

History and the Mythology of Confrontation in *The Year of Living Dangerously*

The imaginative writer is as much the historian of the dead as of the living.¹

Wilson Harris

When Wilson Harris made this statement he was referring to those whom he calls 'the nameless forgotten dead', i.e., the suffering multitudes whose lives usually go unrecorded in history books, yet who carry the burden of history. They are involved in what he has termed 'the paradox of non-existence',² the fact that so much experience, both actual and psychological, is passed over in silence in factual history or conventional narrative and *appears* to be non-existent. For Harris these unrecorded, unwritten lives are 'a catalyst of sensibility'.³ The function of art is to retrieve them from forgetfulness and to give life to these 'unborn' existences. It is also to transform imaginatively through a metaphorical discourse the given categories of the conventional narrative. In this way historical catastrophe can become a warning for the future; it also becomes 'seminal' in the sense that through art it may lead to a vision of

rebirth and an alteration of stark opposites into a relationship of reciprocity.

Although *The Year of Living Dangerously* is written largely in the realistic mode, it lends itself to an analysis inspired by Harris's views. Two major elements suggest such an analysis: the mythological framework which structures the narrative and the omnipresence throughout the novel of the long-suffering Indonesian people symbolized at the beginning and the end by a tricycle (*betjak*) rider dressed in black, whose vehicle bears the words *Tengah Malam*: midnight.

The novel is not strictly about war since it stops short of recording the civil war and the holocaust in which over half a million people suspected of pro-communist sympathies served as scapegoats for the new leaders and were massacred. It recreates the year 1965 in Indonesia which President Sukarno himself called 'the year of living dangerously'. 'Confrontation' was his motto in that year and it involved confrontation at all levels: between the new emerging forces of Indonesia, a former Dutch colony, and the British and American neo-colonialists (*Nekolim* = neo-colonial imperialists); confrontation also between Indonesia and the newly formed Federation of Malaysia which included former British territories claimed by Indonesia such as Sarawak on the island of Borneo. To avoid sitting with the representatives of Malaysia, Sukarno left the United Nations and involved his country in a 'Crush Malaysia' campaign. While war was not actually declared on Malaysia many acts of violence were carried out, notably in Sarawak and Sabah (Northern Borneo). Another confrontation which pervades the narrative is that between the rich or the aristocrats (the *parayiyi*) and the poor, particularly the *marhaen* or small peasants whom Sukarno had conciliated by devising his own brand of nationalist Marxism or populism but whom, as is shown in the novel, he eventually betrayed. There is also the confrontation between the predominantly Muslim army forces and the P.K.I., the Indonesian communist party. It is this political opposition which culminates in the aborted communist coup of 30 September 1965 which was immediately followed by the take-over of the country by the army. All these confrontations clearly illustrate Wilson Harris's suggestion that, as a result of the wounds inflicted upon it, a 'humiliated culture is drawn ... into ... a polarization from which revenge is perpetrated upon all humanity'.⁴

The Australian-British journalist Guy Hamilton moves through these polarizations, largely unconscious of what they really mean to the Indonesian people. He is drawn into a vortex of violence until on the dawn of 1 October he challenges the soldiers who surround the presidential palace

and is blinded in one eye with the butt of a gun. Through most of the year he has been working in close collaboration with the Australian-Chinese cameraman Billy Kwan who, as he himself says, is Hamilton's eyes⁵ ('You for the words, me for the pictures' (p. 23)). Billy is a dwarfish figure who guides him through the Indonesian underworld but whom he tends to take for granted as he does Jill Bryant, a secretary at the British Embassy who falls in love with him. The plot records the mounting tension in Jakarta with the Vietnam War a threatening monster in the background and Hamilton's attempt to establish his reputation as a first-rate foreign correspondent. Everything is grist to his mill from a famine on the island of Lombok to mass demonstrations in which he twice escapes being lynched, to the information, given by Jill to prove her love, that the Chinese are sending an arms shipment to their communist friends in Indonesia. Hamilton betrays her trust for the sake of a scoop just as for a long time he fails to realize the true nature of Billy's commitment both to himself and to the Indonesian people.

