



Wilson Harris, by Guido Villa

An Interview with Wilson Harris

Conducted by Hena Maes-Jelinek

Hena Maes-Jelinek interviewed Wilson Harris in Paris on 22 March 1991, when he was presented with a book of essays, Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination¹, collected in his honour to celebrate his 70th birthday. He speaks here of the catalytic effect of Martin Buber's writing when he was a young man and of one or two writers he admired, though it was their unfulfilled longing to be freed from

the absolutes of the period in which they lived that stimulated him in time to give voice to his own world view. He comments on his perception of the possible reversal of apparently fixed phenomena whether in nature, world order, or art. He also explains clearly his conception of creativity, its growth out of a perception of two different time-scales and the way these two interact at the heart of creation.

Hena Maes-Jelinek: *Wilson, you have now been writing fiction for about thirty years. Did you ever think of becoming a writer when you were very young or did it come gradually?*

Wilson Harris: I have been writing from my early youth because it was necessary for me to do so. It was a necessary kind of extension of myself, or to put it in another way, it was as if by writing, I was able to traverse some sort of route that ran very close to the course of the job I did as a land surveyor. I pursued writing as a parallel landscape, so to speak, which was necessary for myself. I never realized that it would lead on into what it has become. But it was very important from the beginning.

HM-J: *One need hardly recall that your work is very original in both form and content. Yet critics, almost inevitably, have tried to classify your work, probably because it helps to pin down a writer to what is already known. Some people who knew you when you were living in Guyana and leading these expeditions into the jungle, have said that you used to take volumes of Hegel with you and read philosophy. Now you yourself have denied that. Do you feel nevertheless that you have been influenced by certain writers or philosophers and that there has been a shaping influence in your becoming the kind of writer you are?*

WH: I have certainly *not* been influenced by Hegel. I never took volumes of Hegel into the rainforest. There are all sorts of legend associated with what books I took with me. I'm supposed to have taken Heidegger as well into the rainforest, though I became acquainted with Heidegger much later through C.L.R. James who admired him enormously and spoke of him to me. Even then I did not read

Heidegger thoroughly but only bits and pieces. I started reading a major book of his which I admired. It expressed his conviction on the necessity to discard, or to reinterpret, the ground of metaphysics. I put it down and never took it up again.

The question of influences is always difficult to state. Obviously, one is influenced by writers. Novels written in the course of the shaping of the novel and novel writing from different cultures in Europe and America fascinated me. Also the rising tide of poetry and what was done in previous centuries. I have used epigraphs from various writers and if one looks at these, one will see a whole range of associations.

But the thing which I find more pertinent is the sensation that I am in a position now to go back sometimes to writers whom I may have read a long time ago and see them in a light which I never perceived before. I have indicated some of them in *The Womb of Space* and in «Comedy and Modern Allegory», published in *A Shaping of Connections*. I was attempting there to suggest that one could come into dialogue with these earlier fictions which have an objective force, which I never suspected to be the case many years ago but which I now know to be the case because of intuitive discoveries I made and the way my own work has shaped itself, the way I am immersed in the text and the way I become an agent of the living text. So that I am subject to pressures that seem to come from very deep resources. And those pressures are so extraordinary that one begins to come into a relationship with writers in the past which one may have misunderstood. That kind of relationship, that kind of dialogue has been very fruitful. But it comes out of a sensation that one is tapping into resources *through* what one has been doing. This is a mysterious thing and it's something really to be analysed in a text. If I had a text to look at, I could give an intimation of it. In a very significant way, I would think, you can see it in the *Carnival* trilogy because you see the way in which epic and allegory have been treated, and the Faustian legend as well. All of these have been pushed into reverse, as it were, as if a certain kind of reversal had occurred in the contours of those legends and myths. And out of that reversal one discovers resources that are remarkable. They seem profoundly subjective and native to oneself and yet at another level profoundly objective. I use the word «native» here to imply that the native phenomenon is not merely a local reality. It has a non-local aspect in it.

