

# Another Future for Post-Colonial Studies?:

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## Wilson Harris' Post-Colonial Philosophy and the 'Savage Mind'<sup>1</sup>

Hena Maes-Jelinek

Wilson Harris often says that his criticism is a long extended footnote to his fiction.<sup>2</sup> Footnotes cannot exist without the text they refer to, and their usual function is to throw a helpful though not indispensable light on it. Harris's comment makes it clear that, in his own mind at least, fiction is the more important genre he practices and that his criticism cannot be dissociated from it. Indeed, his critical writing has grown in the wake of, or in parallel with, his fiction; each new essay developing and making explicit concepts which, as Eliot commenting on Donne put it, have first been sensuously apprehended and 'experienced' in his creative writing.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, Harris's fiction and criticism have increasingly intertwined as his fiction was beginning to include discursive and meditative passages and his essays more frequently resorted to his own novels to provide metaphorical illustrations of abstract arguments. They are therefore complementary, mutually enlightening, and present together a profound and original analysis of the nature of colonialism and post-colonialism, their many insidious forms and their effects on the psyche of both colonized and colonizers as individuals and communities. It may be this emphasis on the deeper psychology of people(s) rather than commitment to a political ideology (though his writing does have a political dimension) which explains the comparatively small impact of his essays on academic criticism apart from a few exceptions. Significantly, Harris is not mentioned in the Williams and Chrisman Reader on *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* nor, judging from the announced table of contents, in the forthcoming Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature. He is altogether ignored by Edward Said, though he anticipates by some twenty five years some of the analytical statements and recommendations in *Culture and Imperialism*.

*Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967) remains a major formulation of Harris's continuing twofold concern with the eclipsed traditions of colonized peoples and the nature of fiction just as he expressed in that first small volume the correlation he saw between imperialism and the English realistic novel or, as he called it, the 'novel of persuasion', which he was later to associate with the 'Romantic certitudes of the nation-state'.<sup>4</sup> It also offers one of the earliest definitions of a specifically West Indian sensibility to come out after Lamming's very different analysis in *The Pleasures of*

*Exile* (1960), while it also lays the foundation of a Caribbean aesthetic (Rohlehr & Maes-Jelinek). Harris's obsession with the need to retrieve a buried native cultural tradition that is also the source of his perception of Caribbean man as 'the latent ground of old and new personalities',<sup>5</sup> takes many different forms and gradually became the rationale of all his later explorations of the imprints of conquest on post-colonial man in general. Apart from further investigating various aspects of tradition, the essays written between 1968 and 1981 and collected in *Explorations* (1981) analyse the nature of myth and, as I hope to show, its role as a dynamic agent of transformation.

*The Womb of Space* (1983) explores the deeper, in his eyes 'universal', cross-cultural resources of eclipsed tradition in order to stimulate and capture a ceaseless dialogue 'between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness'.<sup>6</sup> One should note here that from his first formulations of cross-culturalism, Harris saw it as a mutuality not between different peoples and cultures in the modern world but between established or self-assertive people(s) and 'silent or eclipsed voices'.<sup>7</sup> Quite unlike influential post-colonial critics who claim the right to appropriate Western intellectual models and their 'frame of power',<sup>8</sup> especially in the field of theory in order to turn them against the West itself, Harris has drawn attention with unflinching constancy to the limitations and one-sidedness of Western intellectual approaches which developed from the enlightenment to the present-day.<sup>9</sup> He deems their excessive rationalism incapable of apprehending the 'phenomenal legacy' (the silent Amerindian presence) of the conquered and the 'alternative realities' which may grow out of a genuine confrontation with the 'ruin' of their 'psychological premises'.<sup>10</sup> His insistence on the importance of the 'intuitive archetypal imagination'<sup>11</sup> superseded and discarded after the Renaissance is no nostalgia for cultural primitivism; nor am I suggesting that he penetrates the 'primitive' mind. Involvement with the Amerindian past, he says, is not an involvement with 'these Aborigines as such, but with the aboriginal fact of conquest, and through this with the perennial, essentially human or natural fact of obscure, sometimes catastrophic change'.<sup>12</sup> Nor does he idealize the Amerindian in a new version of the eighteenth-century 'good savage' but repeatedly warns against such an idealization

which, just as much as the reduction of the primitive to a lower creature, confines him to a fallacious uniform model since we are not in a position to fathom his mind or motivations<sup>13</sup>

