Sandra E. Drake. *Wilson Harris and the Modern Tradition*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986. 213 pages. $29.95.

The publication of a new book on Wilson Harris's fiction is inevitably something of an event to which his admirers look forward. Not only does the complexity of his multifaceted novels require more than one or two approaches, his inexhaustible creativity makes critical updating a necessity. Sandra Drake's study does not deal with the late novels, but her discussion of Harris's work in connection with the modern tradition is highly welcome, since there was a strongly felt need for just such a treat-

ment of his fiction as well as for a clear explanation of what exactly makes Wilson Harris a "modern" writer.

The present critique is intelligently conceived. The first two chapters discuss the origins of the modern tradition, the impact of the discovery and exploitation of the Americas, the Caribbean in particular, which have modified Europe and the Western world generally, contributing to its economic development, growing confidence, and technical skill and issuing in the twentieth century in a crisis that resulted in the loss of colonial power, a sense of fragmentation, and deep anxiety. The author supports her argument with references to Todorov (*The Conquest of America*) and Derrida, making full use of the latter's criticism of centered structure and his emphasis on decentering to present Harris as a Third World modernist whose work is "a fiction of decentered structures" (35). She is careful to point out that her analysis is not Derridean or Lacanian but rather that it shows Harris's affinity with both thinkers, using their writings to explain "doubling" and "repetition" in Harris's novels. What seems to me particularly interesting in the "frame" of her study (the first two chapters which trace the source of Harris's fiction to New World history and the last one, which draws an analogy with the German philosopher Ernst Bloch and his concept of "hope") is that they sum up the general trend of Harris's work. This includes his analysis of the historical and psychological consequences of a whole continent's catastrophic experience, which nevertheless does not issue in angst or despair but offers occasion for hope through his conception of reality and of the nature of death.

The central and major part of the book is devoted to a discussion of four novels chosen because their plot is based on "Caribbean historical, mythical and social realities" (5): *Palace of the Peacock*, *Tumatumari*, *Ascent to Omai*, and *Genesis of the Clowns*. I regret the absence of any discussion or reference to *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, which is not only a key work to understanding Harris's rendition of the "Caribbean realities" but represents an essential turning point and stage in the development of his modernity (I use this word intentionally because the author deliberately avoids making a distinction between modernism and postmodernism). If there is such a thing as a "decentered structure" in Harris's novels, I would suggest that it is to be found in *The Eye*, which also contains the only explicit statement in his fiction on what Drake calls his "theory of language" (see the "Manifesto on the Unborn State of Exile") and to which she often alludes. However, her repeated use of the word "theory" (cf. "theory of psyche") and even "codes" to describe Harris's views or, surprisingly, the function of his characters (150) seems to me rather unfortunate and in striking opposition with the nature of his narratives. The same is true of "decentered system," which I see as a contradiction in terms, since the very notion of a system denies the "free-play" concomitant with decentering and is, I think, inadequate to convey Harris's world view. I do not deny that a parallel can be drawn with the modern thinkers who Drake discusses, but I would suggest that a specific feature of both Harris's mode of thinking and writing (even in criticism) is that his strong and intensely personal convictions (including his concept of language) dismantle (rather than erect themselves in) theories, codes, or systems and that his own unpredictable and idiosyncratic creation of language and character runs counter to any fixed formulation.