A turning point in the growth of Hamilton's consciousness takes place when he witnesses a representation of the *Wayang Kulit* on the outskirts of Bandung. The *Wayang* is the shadow puppet theatre which was already popular in Indonesia in the tenth century of our era. It was strongly influenced by Hinduism and the major war epic it stages, the heroic struggle between the Pandava and the Korava, was adapted from the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*. The *Wayang* is not a mere game or theatrical representation. It expresses man's relation with the supernatural world and presents it in a concrete way. Basically, the 'representation is a mystical action where the invisible becomes visible, where the ineffable makes itself heard'.⁶ Although the shadows of the *Wayang* are mythological figures, one can see a connection between them and the shadowy lives of eclipsed people in whom Wilson Harris sees the source of the divine. The *Dalang*, i.e., the narrator and manipulator of the puppets, is a kind of shaman-priest who establishes a contact between the living and the dead. He is an artist and creator; his task is phenomenal since he improvises on a given theme and keeps the show going for the whole night (from 7.30 in the evening to 6.00 in the morning) without ever leaving the screen. The confrontation he presents is essentially one between the forces of good and evil, so that the conflict, which ends with the triumph of good and the restoration of order, is of a moral and spiritual nature.

The same is true of *The Year of Living Dangerously*. The whole novel unfolds like a *Wayang* play; it opens, and much of it takes place, in the *Wayang* Club of the Western-style Hotel Indonesia. It is appropriately dark, only lit up by red candles on the bar and a few lamps which throw

light on the figures that decorate the walls, the heroes and villains of the *Wayang Kulit*. This is where the giant hero Guy Hamilton meets the dwarf Billy Kwan and they strike up an alliance. Hamilton is associated with Arjuna, the chivalrous Pandava warrior who fights for the triumph of good; Kwan identifies with Semar, the peasant dwarf who serves and advises Arjuna and is wiser than his master in difficult situations. Together they move between two worlds, that of the gods (Sukarno in his helicopter is seen by the people as Vishnu in his magic car) and the dark world in which the people live their buried existence. The other journalists also call their team 'Sir Guy and his dwarf': they jokingly associate Hamilton with a hero of medieval romance while Kwan evokes the Arthurian dwarf Pelles who was 'split into two men — a knight and his dwarf squire' (p. 117). Thus while drawing attention to the kinship between Hamilton and his shadow or double Kwan (they both have green almond eyes), Koch also emphasizes the parallels between Indonesian and Celtic mythologies and gives them universal meaning. Kwan is often called a goblin and attributes his dwarfishness to his Irish rather than his Chinese ancestry (p. 95).

While Koch himself has suggested close correspondences between the *Wayang* figures and his own characters as well as between their deeds, the mythical framework of the novel suggests a less systematic analysis than the mere recording of parallels, whether in parody or seriousness, between myth and fiction. More significant, I think, is the groping through myth, a groping possibly unconscious on the narrator's part, towards the alteration of polarized situations in the narrative. It is largely illustrated in Billy Kwan's attitude towards the underprivileged; it is also linked with Hamilton's changing conception of his identity and his commitments.

In his numerous comments on myth Wilson Harris always emphasizes its essential life and vitality as opposed to what he calls 'the mimicry of fact'.⁷ Unlike recorded historical facts, which are apparently final but actually partial and often one-sided, myth is essentially dynamic. It breaks through historical fact and brings to light the nameless, unacknowledged faces of the downtrodden. Myth is not a mere story or a formal pattern imposing order; Harris describes it as 'a capacity for mediation between polarized emotions, polarized cultures'.⁸ In the same essay and several other of his essays Harris associates myth with music, which he presents as a metaphor in depth. Like painting and language,⁹ music can express the artist's consciousness of the invisible and of eclipsed humanity. Music is also 'a vibration of silence', 'a kind of echoing darkness',¹⁰ which alters the humiliation and bitterness of the

experience the artist is describing. What Harris calls the 'creative therapy'¹¹ of this alteration is relevant to *The Year of Living Dangerously* and its use of myth, though not in any political sense.