The Guyanese critic Gordon Rohlehr writes that 'the ghost of [the] legacy of guilt, materialism, brutality and psychic crippledom [in plural, self-divided Guyana] cannot be laid by amnesia or evasion, but by confrontation and atonement, and since the crippledom exists within the psyche and has been maintained by ex-colonial peoples long after the physical withdrawal of the colonizers, then confrontation and atonement have to occur within the psyche'.<sup>14</sup> All Harris's protagonists are immersed at one stage in 'the terrifying legacies of the past', an immersion at once concrete (the Guyanese interior), psychological and moral (the inner self) and creative ('Interior of the Novel'). The 'womb of space' is Harris's metaphor for the psyche as inner spatial ground of exploration, in which the dialectical relationship between so-called savage and so-called civilized is a way of restoring a psychological balance lost with the conquest. In contradistinction to the prevailing post-colonial need to assert a distinct, usually 'national' identity, contrary also to the human tendency to feel secure in stable homogeneous groups, the basic principle of Harris's anti-colonialism and, more generally, of his philosophy of existence is his conviction that all human perceptions, positions, achievement of any kind or 'images' are 'partial structures masquerading as totality',<sup>15</sup> while wholeness, even if it exists, remains inaccessible to man. Therefore will-to-power, any kind of sovereignty, hubris, or natural human tendency to consolidate material and immaterial hegemony whether through institutions, possessions or one-directional thought are necessarily inspired by an illusory and self-deceptive sense of superiority and assurance. Viewed in this light, colonialism holds sway over all human activities, and the only way to escape its strictures is by breaking down its homogeneous authoritarianism. This sounds commonplace enough in post-colonial criticism. What distinguishes Harris's view from that of other post-colonial critics is that he does not discard one politically inspired world view for another, does not present man as a social and political being *only* but as also part of an unending natural and cosmic process of separation, reunion, interweaving or overlapping of fragments - not mere hybridity - which the disruption of uniformity or apparently stable plane of existence brings to light. It is important to keep in mind that all forms of life, physical and psychical, partake of that process to understand the two-way movement that informs the concept of creativity discussed in his essays and shaping his fiction: the 'voyaging imagination' travelling towards a reality whose very livingness makes it erupt of itself, 'the sap of life ris[ing] anew'.<sup>16</sup>

In 'The Quest for Form' (1983) Harris presents his 'philosophy' as an 'evolving metaphysics of the imagination'.<sup>17</sup>

rooted in his post-colonial vision. His conception of evolution (paradoxically synchronic rather than diachronic) is very different from Darwin's theory of 'remorseless progression',<sup>18</sup> comparable to what he calls 'progressive realism' in both life and fiction. His own view is of a ceaseless cyclical motion, an alternation of light and darkness or any kind of opposites, simultaneously involved in a transformative movement towards each other. There is no standing still, no 'stasis of divine comedy of existence'.<sup>19</sup> 'Divine comedy' naturally calls up Dante, whose work Harris greatly admires while also objecting to the persistence of his totalizing vision of eternity, part of the medieval context beyond which modern man should have moved. Eternity evokes both terror and beauty. It is an absolute and 'implacable riddle since [it] is an extinction of birth and death in creative human terms'.<sup>20</sup> The function of art is 'to penetrate and make fissures in eternity'.<sup>21</sup> This is where eternity and the idealistic face of colonialism come together since the latter is informed by a longing for infinity, a need to exercise tyranny 'as insane continuity or lust for infinity - endless progression, endless logic that consumes and despoils'.<sup>22</sup> The role of the imagination, both creative faculty and process, is to fissure a permanence sustained by that desire for an unchanging infinite in order 'to transform "unbearable" heavens and hells'.<sup>23</sup> To a static infinity Harris opposes a contrapuntal ceaselessly self-revising one, a counterpoint (a recurring concept in his essays) of variable images or other kinetic forms of art such as music. In *The Four Banks of the River of Space* the protagonist sculpts an Amerindian woodman in his 'book of dreams':

