondly, because it has a life of its own, it is not to be possessed but developed, as man should develop his own potentialities, with the help of science. Thus even man's relationship with the landscape involves the two elements which, according to Harris, should contribute to his rebirth: imagination and science.

Whereas *The Whole Armour* throws light on the reciprocity between man and nature, in *The Secret Ladder* this very relationship acts as an incentive to the recognition of a similar reciprocity between men. Poseidon, who is identified with the river Canje and its swampy banks, awakens in Fenwick "a daemon of freedom and imagination and responsibility". When Fenwick first sees him, it is "as if he saw down a bottomless gauge and river of reflection", which suggests that he recognizes in the old man a part of himself of which he may have been unaware. Shortly afterwards the river itself concurs to make Fenwick alive to his twofold nature. Weng, his foreman, surprises him by appearing suddenly in the open doorway of the tent with his back to the water, and Fenwick experiences "the grotesque sensation that the frame of the tent and the placid river mirrored his own uneasy shadowy reflection." In the ensuing conversation Fenwick is not allowed to forget that instant of self-recognition. He finds that he and Weng seem to have exchanged positions, that he is being judged by his foreman, whom he intended to rebuke, and as he lies to placate him, he becomes uncomfortably aware of his own self-deception. Gradually, Weng unsettles Fenwick's reassuring image of himself, and the latter can no longer evade his own ambiguous two-sidedness.

In Wilson Harris's later works such identifications are frequent; they take place spontaneously and are part of a larger pattern of associations: on the way to discovery characters become linked in complete reciprocity and 'informed' about one another before they separate again. This movement of fusion and separation can be repeated a certain number of times before the fundamental unity between men is perceived as a reality; it allows man to discern in the fluid and evanescent mirror of other people's humanity what he has always ignored, willingly or not, about himself. His unconscious self, at once an opposite and a complement to his conscious being, becomes perceptible. At the same time he gains insight into other men, those 'opposites' with whom, as with his own other self, he is so often involved in

a relationship of hunter and hunted, victim and victimizer. Man only learns to know himself by learning to know others equally well. Duality is the very substance of all life at all levels and in all forms in Wilson Harris's novels; to become aware of it in oneself and in others is to start on the path of discovery; but this duality will remain sterile or a source of strife unless it can be transmuted into a dialogue.

At this stage it is necessary to point out that Wilson Harris's characters, however 'refined' into psychological entities, are also very much flesh and blood people integrated into the physical universe. Only the Amerindians remain elusive, slightly unreal in body and soul. They are the lost tribe, the ghosts of a forgotten and therefore unconscious past, the social equivalents of one's ignored and deeply buried self. But since they are an essential part of Guyanese life, they must be rescued and assimilated into the Guyanese whole. Just as the individual should face the reality of his own hidden being in order to progress towards fulfilment, so the community must reclaim and integrate those parts of itself now lost in the heart of the continent but still bound to the whole with the invisible ties of shared experience in a common melting-pot.

The lost tribe appears in most novels, always suspicious of civilization and as reluctant to cooperate as their pursuers, whose main purpose is exploitation. Yet, as we see in *Palace of the Peacock*, the conquerors only find themselves when they at last join the fugitive tribe. In *The Secret Ladder* these are not Amerindians but the descendants of runaway slaves, who resent the intrusion of technology, represented by Fenwick and his crew, into their region. The surveyor is of mixed African descent, and his efforts to ingratiate himself with Poseidon and his tribe amount to an attempt to confront and redeem both his personal past and a dark episode in the history of his country. Like the decapitated mare of Fenwick's dream or the beheaded river on the latter's erroneous map, Poseidon, as a symbol of primitive humanity, is like a body whose head has been severed. Yet Fenwick rightly traces in him the dual effects of "ancient spirit and hopelessness" and of "divine pride and human fallibility". Poseidon is both god and man, and it is in this dual capacity that he arouses Fenwick's conscience and becomes for him the mainspring of the rebirth of humanity. It is for the head, Poseidon's thinking and progressive countrymen, to find its way back to its roots, to the body. "It's a question of going in unashamed to come out of the womb again", Fenwick writes.

