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**The True Substance of Life: Wilson Harris's  
Palace of the Peacock**

Few writers identify themselves with their work to such an extent that their imagination is at once the mainspring and the subject-matter of their art. Yet this is the experiment that Wilson Harris initiates in *Palace of the Peacock*<sup>1</sup> and carries on in most of his novels. Imagination with Mr. Harris is not merely an exploratory and creative power: the essence of this power, its innumerable possibilities of development, and its capacity for self-renewal are themselves explored. The transformation of a relationship of opposition into one of reciprocity, which is a fundamental condition to creativeness, obviously holds for imagination itself: the latter is both the directing principle of the novel and the directing principle, in the process of being created, of the character's experience. In its dual role as both the creating and the created function, imagination transforms man's response to the world in which he lives. It shocks the individual character into recognizing the limitations imposed on his consciousness by prejudice and custom; hence, it frees him from the intellectual and emotional conservatism which prevents him from accepting the necessity for continual exploration and regeneration. Through the history of his country and its multi-racial society Wilson Harris explores the plight of universal man and his neglected capacities for remodelling his own life and society by freeing himself from the contradictions and anguish which imprison him.

There is a passage in *Heartland* in which the main character reflects as he enters the jungle:

Nothing changed over the centuries. Long before the European colonizers – Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, English – and African colonized arrived and ventured into nameless tributaries, their pre-Columbian ancestors had been on the self-same ground. . . . They had apparently failed in their mission to catch the unreality of themselves which they encountered in the rude nomadic tribes they came to rescue and civilize, who flitted like ghosts under a more compulsive baton . . . than any human conqueror could devise. Legendary hunted creatures they all were and their legend was an extraordinary malaise . . . Their religion was an extreme capacity for avenues of flight they made for themselves to discover a heartland which had been created for them and which they had lost.<sup>2</sup>

This repetitive pattern of conquest and flight which drove both parties into a spiritual void is the theme of *Palace of the Peacock*, a novel which also explores beyond the void the possibilities of rebirth and fulfilment. It is shaped by what the author calls an 'act of memory', that is to say an act by which memory combines with imagination to recreate the Guyanese experience of conquest and

flight, the abortive meeting between two alien cultures and civilizations. The progress of a skipper and his crew on a nameless river in the Guyanese jungle is an allegory of all such expeditions. But it is also a spiritual quest in which the author revives a universal myth: the boat in which his dead characters travel explores their own underworld until they reach the centre of their inner kingdom and achieve consciousness. The allegory develops on two planes: the material and historical on the one hand, and the spiritual and psychological on the other. The ordeal imposed by historical circumstances on the ordinary individual brings to light capacities of fulfilment by which his confused 'nebulous' being can progress towards self-realization. The correspondence between the historical and the spiritual journey is not contrived; it arises from the conviction that the interpretation of history is, or should be, an act of the creative imagination. The writer, or artist-historian, recreates in order to understand them the conflicting relationships and emotions in which the historical situation involves the individual, and which are capable of shaping his consciousness. Given the dual role of imagination in the novel, it not only brings to light potential lines of development that may have been ignored in the past. As the main agent of discovery, it is itself modified in the very act of shaping the individual's consciousness.

The characters in *Palace of the Peacock* are dead in more senses than one. They are not simply actors in a bygone drama, they are also dead to their real nature and to the life of the soul, and blindly allow their passions to get the better of them. In so far as they are aware of spiritual possibilities at all, it is as something outside themselves which they do not really understand. Da Silva's twin-brother, for instance, seems to represent that part of himself unknown to him and of which he is most afraid. Donne is a divided being: he and the narrator are the two selves, the one material, the other spiritual, of the main character and skipper of the boat. This duality is but one expression of the fundamental opposites, which do not manifest themselves in man alone but in every form of life, in the landscape, for instance, which reflects man's dual nature and helps him to define himself. Mr. Harris borrows from Donne, the poet, the imagery of his 'Hymne to God My God, in my Sickness' to convey the sharing of a common experience by man and the landscape as well as the underlying unity between the material and the spiritual. Donne's body is seen as a 'symbolic map', a 'well-known room and house of superstition', and conversely the stream of life and 'straits of memory' take on at times the features of a human body and prove as treacherous as any ill-intentioned adversary.