... it was authentic comedy or retrace of unimaginable genesis I sought . . . to infuse into the arts of life as a *moral counterpoint* to civilisation's addiction to technology.<sup>24</sup> (italics mine)

Among the many essays Harris wrote on the nature of imagination, after 1982, as so many partial approaches to a faculty and process parallel with, and partaking of, the world in the making, two of them, similarly entitled 'The Fabric of the Imagination', and a third, 'The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination', explain a conceptualization of creativeness metaphorized in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* as Penelope's weaving and unweaving of 'the coat of tradition',<sup>25</sup> itself a metaphor for the surfacing of art from the experience of the lost. In keeping with his belief in the partiality of all structures and the inherent plurality at all levels of human nature and experience, the central dynamic informing Harris's post-colonial philosophy and creative canvas could be summed up as 'break up [whatever tends to solidify in institutional or intellectual activity] and re-vision'. Significantly, the first essay opens by stating that 'fabric' implies that 'somewhere within the interstices of unrecorded

time . . . the unique . . . [genesis of the imagination] imbues the human psyche with flexible and far-flung roots in all creatures, all elements, all worlds and constellations, all sciences, all spaces susceptible to visualisation'.<sup>26</sup> This insistence on the universality and all-pervasiveness of the force of imagination evokes a web of inter-relatedness between man, the natural (animal and vegetable) world and the cosmos. Moreover, as opposed to the assertion of revealed religion that world and man were created at a given time by an external, all-powerful creator, 'interstices of unrecorded time' suggests that the origins and future of the creation and the force which animates it are equally enigmatic. To keep abreast of the evolving cosmos or in step with 'the swift runner of life'<sup>27</sup> man needs, as it were, to jump on the bandwagon of evolving creation, attune the antennae of his consciousness to its movement and respond to the frail clues emerging from its layers of density as imagination itself arose enigmatically through the 'interstices of unrecorded time'. As suggested above, these frail clues can be sudden eruptions of movement in an apparently passive nature, or sensuous embodiments of what Harris calls 'numinous proportions' at the heart of creation, for example Caroll's music in *Palace of the Peacock* or the butterfly Jordan kills angrily in *The Secret Ladder*. Through such 'diminutives', he says, unbearable experience becomes bearable art.<sup>28</sup>

'Numinous proportions' are hidden, Harris adds, 'within the mechanisms of colonialism and post-colonialism',<sup>29</sup> or to phrase it differently, within any authoritarian system which tends to suppress difference. They are inherent properties of a mysterious otherness confined to an abyss of apparent non-existence (the extinct 'ruined' premises already mentioned) out of fear either of 'the conquistadorial other . . . the other and stranger god, [or] the alien native . . .'<sup>30</sup> He has commented in many different terms on this 'absent presence' (such as 'live fossil spaces' or 'variable fossil proportions', 'the soil of the world's unconscious', 'hidden texts of reality'), which partakes of the ceaselessly evolving existential movement and can therefore arise unpredictably in both space and time. Though it is not the subject of this essay, it is worth pointing out that Harris similarly considers that the substance of his fiction partly erupts from hidden texts of reality into the protagonist's consciousness. In other words, that substance (the past and, in a sense, the world itself) re-creates itself in the welcoming consciousness of the protagonist who renounces (or attempts to renounce) his authority as narrator and is therefore a 'vessel'. 'The other and stranger god' in the above quotation also makes it clear that he associates the other with the sacred, a point I shall come back to presently. My intention at this stage is to draw attention to the many corresponding or parallel strands in his philosophy of existence, rooted in his conviction that no human experience is ever completely lost, that only a lucid confrontation of the past, however abysmal, can gradually alter its once catastrophic effect and shape a