Exploring and coming to terms with the past, whether personal or historical, is not an easy and sentimental task. It is a slow and painful process of initiation, in which the neophyte sheds layer after layer of self-deception and illusion until he reaches 'the void' and dies to his individuality before he can be reborn. In *The Waiting Room*,<sup>5</sup> for instance, this psychological amputation is described in terms of the physical operation undergone by Susan, and conveyed with eloquent simplicity: "The sensation she recalled was *pain*, aftermath of living excision, of unconscious event,... waking pain ... acute confrontation between *buried* past and revival in the present." In *The Secret Ladder* Fenwick's gradual recognition of his limitations is stimulated by his difficult relations with the crew and with Poseidon and is inseparable from his inquiry into the nature of authority and freedom. He discovers that freedom and responsibility, the concomitants of rebirth, are not free gifts; they must be 'created' in conjunction with the process of self-conquest. In the course of his spiritual liberation Fenwick realizes that he is contributing to a "new immaterial genesis and condition". It is here that imagination tempered by humility plays an essential role in recreating the past, in investigating sometimes profitably, sometimes uselessly, the many connected rooms of memory. The unifying process towards self-knowledge is also a creative act through which opposites eventually merge on reaching the void that precedes rebirth. As Fenwick's experience shows, this exploration is a dive into the dark river of the unconscious. But the man who can face the disturbing truths he discovers emerges regenerated from this frightful confrontation. Nevertheless, harmony is more easily achieved on the personal than on the social plane. To use Eliot's words, Fenwick learns that "History may be freedom" and both his personal and historical past serve him as a bridge to a new vision of life. Conversely, for Poseidon's frightened disciples "History [is] servitude", and by re-enacting the escape of their ancestors they merely re-enter the "prison of the void".

In *The Secret Ladder* the impossibility for the representatives of science, and those of primitive humanity, to initiate a dialogue, is obviously due to some extent to prejudice and unwillingness on both sides, with the exception of Bryant and Fenwick. But it also seems that the latter's advances and his incapacity to reconcile imaginative understanding with action account for that failure. Not only is he accused of endangering the life of his own men by his tolerance, but to both sides his attitude seems

ludicrous and naive. One shouldn't deduce from this that, given the stubbornness and distrust displayed by both parties in such conflicts, Wilson Harris is suspicious of action. Yet it is perhaps significant that in the novels published after the *Guiana Quartet* his characters tend to achieve self-knowledge exclusively through the interplay of imagination, memory and foresight in re-living their past lives.

*Heartland*<sup>6</sup> takes us a step further in that direction, for it is not through any direct confrontation with another person that Stevenson is forced to look into himself. He has come to work in the jungle after a reversal of fortune, the death of his father and the betrayal of his mistress. Disturbed by his solitude, he starts struggling with both outer and inner heartlands in an attempt to unravel the truth about himself. The physical reality of the jungle and its role as a "climate of the mind" correspond so closely as to be inextricable. As the concrete source of terror and distress at the centre of Stevenson's existence, the forest provides the stimulus to his memory and imagination in the recreation of his past. Through the experimental working of his imagination on the ingredients of his former life Stevenson is able to discover its latent, previously ignored meaning and to try "to break through beyond himself". From his initial realization that "he had never learned to surrender himself to a true vocation, dialectical and spiritual" and that "therein lay ... the imprisonment of obsessed and frustrated being", he comes to experience acutely the truth of Kaiser's statement that "Man need man". His imaginative perception of events alone makes him realize the full impact of his father's self-sacrifice and makes him identify himself with the latter to the extent of experiencing his father's death as his own.

It is also through such an effort of imagination that Stevenson perceives the intimate correspondence between himself and Petra, the Amerindian muse in whom he sees the mistress he still longs to possess. He helps her to give birth to her child at a time when both die to their former selves, becoming "equally strange in relation to themselves and to every cherished misconception they held". He is profoundly shocked that she should have fled while he was getting food for her and interprets her flight as a reiteration of his mistress's act of ingratitude. Actually, though he has gone far in the creation of responsibility and freedom, he has been easily deceived by his own generosity. By running away, Petra saves him from his former self and helps him to give birth to his new personality since she

makes him realize that his motive was selfishness and that

she had seen through his duplication of sentiment to the core of his necessity to mount a guard over himself.... Stevenson was appalled at the spectre of his own dreaming mind locked in a cell of time in the forest.... Would one never learn to submit gently to the invisible chain of being...?

What Harris is suggesting is that we are all 'locked in a cell of time' from which the muse is trying to release us. As appears clearly in *Heartland*, the muse is also the archetypal mother, and she is usually of mixed white and Amerindian origin. She is obviously meant as a link between the modern and the primitive imagination. But modern man always tries to take advantage of her. And whenever she is pregnant by him, she is rejected by her Amerindian countrymen, a sure sign, it seems, that they refuse to cooperate with, and be regenerated by, modern civilization.

In *Tumatumari* the muse herself is divided, split into the two women who personify imagination: Prudence and her counterpart, Rakka, the 'barren' Amerindian mistress of her husband, Roi Solman. While Rakka, the muse of the Lost Tribe of the Sun, has been "crushed, despoiled" and is like a "Vacant lot in the depth of a wilderness", Prudence, modern man's creative imagination, is suffering from a nervous breakdown. Her husband, half-white, half-Amerindian, the "engineer of the future" and representative of science, embodies the spirit of man which, like the king of alchemy, is in need of regeneration. In alchemy the king is often represented by the sun, a symbol of gold and of man's spirit; the alchemical process describes his transformation from an imperfect state into a perfect whole. Prudence's father, the Guyanese historian Henry Tenby, represents mankind. When he eventually unites with the soul and the spirit (Prudence and Roi), he takes part in the alchemist's "Aurora Consurgens": the dawning of consciousness in mankind.<sup>7</sup> But it is on Prudence, at once the creator and the protagonist of the "epic of ancestors" she endeavours to write, that "the whole burden of conception[falls]." She is the prime mover of unity and achieves it while recreating the history of her family and of Guyana which have made her what she is: a sick woman who has lost her newborn child and her husband, decapitated in the rapids of life, and who now hesitates between self-destruction and self-creation.