The novel is a 'dream' which unfolds in the narrator's consciousness. It opens with a vision of the murdering of Donne by Mariella, the Amerindian woman he has raped and abused. From the very beginning then the vision of vengeance throws an unexpected light on the relationship between Donne, the cruel and ambitious landlord, and the Amerindian victim of his tyranny. It is this vision of



vengeance and death which acts as a spur to the narrator's recollection of the meeting between conqueror and conquered. As a result of Donne's death the narrator's 'living eye' is closed and the spiritual vision denied, while the 'dead seeing eye' of Donne remains their only window on the world. Donne is the 'gaoler and ruler' of his spiritual twin. As to the crew, they not only represent all the different racial mixtures in Guyana, they are also embodied in, and make one with, the dual personality of Donne. They are 'the crew every man mans and lives in his inmost ship and theatre and mind'; they stand for the various features and potentialities within one man and in society. Although their motive for taking part in the expedition is to help Donne to find cheap labour for his plantation, they are, like him, vaguely aware of missed opportunities in connection with their own Mariella. The latter is not only an object desire, but the muse of spirit, of life and of love, and, as we shall see, she also stands for her people. The mission where she lives is also called Mariella, a coincidence by which the muse and the country she inhabits are identified.

As soon as they set out for the mission the crew are caught in the mad whirls of the stream. The trip to the mission prefigures the longer trip to the waterfall and gives the narrator to understand that the dangers are as much in themselves as on the river or in the forest. He perceives the frightful, but also rewarding nature of the quest, what he calls 'fulfilling the simplest necessity of being'. His vision of harmony between different ways of being at the end of the first part seems to be an answer to the exhortation contained in the epigraph from Yeats's poem 'Under Ben Bulben'. 'Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death./ Horseman, pass by.'

Book II, *The Mission of Mariella*, begins with a quotation from Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland*: '... the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps'. Yet this is the only part of the journey which does not take place on the waters but on the land of the mission. This seeming inconsistency fades away when we realize that the crew are not threatened here by the deeps of the river but by the turmoils in their soul. It is at this point that we understand they are 'one spiritual family, and that their sense of frustration and their most eager longings are those of humanity. They all partake of Cameron's ancestry and secretly share his repeatedly disappointed wish 'to make his own primitive home and kingdom on earth', while Wishrop, who has killed several persons, is the 'inspired vessel' in which they pour 'the desire they too felt, in their vicarious day-dream, to kill whatever they had learnt to hate'. On the deserted soil of Mariella they are caught in a spiritual storm, a battle between life and death, in the course of which evil appears to strengthen its hold on Donne, while the crew are paralysed by the effects of his cruelty, material ambition and hatred. In the ensuing calm Donne is beset by his first doubts: 'I am beginning to lose all my imagination', he says, realizing at once that he must find a new relationship with the folk. At this stage, however, his spiritual self alone knows that union with the folk, what he

calls 'the unity of being' or 'the true substance of life', is made impossible by fear, a fear which none of them will acknowledge, though inwardly they have become reluctant to pursue Mariella and consequently to know the truth about themselves. They are temporarily 'freed' and 'lifted ... out of the deeps' by Carroll's laughter and music, which heralds their final coming together.

'I tune the instrument here at the door,/ And what I must do then, think here before.' These lines from the poet Donne's 'Hymne to God' announce the 'second death' of the skipper and his crew, who will now travel seven days before reaching the folk and the door of resurrection. Each day is one of creation, for as Donne loses one by one the members of his crew, i.e. sheds layer after layer of his former self, he gradually creates a new vision and makes room for unsuspected possibilities of life. On the first day, for instance, Carroll is engulfed in the waters and soon followed in death by his alleged father Schomburgh. The death of the Son, which brings forth the long-wished-for recognition of their relationship by the Father, is reflected in the landscape as 'a new and enduring spiritual summer of russet and tropical gold'. From then on the spiritual nature of the quest comes increasingly to the fore, and we participate in the agonizing experiences of the crew through the more mature consciousness of Vigilance. He watches his companions from the top of the cliff where he has followed the old Amerindian woman they have found at the mission and taken with them.

In spite of their brief vision of unity with her, and in spite of the fact that they are inescapably involved in a common experience, the crew have not recognized in the old woman the Amerindian race and the muse they pursue. As they lose the sense of security they used to derive from the material world, they are forced to acknowledge the nothingness of the illusive reality they had cherished. Fighting every opposition out of themselves, they grow increasingly helpless and exhausted, frightened at the loss of individuality which they sense in their coming encounter with eternity. From being the pursuers they become the pursued, and from that moment the Amerindians, who were so far little more than animals to be exploited, become potential saviours. Yet only when no member of the crew is left to support him, when all have 'crumbed into a mirror of absolute nothingness', only then will Donne gain the humility necessary for salvation.