The novel is told by one of the *Wayang* Club journalists, Cookie, who has based his narrative on his own observations, on Hamilton's confidences and on the files Billy Kwan used to keep on all his acquaintances and even on important political figures in Indonesia. As he begins to write, Cookie identifies with the Javanese *dalang*, the master of the shadow show and whispers his invocation: '*May silence prevail: may the strength of wind and storm be mine*' (p. 89). The whole *Wayang* performance is accompanied by *gamelan* music which, as opposed to Western music, has two tuning systems, each one of which comprises three principal *patet*. The concept of *patet* is a highly complex one.¹² It is enough for our purpose to say that it is a musical scale or mode with psychological overtones. The particular tuning system (*sléndro*) which accompanies the play on which the novel is modelled includes the *Patet Nem*, *Patet Sanga*, *Patet Manjura*. They correspond to the three nocturnal periods of the performance. The narrator (and at a further remove Koch) has used these terms as titles for the three parts of his narrative. They clearly represent the prelude, intrigue and denouement or finale or, in Hamilton's development, innocence, experience and maturity. I would suggest, however, that the musical mode which enhances the meaning of the shadows' movements and structures the novel is an equivalent of the 'echoing darkness' mentioned by Wilson Harris. It is not a mere accompaniment to the deeds of heroes and villains but the 'silent voice' of the shadowed Indonesian people which underlies the narrative and eventually acts as a catalyst in awakening Hamilton's sensibility.

As I have already suggested, Hamilton fights his way through the polarizations of the Indonesian situation without being overly affected by it. He only wants to avoid *Konfrontasi* in the office between Kwan who supports the Muslims and Kumar, his Indonesian assistant, who speaks in favour of the P.K.I. Hamilton himself is involved in minor conflicts such as rivalry with the other correspondents or with Henderson, the British military attaché, who hopes to marry Jill. But these make Hamilton the parody of a *Wayang* hero rather than a real one like Sukarno. As Cookie indicates, he enjoys his affair with Jill 'under the yelling visage of *Konfrontasi*' (p. 138). He does become strongly attached to her but he pretends not to know that she is pregnant by him and feels relieved when she goes to Singapore possibly to have an abortion. Politically, he is a conservative and although a hybrid, as Kwan insists, he feels nostalgia for the British Empire. He looks askance at Kumar who

indirectly suggests that the liberal humanism he stands for is meaningless in Indonesia (p. 176).

By comparison Billy Kwan is wholly committed and is ridiculed by the other journalists for taking up one cause after another. The most complex figure in the novel, he is also the most successful creation as a character. He is the only foreigner to be genuinely interested both in the *Wayang* and in the Indonesian poor symbolized by the mother or 'muse' figure¹³ whom he presents as 'a nullity — a vacuum' (p. 131) and his pictures of the people tell a story that Hamilton doesn't tell in *his* reports (p. 81). He has, however, a dangerous tendency to turn people into gods as he does with both Sukarno and Hamilton. He sees Sukarno in multiple guises, as a 'Javanese god-king' but also as Semar, the dwarf god with whom he himself identifies (pp. 132-3). Sukarno is also (like himself) the 'great *dalang*' who has *created* (p. 13) Indonesia. At first Billy approves of Sukarno's policy of defying the world because it restores the self-respect of the Indonesians after years of humiliation. What he does not see is that this leads to Indonesia's running amok just as he himself runs amok when deeply frustrated.