HM-J: *You began by writing poetry and one finds in it the seeds of your later work. Did you move on to fiction because you found it more congenial to what you were attempting to express? Was it a deliberate decision?*

WH: What I discover looking back at my poems, *Eternity to Season*, and even other poems, is the strange way in which you can discover two time-scales. Now this is something I had not seen before and yet it's there in the work. If you look at the poem «Troy». I don't have the book with me but there is a line about the flower on the branch and the wooden companion, and there is a poem called «The Well». A young woman comes to the well and we get the sense that this young woman is a kind of animate sculpture. I would never have described her

in that way before: «animate sculpture». And yet this is true of the poem. I would not have described her like that within the past six months, if as long ago as that. And yet if you look back across more than three decades to *Eternity to Season* [a title which expresses the two time-scales], you will find images in which you have this sensation of animate sculpture. As though the various fossil realities in the poem – live fossil spaces – have begun to align themselves differently in my consciousness in the text of the poem across nearly four decades. The fossil re-distributions of time-scales have changed, so that one's *intuitive* powers in writing the poem are now becoming visible. I was a bit astonished by this. But there is the seed of something very important which was to come into the novels, to extend itself, to deepen itself, to transform itself. All this bears on the mysterious incarnation of natures within the text, the living fossil stepping-stones incarnation embodies, the text as a revivification of consciousness at levels unforeseen by the writer himself or herself despite the intuitive dimensionality he has created in his work.

Alas sculpture tends to be seen by society at large as ornament. The Word tends to be seen as a mere tool, the slave of fashion, or a medium of sophistry. How may one visualize the ascension of the rocks from the waterfall in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*? The rocks embody time at two levels at least. There is the visionary ascension of the rocks akin to the genius of sculpture. But a solid shell or fossil garment remains – instinct with inanimate life – in the thundering waterfall where it functions to check and balance the tumultuous organ of the stream, to conserve the body or volumetric flow of the river that would otherwise deplete itself absolutely in its flight down and through the rapids.

That instinctive fossil shell though stationary when apprehended within the sensational immediacy of conventional time is in ageless, serial movement that is visible to the intuitive eye of the Imagination. The rocks in the waterfall are so linked and shaped that they perform a tidal function akin to the ocean tides which are visible to the naked eye far below in coastal regions. Likewise those moving ocean tides are a *wall*, a *series of doors*, to the intuitive eye: they complement the apparent immobility of the rocks far inland and above them.

The rock in the waterfall is rock in conventional time and to the conventional eye but in serial time a number of invisible reversals occur that bear on the future as much as the present and past. For instance, the invisible action of the rocks is a stepping-stone into the creation of sluice-gates by engineers to provide for the drainage of water resources in canals even as it tilts, so to speak, those resources back and conserves them for the irrigation of farms.

The sculpture and formation of the earth, the intricate and dependent life of species, the orientation of birds and animals, the life of human cultures, witness sometimes, it seems, to a ground of immediate despair when one reflects on the havoc we have inflicted everywhere. But at another nonsensational level a marvel endures in the parallels and bridges we may construct backwards in time *within the genius of time itself* to see through its own malaise, to excavate and transform its own biases, time's deadly biases that may fester into implacable codes of revenge cultures may entertain one for the other. That curious non-sensational level which assists us to mirror in ourselves the *faint* life of intuition (for

intuition never truly reifies anything into an absolute) is at the heart, I think, of the genesis of creation. Faint as it is, it breathes indestructible endurance within a theatre of veils and partialities that would enslave it and give it an absolute identity. Thus it is that the passage in *Four Banks* presenting the ascension of the rocks as a borderline stepping-stone in the human Imagination, as an insight into animate sculpture and its two time-scales, tells of «uplifted veil upon veil of darkness until [Anselm] possessed a glimmering apprehension of the magic of creative nature, the life of sculpture, the genesis of art, the being of music»².

HM-J: *Would you say then that this insight into «the magic of creative nature» and «the genesis of art» is possible because there is a reciprocity between the world and ourselves?*

WH: There is a reciprocity we may easily overlook between technology and art. As you know, I have spoken at times of the Carib, cannibal bone-flute. That bone flute at a certain level is a piece of primitive technology. We may date it. There are obviously different flutes. The earliest are pre-Columbian in origin. To date it gives it an immediate museum value. It conforms to an immediacy we project backwards into another century or import from another century into ours. When one, however, dwells upon the enigma of music associated with the cannibal consumption of a morsel of human flesh – plucked from the bone that was hollowed and fashioned into a flute – a revisionary capacity comes into play that spins, I find, the flute around until it points into the body of the intuitive self. The metaphoric visualization of «music» may now address us so deeply that an art of the Imagination comes into play which reverses animism – a cannibal animism that consumes the other to digest the other's secrets; it so reverses, or tilts or swings that pattern of animism, that one may begin to dwell upon the creative consuming of innermost bias in ourselves. I have written of this in connection with *Palace of the Peacock* in which images that seem the same are transformed in their inner-space substance and potentiality. I would refer anyone who is interested to my amended note to the genesis of *The Guyana Quartet* in the latest edition of *Palace*³.