Book IV, *Paling of Ancestors*, opens with another quotation from a poem by Hopkins, 'The Starlight Night': 'This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse/Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.' On the fifth day of the creation Donne, Jennings and the remaining daSilva twin reach the waterfall above Mariella. They must now ascend the 'hazardous ladders' made of steps and balconies on the side of the waterfall which lead up to the 'palace'. As soon as he starts climbing, Donne is crushed by the thought that 'he had been supported by death and nothingness', and remembers 'with the closeness and intimacy of a

horror and a hell' the house he had built in the savannahs. He now longs 'to understand and transform his beginnings'. He has reached the crucial stage in his pilgrimage when in his attempt to recover his lost innocence, he is faced with symbols of the values he has always ignored, and is made to understand what has gone wrong in his relationship with the muse. Two living pictures appear to him successively in the misty veil of the waterfall. They come to him as revelations of the potential richness and oneness of life to which he has always been blind in his earthly existence. The first of these pictures is of a young carpenter in a room, apparently Christ, the 'tree of life'. But he remains distant, behind the 'paling', and for all the men's longing to enter his room 'crowded with golden sights, the richest impressions of eternity', he shuts the window softly upon them. The second picture is of a woman and her child enveloped in a long sweeping garment which is at once threadbare yet made of 'all threads of light and fabric from the thinnest strongest source of all beginning and undying end'. The woman seems to be clothed in the essence of the garment, or of life, symbolized by the thread, rather than in the garment itself. Impressed by the 'spirit of warmth' and the radiance of the archetypal mother, Donne becomes aware of what he has missed in life. At this moment of illumination 'he looked into himself and saw that all his life he had loved no one but himself'.

Still holding to the cliff, both he and daSilva feel that 'the void of themselves alone [is] real and structural'. They fall in the dawn of the sixth day and are received in the womb of the earth, having 'all come home at last to the compassion of the nameless unflinching folk'.

'It was the seventh day from Mariella. And the creation of the windows of the universe was finished.' A 'vision of consciousness' has thus been created. The savannahs which were empty when Donne started on his journey now seem crowded, a sign that the territory over which he ruled has come to life again. Donne has given way to his spiritual self so that the narrator alone takes part in the resurrection. The description of his rebirth recalls the poetic lightness and iridescent beauty of a Chagall painting. The 'tree of life' turns into flesh and blood and the sun, which at the beginning of the novel was for Donne a symbol of material power, breaks into stars which clothe the tree like an enormous dress until the stars become a peacock's eyes and the tree of flesh and blood is metamorphosed into a peacock.

'This was the palace of the universe', says the narrator, 'and the windows of the soul looked out and in'. In other words palace and peacock coalesce into one symbol which embraces the soul and the 'vision of consciousness' of individual man and of the human community. As Carroll whistles at one of the windows, his song coincides with the cry of the peacock and turns into music; listening to the music, Wishrop, the dancer, turns into a waltz and in this way becomes the immaterial 'otherness' of what he has always been. At the very end of the novel the narrator, now identified with the peacock, realizes that he and the crew are

'free from the chains of illusion [they] had made without'. They are 'paled' in 'heaven' with their ancestors. Fully conscious now of belonging to one undying soul and sharing in its music, the narrator exults in the reward of their journey: 'Each of us now held at last in his arms what he had been forever seeking and what he had eternally possessed.'

In most of Wilson Harris's novels self-knowledge is a preliminary to unity within man and mankind. We have seen that in their 'vessel of memory' the crew relive the past to understand those elements in it which have contributed to their making. They can then purge themselves of their former choices. This liberation is brought about by their 'second death', which is actually a second chance, a symbolic return to the initial chaos, and the kind of dissolution that is a prerequisite for rebirth. Donne's 'second death' coincides with the recognition of the void in himself, a void which we have seen to be the outcome of all selfish conquests. In this instance, however, it becomes the necessary, regenerating void that precedes redemption in all myths of purification and initiation. This is how on the personal and historical levels an apparently sterile and hopeless situation is shown to contain the seeds of fulfilment. The void incurred in despair offers a way out after all through suffering and humility. The suffering undergone by the crew is mainly a product of fear: it arises from their confrontation with the unknown, which they discover in their own past, and from the recognition of evil and hatred among themselves. But by freeing themselves from fear, the crew have also given freer scope to their imagination to transform their former experience as they were reliving it. At the end of the novel the unknown also turns out to be the folk, who have appeared in different guises during their quest: as Mariella, as the old Arawak woman, as Carroll's step-sister, as daSilva's mistress, and as Wishrop's benefactress. In each case the folk is represented by a woman who has been ill-treated and who clearly stands for the 'opposite' with whom Donne and the crew must come to terms. The Amerindian woman is also the archetypal mother, the source of life and love, whom Donne has ignored. And finally, she is the muse who can revive his imagination and who makes the creation of the palace possible. This does not mean, however, that the crew's reunion with the folk is presented as the only way to salvation. It simply means, I believe, that an imaginative return to origins can open up various unsuspected vistas of self-realization. Unknowingly, the Amerindian folk testify to the reality of latent perspectives of fulfilment, which may be fruitfully explored through what Mr. Harris calls 'a treaty of sensibility between alien cultures'.