Billy Kwan is presented by Koch as the 'wise fool'. With his multi-coloured Hawaiian shirt, he corresponds to the Harlequin or trickster, who for Wilson Harris represents both the sickness of an age, the legacies of hate that must be broken down, and its possible rebirth.¹⁴ Like the Harlequin, Billy is 'a borderline conception between mischiefmaker and saviour'.¹⁵ It may be as a compensation for *his* humiliation as a dwarf that he too wants to play god, particularly with Hamilton, whom he launches on his successful career and whom he introduces to Jill in the hope of enjoying Hamilton's affair with her vicariously so that he can tell Hamilton reproachfully '*I created you!*' (p. 237).

This assertion becomes truly meaningful only after Billy's death. He combines the double attribute of the *dalang* as creator and manipulator. While still alive he is more of a manipulator, like Sukarno, who, hoping to remain in power, plays the Muslims against the P.K.I. In Billy's bungalow the files he keeps can be seen as a counterpart of the puppets on the wall and illustrate his desire to manipulate people like *Wayang* puppets. Billy's duality (see the reference to his 'two faces', p. 99), like Sukarno's and like Indonesia's ('its enormous hopelessness, its queer jauntiness', p. 59), is a major expression of the duality and the oppositions through which the narrative progresses, suggesting an antinomian philosophy of life. In his dossier on dwarfs he writes '*I can shuffle like cards the lives I deal with.... I own them in a way! They can lock me out of their hearts ... but not out of their lives*' (pp. 109-10). But he feels genuine concern both for

Jill and the Indonesian people. He favours the Muslims because their faith is still passionate and in Indonesia the spiritual is all important: 'the unseen is all around us' (p. 97), he says. Addressing Sukarno in his dossier, he urges him not to forget the *marhaen* and to beware of Aidit, the communist leader:

He and his cadres would stamp out the ancient dreams which are the spiritual life-blood of the country. The myths would be perverted into propaganda, the life of the spirit stilled in the name of the full belly, and love of God made an offence. Islam would be extinguished and so would joy. (p. 134)

When he sees that Sukarno no longer cares for the *marhaen* and perhaps never did, that he maintains his policy of prestige in the face of mounting violence, the total collapse of the Indonesian economy and the starving people, Billy turns against him just as he turns against Hamilton for failing to come up to his expectations. His ambivalence prevails through his last meeting with Hamilton. He rightly sees that what is at stake all over the world is 'the death of love', that 'when we abuse each other's bodies ... the spirit doesn't die ... it just becomes a monster' (p. 236). But he refuses to see that Hamilton has begun to change after his experience in central Java; he jeers at his intention to marry Jill and dismisses him contemptuously as a wrathful god might dismiss a man unworthy of his gifts.

On the day of Sukarno's visit to the Hotel Indonesia Billy Kwan in a particularly loud harlequin shirt runs to the seventh floor and manages to hang out of a window a banner with the legend: 'SUKARNO, FEED YOUR PEOPLE' (p. 249). He is shot by an intelligence agent and falls to his death. Public and private conflict coalesce in this gesture of despair. First because Billy's disappointment in Hamilton is clearly inextricable from his strong disillusionment with Sukarno and indeed heightens it. Also, like the people of Java shortly afterwards, he illustrates Harris's view that 'the difficult transformation of habits of power ... is so frustrated ... that the psyche of possibility ... has no recourse but to run wild, to become an irruption of terror'.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Billy's death completes Hamilton's conversion. Already his trip to central Java, his fear of losing Jill and the loss of Billy's co-operation had made him realize to what extent he had become involved, and he had stopped taking people for granted. His grief over Billy and his anger at the horrors that are beginning to take place in Jakarta show that he is no longer a mere spectator and that he now genuinely cares. The loss of one eye seems to be his penalty for losing Billy, the double or part of himself, who was also his 'eyes' (p. 72), and it is significant that Hamilton is now ready to

forsake a chance of recovering his eyesight in order to make sure that he gets on the plane with Jill.