In the context of this interview, what I wish to draw to your attention is the time-scale embodied in reversals and swings in a primitive technology we take for granted. That swing constitutes an overturning of a formula of absolute sequential time. In that overturning the voice of the past speaks to us within invisible dimensions of music – a dimensionality that touches upon the architecture of an age that is ceaselessly unfinished.

The voice of the flute becomes, as it were, a measure of incarnate conscience to affect a backward and forward movement of partial imageries we *read* differently in our immersion in the forwards/backwards re-alignment of narrative pages of reality.

Alas, in my estimation this is scarcely tolerated or understood. We live within one linear time-scale that has become endemic. And yet... And yet... And yet...

I do not wish to judge. For the fact that I can perceive the fallacy of an absolute identity to time means that others are perceiving too. What I wish to say

is that when we live in a single time-scale, technology becomes absolutely ascendant. Cultures are then afflicted by amnesia. Art then may entertain, may have an aesthetic value, but all this accords with the sovereignty of ornament or linear bias. Ornament entrenches fashion. The mystery of evil is banished in favour of an escapism that perceives ruses of wickedness as realistic and profitable.

HM-J: *Would you say that the double movement you have been describing between the two time-scales and the reversal of the conventional time-scale into another perceived intuitively is what you mean by «unfinished genesis»? Is that one way of putting it? Is the artist's attempt to grasp the other, nonsensational time-scale his way, or your way, of taking part in the «unfinished genesis of the imagination»?*

WH: I shall take up the question of «unfinished genesis» in a moment or two, but first a few remarks leading up to a word about Martin Buber. This may help to come to the issues you raise in your question from an unusual standpoint that builds an equation between non-sensation (non-sensational time-scale) and «incarnate silence».

As a young man I was subject to a curious despair about philosophies of «persuasion» – however refined such «orders of persuasion» were. The truth is I could not rid myself of the feeling that «persuasion» – however sophisticated and liberal – was the idealization of conquest, a symptom of a dead-end in politics and culture that we need to breach, a symptom of the colonising temper of the age into which I was born.

I read Herman Melville in my early twenties but did not really appreciate the depth of his despair about the restrictive and one-sided – however polished – vocabulary of his age in, for instance, the novel *Bartleby*. I was drawn to John Donne. Looking back across the years, I understand why. Donne's poems were subject to paradoxes of unfulfilled desire deeper than the habitations of metaphysical persuasion. Though he became Dean of St Paul's, it was a mask that he wore. His poems move upon an incline into the darkness of the masked self, a darkness susceptible to an illumination of the senses and non-senses. There is, I find, a link that is strange between Melville and Donne, though they differ in masked aspect.

I came upon some of Martin Buber's essays in the late 1940s. He gave me hope. He spoke of «dialogue with the silent eloquence of a stone», because of «address», the «stone» possessed an «address».

Here perhaps is the distant seed of intuitive proportions of dislodged prepossession (dislodged address) of an absolute identity to time – or for that matter to race – born of intuitive clues in my own novels. You may remember I spoke of the «ascension of the rocks» earlier in this interview and its bearing on dislodged time or the double movement between two time-scales.

However, to return to the late 1940s when I read Buber. I was a young land surveyor and I understood his «dialogue with a stone» and the matter of «address» in my own way. I visualized that «address» through the topographic surveys on which I was engaged. A stone's burden of «address» is shared with other features

in a landscape upon an invisible thread or contour that links it to those features. Now – years later – when I return with my mind's eye to the landscapes and riverscapes of my youth, I sense the mystery of dialogue as incarnate conscience, *incarnate silence*, within a nonsensational time-scale that imbues the sculpture of a rock or a tree or a hill. Wave or trough; rock or tree or hill one tends to enslave and to abuse as passive (if not dead) creatures within models of «persuasion» or the idealization of conquest.

Incarnate silence – or gesture of the sculptural imagination – is scarcely understood at all today. It requires a complex re-visualization of the tapestry or loom of space as if space is substance.

I shall give only one illustration of «unfinished genesis» drawn from my novels. *The Infinite Rehearsal* is the second volume in *The Carnival Trilogy*. Commentators on the novel have tended to overlook the peculiar significance of Robin's drowned yet resurrected life. Robin Redbreast Glass arises from the grave of the sea. This resurrection has not been imposed on the narrative. There is no persuasive, linear storyline depicting the return of Robin from the sea into the city of SKULL (the name given to the sophisticated concentration camp of prosperity – the excesses of prosperity – or the wasteland, in the novel).