different future. Hence the importance of memory in a backward and forward movement of consciousness and imagination, which attempts not only to encompass man's historical past, present and potential future but also to break through the ontological strata of his being and the plural masks it assumes as it branches out into the animal, the human and the divine. Harris frequently presents the Renaissance painting by Titian 'The Allegory of Prudence'<sup>31</sup> as a striking illustration of man's ontological 'fluid and variable identity',<sup>32</sup> whereas he draws from pre-Columbian mythology and art (Quetzalcoatl's emblematic figure of heaven and earth, variegated human and animal Mexican sculptures) sustaining visualizations of his internationalism and multi-racialism.<sup>33</sup> Increasingly outspoken in their criticism of nationalism, ethnic purity and 'cleansing', his latest essays are also more insistent on the need for contemporary man to integrate his natural and aboriginal heritage into a vision of the future.

Harris sees this integration as one of the means to alter a terrifying historical past and, in conjunction with it, the perceiving consciousness. Alteration also derives in part from a capacity to distinguish between the contrasting, though apparently similar, possibilities arising in any given situation. Among the examples he frequently puts forward is a distinction between violence as an agent of destructiveness and regenerative force, which may look alike as the sexual act of the rapist resembles that of the genuine lover, as fire destroys or purifies, or at a much further remove, an ambivalent deity (creative/perverse) within ourselves impels us to respond creatively to multifariousness in all men, 'all species, landscapes, riverscapes, skyscapes'<sup>34</sup> or, on the contrary, consents to what he sees as socially organized incest in applied ideologies of racial purity.<sup>35</sup> Awareness of such dual possibilities within each action or phenomenon enables the discriminating consciousness to discover the other face of catastrophe and the seed of renewal it contains. Catastrophe, says Harris, 'is part and parcel of the difficult transformation of habits of power and fixtures of greed'.<sup>36</sup> Hence the 're-visionary potential' in terrifying disruptions and his assertion that 'the reality of the abyss [is] a true goad to the psyche of innovative imagination'.<sup>37</sup>

In this re-visionary exploration of historical and individual past Harris sees the need for ways of reading reality that counter the hegemony of reason and the normally accepted logic of causality, trusting to intuition, the senses, images and structures in outer and inner reality. Reversing the Marxist view that society makes man, he avers that changing the world first requires alterations in the self.<sup>38</sup> The re-vision of the impact of history is thus rooted in subjectivity and begins with a 'self-confessional, self-judgemental',<sup>39</sup> descent into the self as the ground of contradictory forces at work in all areas of human experience. Such descent, at once spiralling and multi-faceted, is variously perceived as an evolution towards the unconscious (the seat of unacknowledged

emotions and motivations), towards the abyss (the ground of lost populations) as well as towards the sacred other and active archetypes in both universal and individual unconscious. It is thus also a mystical descent, one might say a mysticism in reverse towards inner transcendence, a 'transcendence within immanence',<sup>40</sup> as opposed to a transcendence external to man and beyond his normal experience. But again, this descent would itself be in search of an infinite absolute were it not counterpointed by the emergence of the *plural* otherness ('strangers in the self') it seeks to meet, thereby transcending the limits of the individual self. Adumbrated in *Palace of the Peacock*, the pursuit of an invisible native presence and spiritual ancestry in the apparent void of Caribbean history has deepened, through an increasingly mythical and archetypal vision, into an attempted confrontation with the plural divinities - demonic and angelic - vying for precedence in man's unconscious.

