

## Wilson Harris

Wilson Harris is one of the most challenging and rewarding novelists writing in the Commonwealth today. If ready-made concepts were not so alien to his art, we might say that he has introduced a kind of 'permanent revolution' in Caribbean writing. Contrary to what is often said of him, he is not a pure aesthete but an intensely committed writer who compels the reader to reject, as he does, prejudice and preconceived ideas, and demands his active participation in the discovery of man. "Kanaima" illustrates the outstanding qualities of Harris's work: the freedom of the imagination, the power to epitomize and control his material, and his coherent use of symbols.

In *The Marches of El Dorado* Michael Swan writes that Kanaima 'is perhaps the most potent force in all Indian life . . . it is still very much alive among the Indians as the source of death and evil'. While remaining faithful to the traditional character of the evil spirit, Wilson Harris has discovered a new significance in his role. "Kanaima" describes a struggle between life and death in the Guyanese landscape which is gradually transmuted into a struggle between life and death of a spiritual and universal significance. The setting is the dying village of Tumatumari. Though it is described as a 'standing death' it contains potentialities of life, concrete in the waterfall with its 'violent inner concentration and energy'. However, this symbol of 'something alive and vibrant and whole-hearted' is an untamed, and therefore wasted, life force.

The Indians who came to the empty and lifeless village in search of 'a new encampment', i.e., of a new life, are themselves flying from death, which for some time has pursued them in several forms; the last of these, a destructive fire, is interpreted by them as a spiritual warning. Yet, wherever they go, they see death as something outside themselves. The 'barren', African pork-knocker (a gold- or diamond-miner) who meets them personifies the death which results from the gold-miners' exclusive concern for material riches, from their 'expending nearly every drop of heart's blood in the fever and lust of the diamond bush'. Because Jordan and his companion are

inhospitable and selfish, we have the impression at first that they merely want to get rid of the Indians, until we realize that Jordan too is afraid of death and aware of its hold over his own life. Both the Indians and the Africans submit to what they interpret as the inevitability of fate and through their passivity and resignation acquiesce in the power of death.

The way to death is described in the imagery of a snake coiling through the story like the trail through the forest, and repeatedly showing its ugly head. It is a manifestation of primeval undifferentiated life as well as a life-giving principle. The snake of Tumatumari is dead since it is with its skin that the trail is compared, while its entrails, which used to contain its fertilizing power, are 'dangling and rotting' like 'husks of vine' in the forest. But the snake is also a symbol of the inferior psyche, of the unconscious, and as such is associated with the fire that destroys the Indians' village, with the garment of Kanaima and with the 'trailing darkness' that envelops Tumatumari when Kanaima is among them. As a symbol, the snake shows affinity with the shadow, itself an expression of man's personal unconscious and of the negative, dark side of his personality. Now it is as a shadow that Kanaima appears, shaped by the two shadows of the pork-knockers and making one with the shadows of the forest, which participates in their death in life. The shadow of Kanaima is inseparable from the earth, the primeval mother; its cloak sweeps 'into a black hole in the ground', and though moving freely in death, is incapable of an upward movement.

As soon as Kanaima materializes on the scene, it is shown literally feeding on the meat of life. The signs of possible rebirth are still present: the fire lifts a tongue up to heaven, and the sound of the falls with their potential fertility is heard by the Indian headman. But he remains aware of death only. Arriving at Tumatumari, he and his companions had felt that 'the world they knew was dying everywhere and no one could dream what would take its place'. Now he sees that 'all the trails were vanishing into a running hole in the ground', i.e., were all leading to death instead of ascending to life. But unexpectedly, the struggle between life and death is brought to a climax in the person of his wife, who has misjudged the trail (the snake, the shadow: death). The headman perceives then 'the cloud of unknowing darkness' (their own ignorance or want of spiritual light). Recognizing Kanaima in the watchman, in nature, in everything that surrounds them, the Indians are struck by 'what they knew all

along'. At last they acknowledge the presence of the Lord of Death among themselves. If they have been unable to escape his threatening shadow, if death was at each place they were coming to, it was because they were carrying it within themselves. Now their fate is being played out in one of their own, who acts as a 'vessel of experience', as Harris would say, 'the *groping* muse of all their humanity'.

Passing through the jaws of a monster is one way of gaining access to heaven or to real life. As the woman climbs upon the 'staircased-teeth' (the ladder leading to life), the roaring jaws of the waterfall, now a potential instrument of death, are the gateway to salvation for herself and her companions. If Kanaima alone knows whether she will reach the cliff top, it is because their unconscious, or the deathly part in them, is still all-powerful and still takes precedence over their conscious self.

Though apparently pessimistic, the story implies that the characters can free themselves from the all-pervasive influence of death. Life and death are inseparable but the Guyanese or, for that matter, universal man, can either choose between looking up to 'the golden mountains of heaven' or allowing themselves to be dragged into 'the hole in the ground'. Tumatumari means 'sleeping rocks' and rocks are said to be the source of life. Whatever is asleep can always be awakened. *H. M.-J.*