Yet the resurrection is quintessential to the narrative gestures of the novel. Those narrative gestures are shared between «passive» and «active», between «absence» and «presence», between the spaces of the dead and the hollowness of the living.

The resurrection therefore cannot be colonized into a cure-all or panacea administered by a superior political or evangelizing power.

The return of the dead – so to speak – into the living brings an acute insight of administrations of malaise to which the living may subscribe by way of escapism or nihilism. The return of the dead is therefore a curiously uncomfortable, creative, re-creative reality at the heart of tradition. The bridge between the dead and the living remains ceaselessly unfinished. It is no *linear* storyline. For its momentum is a capacity for re-visionary cycles steeped in the uncertainties of testament-in-odyssey (if I may so put it). Such «story» as exists is closer perhaps to an ancient measure of the descent of the Imagination into non-local rather than provincial memory – closer therefore to the nameless, curiously archetypal past than to the rise of the parochial novel in the eighteenth century. As a consequence, the bridge of traditions in *The Infinite Rehearsal* (as I felt it when I was involved in it) is susceptible to the substance of space, curvatures of space, the dance of space, the rhythms and architectures of space. This combination makes for density and uncanny transparency in the mystery of dialogue between the eruptive life of the unconscious and the hollow being of the conscious.

The resurrection therefore in revealing the hollowness of the living, in revealing «obsessional desire, obsessional folly», implies that hollowness is a shared cavity within which quintessential space, quintessential oceanic dimension – oceanic time-scale linking civilizations and cultures, refugees and slaves – re-discovers its innermost Ghost-conscience. Such re-discovery is never complete. In the light or humour of such incompleteness Robin Redbreast Glass reflects a procession of masks, ageing masks, that Faustian immortal youth – arisen from

the sea – wears. W. H. – an ageing character in the novel – becomes one of Robin's masks. But W.H. himself possesses his quintessential spatiality even as he bows to Faustian obsessional desire. W. H. disappears towards the end of the novel as if to give way to another nameless mask Robin will wear (I am reminded of the I-narrator in *Palace of the Peacock* who vanishes at a certain stage within the body of the living text). Such is the humour or comedy of W. H.'s *apparent* servitude to Glass, W.H.'s *apparent* extinction in Glass. Apparent extinction reaches through the novel into what is unsaid though implied in the said. Thus it seeks to appoint in the backwards/forwards play of the said and the unsaid a comedy in dialogue with the ungraspable foundations of consciousness. Extreme consciousness or nonsensational reality lives. All this suggests the ramifications that the theme of the resurrection implies.

The extinction of others, for instance, in various theatres of conflict, is a form of living absence we cannot cheat into servitude to the idols we ourselves serve – idols such as Faustian materiality and immortality in the state or in civilization. Yet by the way of the said and the unsaid we need to expose our temptations to succumb to such a cheat in our passion for one-sided coherence or identity. Robin Glass and his masks bear on this.

Thus the heartrending reflection of the extinction of others in ourselves – or in the idols we serve, the idols that may have used us – empowers an emotion or vision of the life of absence that bears on the very grain of our institutions, bears to re-dress and compensate one-sided fates, one-sided freedoms. Tradition is grain. Tradition is descent into the revolving masks of the seen and the unseen...

I saw it all now with heartrending insight and remorse such as only the dead who return to the living may know. I had come back from the chapel of the sea with Ghost long, long ago. In dreaming of him on the beach I had been involved in a rehearsal of perfectible order, perfectible industry, perfectible state, that I shared with him from the beginning of time. But in my obliviousness of the ambiguity of the Word and the nature of absence that the dead endure (absence from a hollow humanity) and absence's ramifications in native presence, I had to dream again and again of obsessional need, obsessional wealth, obsessional poverty, obsessional expectation of a supreme prosperity as if prosperity were its own perfectible Ghost, perfectible commander of the futures of the race.

«Supreme prosperity?» Ghost said to me now from within the masquerades of dream. «Supreme irony! The perfectibility of command, the perfectibility of industry, leads to a growing tide of refugees of spirit in flight from themselves to an illusory benefactor. And your resurrection – each rehearsal in which I am involved with you – is as much warning of the sickness of the expectant soul as it is a vision of a divine and terrifying love. My fear is, Robin, that the sickness of expectant souls may prevail for a long, long time to come (with increasingly dangerous consequences) in a disordered and chaotic world in flight to a prosperity it confuses with the genius of love. But then have we not sown obsessional desire, obsessional folly, in the waste land that we cherish?»⁴

Hena Maes-Jelinek

is Professor of English at the Université de Liège, and co-editor of the series Cross-Cultures published by Rodopi.