The end of the novel recreates, in terms of a *Wayang* performance, the struggle for power between the army and the P.K.I. which took place in Jakarta in the autumn of 1965. Rather too obviously, perhaps, the communist forces are identified with the *Wayang* of the Left, which in moral terms also stands for evil, while the Muslim-supported army are the *Wayang* of the Right (i.e., good) led by the *alus* prince Suharto who turns the tables on the communists and momentarily restores a semblance of order. Admittedly, both sides contain elements of good and bad but their positions in the struggle are fixed. As a result, the mythological representation of the political confrontation jars with the moral or spiritual meaning of the *Wayang*. Indeed, no one side is better than the other and, politically at least, there is little to choose between the Right, supported by spiritualist Billy, and the Left, supported by materialist Kumar. Unfortunately, there is no hope of a dialogue.

There is a suggestion in the novel that the whole world is a *Wayang* theatre (see pp. 104 and 108). But it is only in personal relationships and in Hamilton's conversion that the *Wayang* confrontation is given meaning and resolution. Clearly for Koch, evil is indifference, taking people for granted and using them; good, however hackneyed this may seem, is love and caring about what happens to others. Hamilton knows that the dawn towards which he is flying emerges in Europe for Jill and himself only. It cannot be said in Harrisian terms that the child they are expecting is an 'annunciation of humanity' and prefigures its rebirth. While they are flying towards privileged Western Europe, South East Asia with the coming holocaust in Indonesia and the Vietnam War is being plunged into darkness.

An unforeseen result of Hamilton's perception of this and of his greater attention to Billy's convictions after the latter's death is that, although he is granted his wish to be posted to London, he now feels more Australian than British and realizes that 'in the end, the other hemisphere would claim him' (p. 295).¹⁷ Implicit in this recognition is the feeling that Australia too, as part of the Southern hemisphere, is committed to that part of the world rather than to Europe. The novel ends with the expression of Hamilton's distress and his vision of the *betjak* rider. There is no hope that the living *Wayang* figures will avert the impending catastrophic confrontation, only an individual's awakening to genuine feeling and to the existence of the 'nameless dead'.

NOTES

1. 'Re-creative Parallels', talk given at the University of Bayreuth, 18 June 1983. No written text is extant and the quotation is from notes I took.
2. Wilson Harris, 'Metaphor and Myth', in *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick, Essays and Monograph Series No 1 (Adelaide: CRNLE, 1982), p. 8.
3. Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (Faber paperback edition, 1974), Author's Note unpaginated.
4. Wilson Harris, 'Character and Philosophic Myth', in *A Sense of Place*, ed. Britta Olinder (University of Gothenburg, Department of English, 1984), p. 127.
5. Christopher Koch, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (first published in 1978; Melbourne: Nelson, 1982), pp. 36 and 72. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.
6. Frits A. Wagner, *Indonésie l'Art d'un Archipel*, translated from the Dutch by Inès Vromen (Paris: Albin Michel, 1961), p. 118. Translation mine.
7. *Explorations*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1982), p. 100.
8. 'Character and Philosophic Myth', p. 124.
9. See among others, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967), p. 32; 'Character and Philosophic Myth', pp. 126-7; *The Womb of Space* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 91; *ibid.*, see Harris's reference to 'a coincidence of arts'.
10. 'Character and Philosophic Myth', p. 125.
11. 'Metaphor and Myth', p. 5.
12. See Mantle Hood, *The Nuclear Theme as a Determinant of Patet in Javanese Music* (Groningen: Wolters, 1954) and 'Javanese Gamelan in the World of Music', paper read in Jogjakarta, 28 January 1958.
13. Her silent presence recalls Mariella, the Amerindian muse in Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*.
14. Wilson Harris interviewed by Anna Rutherford and Kirsten Holst Petersen, *Commonwealth Newsletter* No 9 (January 1976), p. 22.
15. 'Character and Philosophic Myth', p. 128.
16. *Explorations*, p. 98.
17. On this aspect of the novel see Helen Tiffin, 'Asia, Europe and Australian Identity: the Novels of Christopher Koch', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 10, No 3 (May 1982), 326-35.