This may be an inadequate (because linear and inevitably simplifying) way of describing a process which, even in his essays, Harris refuses to enclose within a 'logical' frame precisely because it resists a rational conceptual formulation and perpetually deconstructs, 'breaks down', a vision of the world which Western thinkers have generally assumed to be wholly intelligible, even though its origins and future remain unfathomable and science itself repeatedly revises its earlier 'partial' views. As opposed to modern Western philosophy, mythical thought is attuned to the natural and cosmic worlds, to their rhythms and metamorphoses. It captures forms of the subterranean tradition Harris repeatedly probes, which finds expression in what Lévi-Strauss calls a 'logic of sense perception'<sup>41</sup> and a language of dynamic imagery. In his many essays on myth Harris avoids abstract definitions and makes a distinction between what he calls the mimicry of fact (history in its conventional sense) and the originality of myth.<sup>42</sup> The one traditional feature of myth he pinpoints is creative capacity rather than mere narrative function to account for creation. However, he conceives of creativity as alteration rather than arousal out of nothingness unless that nothingness is also somethingness breaking into the world or into consciousness. Moreover, mythical thought ignores barriers between categories of being, animal, human, divine. Subject to the same 'partiality', imprisoning biases and creative potential specific to human perspectives, myth, for Harris, is both event and 'untamable force', a 'medium of transformation'<sup>43</sup> through which the dialogue between unconscious psyche and conscious mind gives momentum to creativeness.<sup>44</sup> It is his emphasis on myth as 'rooted in catastrophe' yet capable of altering it, which makes him read the limbo dance as a myth re-enacting the catastrophic dismemberment of slaves in the Middle Passage while re-activating resources of creativity as it bridges past experience in Africa with potential new being in the West Indies ('History, Fable and Myth'). Similarly, he

interprets the ending of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the light of an Amerindian creation myth which tells of Arawaks pursued by Caribs and seeking refuge in a tree to which the Caribs then set fire, and the Arawaks are converted first into sparks, then into the Pleiades in the sky.<sup>45</sup>

Harris thus finds in the mythical and archetypal imagination a way of coming to terms with the irrational forces which modern man tends to ignore or repress at his cost when they explode and destroy, as well as a means of altering these forces into a creative current. In his latest essays he denounces with increasing moral urgency new forms of violence and tyranny in the post-colonial era:

conflicts between genders, between races and cultures, between technology and nature, are looming more critically and terrifyingly perhaps than ever before within the frontiers of history and the traffic of refugees of body and spirit everywhere.<sup>46</sup>

To understand the form recently taken by his plea for transformative renewal, one should remember the crucial role of women in his fiction as both abused, raped, subject to all kinds of violation, yet unique vessels of the seed of renewal, as the womb metaphor in all its applications (to the cosmos, nature, reality, space, time) clearly shows. Woman, however, is both a life-giving agent of compassion and cosmic love and a dread-inspiring death goddess. Interestingly, Harris sees the death goddess, the dreaded sirens and furies (revenge goddesses who in ancient mythology pursued the doers of unavenged crimes), as embodiments of the spirit of revenge which tears the world apart in horrendous conflicts. They appear in the popular mass media in such films as *Fatal Attraction*, *Black Widow* and *Play Misty for Me*, though these are not directly related to world conflicts but unwittingly express a similar 'revenge-syndrome nursed by those who see themselves as despoiled, raped or injured'.<sup>47</sup> However, just as in his *Carnival Trilogy* the traditional face of Ulysses is broken into plural masks and generates a transmutation of implacable Homeric vengeance into a movement towards forgiveness, so dread-arousing female archetypes are broken and from killing goddesses turn into 'blessed furies' or vessels of cosmic love.

With the benefit of hindsight Harris himself sees the partly 'daemonic' old Arawak woman in *Palace of the Peacock* transfigured near the end into a blessed fury or, as he says of the Arawak virgin dressed in her hair, a 'broken virgin-archetype'.<sup>48</sup> He also frequently recalls that after completing *Carnival* he came upon Norman O'Brown's *Love's Body* in which an ancient myth tells of 'the wanderings of the soul after death [as] pre-natal adventures, a journey by water in a ship which is itself a goddess, to the gates of rebirth'.<sup>49</sup> The myth, he feels, validates retrospectively his own use of the ship metaphor, from *Palace* on, as the vessel of the 'voyaging imagination' as well as a composite image of the mother

goddess, a protean figure equally susceptible of giving life as of manacling her offspring to her mast (body) in a paralysing embrace.