In *Tumatumari* imagination as an independent character takes the

initiative of probing into her own soul and into the heart of those from whom she is inseparable – her father and her husband – to emerge liberated from her confrontation with the humiliating truths humanity hides under its multiple masks. By her complex associations with each character or several of them at the same time, and with the mixture of generosity and jealousy common to most women, Prudence gropes towards understanding and self-realization in a series of alternating illuminations and black-outs. Simultaneously, her father's and her husband's lives, which recall the Guyanese experience in the first half of the twentieth century, are reconstructed in accordance with her free and unpredictable associations. Yet the reconstruction is not so haphazard that a logic of motives does not clearly emerge. Indeed, the two men are linked to each other as they are to the 'blind-folded' Indians by having always acted in Prudence's name. The Indians, who have lost their primal vision, and the men of Tenby's and Roi's generations, wrapped in their cloak of false emancipation, have all put reins upon their 'underground imagination'. Only Prudence's confession of weakness and humility will save them from the dreadful vision of the "Tumatumari of Tomorrow". It is through her that they will be reborn, through her understanding of the need expressed by her father for "a far-reaching assessment of the collision of cultures", a reconciliation of the "alien furnaces" of nature and society.

On the threshold of consciousness Henry Tenby realizes that in order "to forge a new treaty of relations between nature and society", he must "crawl back into the interior ... crawl back into the womb" in which all oppositions are resolved. As in *The Secret Ladder*, the 'opposites' in this novel are the social outcasts or the dispossessed whom Tenby and Roi have exploited in some way or other. As a matter of fact, both are to a large extent defined through their attitude towards those opposites. Roi is an intelligent man with a clear-sighted view of the world in which he lives, but he feels uneasy in this "age of marvel and transition". In spite of his single-mindedness he is his own worst enemy, a sceptic who wears a mask of self-deprecation. He is also a cynic, who sees the Indians as "the conscience of our age" but goes on exploiting them "in the name of science, emancipation, industry, all rolled into one self-interest". When Roi is made whole in Prudence's recreation of his drowning in the waterfall, it is not by transcending his own contradictions but through the creation of reciprocity between Prudence and Rakka, who become the positive and



negative poles on the circumference of a whirlpool spiralling down towards fulfilment.

Henry Tenby's Rakkas are all those he betrayed in both private and public life while taking refuge behind his masks of Prudence, Virtue and Refinement: his dark-skinned son and the African past he represents, the East-Indian woman confined in her economic ghetto, and all those who suffered from his acquiescence in the suppression of liberties. In all circumstances he has been an obstacle to evolution and real emancipation by succumbing to fear and weakness. Yet he also, like Roi, is aware of the possibilities of rebirth. His own 'birth of conscience' starts as an extension of Roi's fulfilment. As he confronts each of his failures with Prudence's eyes and rises with her from the bottom of the pool, as all the restricted elements of his life become "liberated and digested by ... imagination", we become aware of mankind's miraculous power of recovery. In its extraordinary concise complexity the novel presents an almost unlimited number of relationships at all levels of experience and their transformation into a "genuine open dialogue". That all men need one another and can only reach fulfilment through one another is a major theme in Wilson Harris's work. But again it is not inspired by an easy humanitarianism. Rather it is a corollary to his belief that in the midst of the known and scientifically knowable world, there persists in nature, in 'lost' communities, in the individual man, an unfathomable mystery which must be approached imaginatively and made to balance the achievement of civilized man, if the latter is not to be defeated by his own conquests. The jungle or its equivalent in nature, the victims, whether runaway slaves or lost tribe, his own hidden self, these are the mysterious opposites with which Harris's modern character must come to terms by tempering the role of science with imagination. It explains why Harris perceives in the process of discovery the "agnostic humility" of the alchemist or artist rather than a "vested interest in a fixed assumption and classification of things."<sup>8</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (New Beacon Publications, 1967); pp. 32-33.
2. Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XX, 1953); p. 262.  
The synthesis of the conscious with the unconscious corresponds to the 'union of opposites' pursued by alchemists.
3. The *Guiana Quartet* includes *Palace of the Peacock* (Faber and Faber, 1960), *The Far Journey of Oudin* (Faber and Faber, 1961), *The Whole Armour* (Faber and Faber, 1962), and *The Secret Ladder* (Faber and Faber, 1963).
4. Wilson Harris, *Tumatumari* (Faber and Faber, 1968).
5. Idem, *The Waiting Room* (Faber and Faber, 1967).
6. Idem, *Heartland* (Faber and Faber, 1964).
7. Carl Gustav Jung, (cf. 2.); p. 456.
8. See the quotation with which this article opens.