That such a treaty is at all possible implies an underlying unity between conqueror and conquered of which the crew have brief intimations during their journey but which is only fully realized in the symbolical creation of the palace. Note that the palace grows out of the waterfall and that the perpetual movement of the water suggests a world whose parts forever change and renew themselves while its outward form remains unchanged. This diversity within unity is the

essence of the *Palace of the Peacock*, the key symbol in the novel. The author has explained that it stand for El Dorado, that ambivalent creation of man's greed and of his spiritual aspirations. The significance of the palace is enhanced when opposed to the 'prison house' in which Donne's spiritual self has had his initial dream. From the 'high swinging gate' of the house to the 'lion door' at the foot of the waterfall the perilous and unpredictable adventures of the crew on the river have bridged Donne's way to his meeting with the folk. And in the process of converting their own imprisonment into freedom the crew have gradually recognized the necessity of transforming the tyranny imposed on the folk into a dialogue, so that in freeing themselves they have retrieved the elusive tribe from the void in which *they* were seeking refuge. It is this process of mutual release which culminates in the creation of the palace. Whether we see the folk as the real pre-columbian inhabitants of Guyana or as the unknown ghosts which people man's unconscious, they are the potential hosts of a palace, of a world, or of a vision which must be built in common. But as the quest shows, it is left to those who command or to the conscious being in man, to take the initiative of the journey, to bring to light the missing links, and, as Mr. Harris says, 'come home' to the folk.

The metaphor of the peacock belongs to the alchemical symbolism, which the author was to use with consummate art in *Tumatumari*. Like the phoenix, it is an ancient symbol of resurrection, and it also suggests man's power of metamorphosis and self-renewal. Its implications in the novel are numerous. The most obvious of them is that the peacock illustrates the duality of man: the 'vanity and conceit' of the crew before their rebirth paralleled by the beauty and the transmutation of which they are also capable. Though various possibilities suggest themselves to the reader, at the very end of the novel the peacock strikes mainly as a symbol of totality and of harmonious diversity. Like the rainbow, it combines all colours, all qualities, and its multiplied vision stands for the manifold personality of Donne, of his people, and of humanity. The peacock's tail is also supposed to symbolize 'the soul of the world, nature, the quintessence which causes all things to bring forth'.<sup>3</sup> It is thus an adequate symbol for the three aspects of the quest: the discovery of the source or roots of life with its personal and historical implications, the rebirth and the unity which apply both to the individual and to mankind.

The rewarding quest of the dead in Wilson Harris's first novel is a unique experiment which has no counterpart in his later work. Mr. Harris himself has written recently that 'the colours of the peacock may be equated with all the variable possibilities or colours of fulfilment we can never totally realize'.<sup>4</sup> This is in keeping with the myth of El Dorado, which supposes an ultimate goal repeatedly pursued but never attained. Nevertheless, in spite of its restrictive connotation Mr. Harris's description indicates that self-realization always remains an open possibility, and we know indeed that most of his novels end

with what is a beginning for his characters. This is even true of *Palace of the Peacock*:

This was the inner music and voice of the peacock I suddenly encountered and echoed and sang as I had never heard myself sing before. I felt the faces before me begin to fade and part company from me and from themselves *as if our need of one another was now fulfilled.* (p.152) my italics.

By its mutability the peacock suggests that the crew's coming together is not an end in itself but a stepping-stone to a new beginning and to a further development.

In the passage just quoted the quintessence of the soul finds expression in music, a music which has impressed itself with increasing insistence on the reader since the protean picture of Christ was transmuted into the peacock. During the journey the 'broken speech' of the crew and their inability to communicate was repeatedly a source of tragic misunderstanding between them, but Carroll's music already evoked the latent possibilities of harmony between the crew, and after their rebirth his melody expresses the love and sense of fulfilment of unified man:

The dark notes rose everywhere, . . . they rose into a fountain – light as the rainbow – sparkling and immaterial as invisible sources and echoes.<sup>5</sup> (p.148)

This interpretation of the diversity and harmony in the universe in terms of a musical and visual symphony reminds us that Donne's pilgrimage is also a return to the source of art. As we have seen, the Amerindian woman is the muse who can regenerate his diseased imagination. The construction of the palace is an act of imagination on the part of the narrator. Imagination appears as the source of harmony which can reconcile man with himself and with his fellow-men: it is capable of fathoming man's personal and historical past; by renewing itself it breaks man's way through to rebirth; and finally, imagination alone makes possible the apprehension of 'the true substance of life', the fundamental unity of all life.

#### Notes

1. Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London, 1960).
2. —, *Heartland* (London, 1964), pp. 30-31.
3. C.G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (London, 1970), p. 288.
4. Wilson Harris, *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* (Georgetown, 1970), p. 20.