The discussion of Harris's novels is the best part of the book and the one which argues most convincingly, by referring to the texts, that Harris is a Third World

modernist. The titles of chapters admirably sum up basic motives and experiences recreated in Harris's opus: Conquest and Desire, Ruin and Resurrection, the Epoch of Light. Inevitably many of the points made on *Palace of the Peacock* have been expressed before because much has been written on this novel, but the organization of the commentary around the guiding lines of doubling and repetition is wholly original. Similarly, Drake's analysis of the other three novels abounds in perceptive comments that throw new light on them, since she gives more importance than earlier critics to socioeconomic problems and to Harris's metaphorical representation of them. It is especially true of *Genesis of the Clowns*, so far a neglected novel that for the first time is given here full and most helpful treatment. It is all the more disappointing then that purely theoretical statements should sometimes be offered without the least reference to the texts that could illustrate them. An example is the author's argument that Harris adapts the Arawak concept of the *Zemi* to express "his crucial idea of alternate possibility" (168). Interestingly, *Zemis* are explained as essential features of Harris's Third World modernism, metaphors even for the kind of novels he writes, since "the *Zemi* secretes possibility and dissolves stasis" (175), and "language itself [is] a *Zemi*" (176). Yet no mention is made of "Arawak Horizon," the story in which this is most eloquently illustrated, nor of *The Tree of the Sun*, in which Harris precisely explores the metaphorical possibilities of the *Zemi*.

This brings me back to the theoretical framework of this study. While wholly subscribing to Drake's assertion that Harris's modernism derives from his Third World perspective, actualized in his rendering of the predicament of "*Amérika mestiza*" yet also showing his awareness of the consequences of the decline of Western hegemony both in the West and the rest of the world, I think that some important qualifications must be made. For all the importance of his critical thought and writings, I consider Harris as primarily a novelist (the essays usually appear as a posteriori formulations of fictional developments). The source and material of his art are undeniably West Indian, but this West Indianness cannot be separated from the Western literary tradition in which he was trained. It is not simply a question of leaving aside Yeats, Blake, Eliot, and Hopkins (xiv) because readers of this book are likely to be familiar with the Western tradition. However significant the transformation of this tradition by Harris in the light of West Indian experience, it is essential to take into account the conjunction of both Caribbean and Western elements (the diversity and multiplicity increasingly obvious in his fiction) to explain his modernity. The fact that Drake herself felt the need to resort to so many Western thinkers (not just Lacan and Derrida but also Laing, Bakhtin, and Bloch) to explain it may be proof of this. Harris has explained that even as a child he was brought up on a "multiplicity" or "community" of texts: Amerindian, African, and European myths. These appear together in his earliest writings whether poetry or fiction, and more recently he has reinterpreted Caribbean experience through his own modified version and vision of *The Divine Comedy* and the Faustian myth. As he has repeatedly shown, both Caribbean and Western "images" are to him only "partial," a partiality that makes him reject both "obsessive centrality," as Drake rightly argues, and the centrality of an exclusively Third World. The difference between his and Derrida's emphasis on decentering is that Harris believes (and has expressed this belief with growing conviction) that partial images, structures, or systems are mediated by a mysterious creator or creative capacity, sometimes also called "unfathomable centre," "*unstructured*

mediation," or "untamable force" (e.g., in *Explorations* 132). "Truth exists," says the narrator in *The Tree of the Sun*, "but rests on unfathomable foundations." This dynamic center ("The centre moves," Harris wrote in an early poem) and its unfathomableness account for the essentially *unfinished* quest in all Harris's novels, a quest that in his recent fictions and the title of his latest novel he calls "Infinite Rehearsal." It is a quest into endlessly deeper layers of which, If I understand rightly, doubling and repetition are aspects or stages. That is why the vision of Paradise in his novels can never be final (as Drake suggests, 52, 62, 169) and even in *Palace of the Peacock* is evanescent and followed by a new separation. But it is also the reason the author's comparison with Ernst Bloch in her last chapter seems wholly relevant. Though Harris is much more suspicious of utopia than Bloch (and above all of the Marxist capacity to move toward it), the latter's belief in a world in constant becoming and in need of transformation is indeed close to Harris's, and it seems to me that what Drake calls "desire" in his fiction corresponds to Bloch's primary function of "hunger," both material and immaterial, as an essential aspect of the human psyche. As Bloch rather humorously puts it, "The Happy End is unmasked but nevertheless sought after."

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