In his latest novel *Jonestown* the ship goddess blends with the virgin archetype into the 'virgin ship' in which the protagonist travels back and forth from his childhood and his mother's death in a Georgetown suburb to the actual Jonestown massacre in the Guyanese forest in November 1978. The massacre is one of the many climactic holocausts into which the colonialist spirit has degenerated in the twentieth century. Francisco Bone, who was one of Jones's followers, meditates on the possibility of translating the terrible violence unleashed by ideological absolutes into broken energizing sources of renewed imagination 'beyond all cults, or closures, or frames'.<sup>50</sup>

### Regeneration through Virgin Sirens.

How strange to entertain the regeneration of oneself through the furies one has long feared. How steeped has one been - without quite knowing it - in uncanny dread of the masks one's dead mother wears, or has worn, across centuries and generations, the mystical wilds or wildernesses, the mystical brides? How profound is the fall in one's faint body at the heart of Carnival, one's fall that breaks such charisma, one's fall into a new birth of consciousness?<sup>51</sup>

### NOTES

1. In spite of this allusion to Lévi-Strauss, I must point out that Harris dissociates himself from structuralism (*Explorations.*, p.132). Nevertheless, there is an obvious affinity between some aspects of myth he describes and the Lévi-Strauss of *Mythologiques*.
2. e.g. 'Faulkner's Orphans', (Talk given at the South Bank Centre in London on 7 April 1994) & Letter to Hena Maes-Jelinek, (28 April 1996).
3. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose* (Penguin Books, 1953) p.109-110
4. 'Profiles of Myth and the New World', in *Nationalism vs Internationalism, (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, ed. by Wolfgang Zach and Ken L. Goodwin (Tübingen, Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996), p.84
5. *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London, New Beacon Books, 1967)p.28
6. *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983)p.viii
7. *ibid*, p.xix
8. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989)p.109
9. For a comparison of Harris's critical views with post-modernism and post-colonialism, see Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Numinous Proportions": Wilson Harris's Alternative to All "Posts", in *Past the Last Post, Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, ed. by Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp.47-64
10. *Explorations* ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup, Dangaroo Press, 1981) p.45
11. *ibid* p.99
12. *ibid* p.44
13. *ibid* p.44
14. Gordon Rohlehr, *My Strangled City and Other Essays* (Port-of-Spain, Longman Trinidad, 1992) p.10
15. *Womb op cit* p.50
16. *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) p.39
17. 'The Quest for Form', *Kunapipi*, V, 1 (1983), p. 24
18. *ibid*
19. *ibid* p.27
20. *ibid* p.22
21. *ibid*
22. *ibid* p.23
23. *ibid* p.26
24. Wilson Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (London, Faber and Faber, 1990)p.13
25. *ibid* p.54
26. 'The Fabric of the Imagination' 1, in *The Radical Imagination, Lectures and Talks*, eds Alan Riach and Marc Williams (Université de Liège, L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1992)p.175
27. Wilson Harris, *The Waiting Room* (London, Faber and Faber, 1967)p.67
28. 'Fabric', *op cit* p.179
29. *ibid* p.176
30. *ibid* p.177
31. 'The Fabric of the Imagination' 2, in *The Radical Imagination, Lectures and Talks*, eds Alan Riach and Marc Williams (Université de Liège, L3 - Liège Language and Literature, 1992)p.76
32. 'Profiles' p.79
33. see *ibid*
34. *ibid* p.80
35. *ibid*
36. *Explorations op cit* p.98
37. 'Fabric' 1, *op cit* p.181
38. 'Fabric' 2, *op cit* p.69
39. 'Profiles' p.83
40. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris, Fata Morgana, 1972), p.106; Luc Ferry, *L'homme-Dieu ou le Sens de la Vie* (Paris, Grasset,

- 1996). p.50
41. 'une logique des qualités sensibles', Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit, Mythologiques 1* (Paris: Plon, 1964)p.9
  42. *Explorations, op cit* p.100
  43. *Explorations, op cit* p.125
  44. *ibid*
  45. *ibid* p.127
  46. 'Apprenticeship to the Furies', forthcoming in *River City* (University of Memphis)p.10
  47. *ibid* p.3
  48. *ibid* p.9
  49. 'Fabric' 2 *op cit* & 'Voyaging Imagination' forthcoming in *How Novelists Work*, ed. by Maura Dooley to be published by Seren Books.
  50. Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London, Faber and Faber, 1996)p.8
  51. *ibid* p.40

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