

Harris, Wilson (1921-)

Guyanese novelist, poet and essayist

Before emigrating to Britain in 1959, Wilson Harris led many expeditions as a surveyor into the interior of his native Guyana, an experience that inspired major aspects of his writing and the philosophy underlying his work. He saw the 'density of place, depth and transparency' as a living receptacle of peoples decimated by repeated conquests, hence his notion of an enduring subterranean Caribbean tradition counterpointing Western culture. It stimulated his concept of space ('womb of space') as territory and metaphorical multi-layered psyche, and his view of the human personality as a cluster of selves ('one is a multitude'). It also made him reject realism which, as early as the 1960s, he associated with the rise of imperialism and thought inadequate to express the Caribbean experience of dismemberment or the underlying inter-relatedness of all creatures and natural elements. He initiated instead a style shaped by 'convertible imageries' and a language that 'continuously transforms inner and outer categories of experience'.

This original style, blending the contrasts and livingness of landscape imbued with the traumas of a brutal historical past, yet susceptible of rebirth, already shapes *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), the first of Harris's twenty-two novels opening *The Guyana Quartet*. This seminal narrative prefigures the psychological, spiritual and political developments of his fiction. It is an allegorical quintessential re-creation of the New

World conquest, of the exploitation of land and people by successive invaders in search of a legendary El Dorado, object of their greed and thirst for power, but also expression of a deceptive idealism. Donne, an ambitious skipper who nevertheless evokes the Renaissance poet and imagination, leads a multiracial crew through the rainforest in search of Amerindians he wants to use on his plantation. The obstacles they meet on the river, and their conflicting relationships, turn their pursuit of the folk into a quest for salvation. In the symbolic final chapters Donne's realization of his own iniquity and his vision of the compassionate Amerindian folk, represented by an Arawak Christ and Virgin, open onto the resurrection of the dead crew and their coming together again evanescently in the 'palace of the peacock', in a moment of fulfilment and understanding. In their fleeting harmonious unity (followed again by separation) the crew, 'supported... by the undivided soul and anima of the universe', become part of the existential flow that the disruption of surface life brings to light. In this apotheosis, unique in Harris's fiction, they merge into what Harris was to call 'the inimitable ground of being', the universal, immanent (rather than transcendental) reality, the source of creation that feeds the imagination. It is also the unconscious repository of the motives and the emotional forces that shape history, yet are seldom accounted for in social and political life but need to be faced and 'digested'.

The Guyana Quartet (*Palace of the Peacock; The Far Journey of Oudin*, 1961; *The Whole Armour*, 1962; *The Secret Ladder*, 1963) offers a composite picture of Guyana and evokes the historical legacy that generated its heterogeneous population: slavery, Indian indenturedship, the flight of Amerindians, then of runaway slaves, into the jungle and the impact of their descendants' retrieval from oblivion on the modern Guyanese consciousness. In *Heartland* (1964) the protagonist's journey and disappearance into the interior epitomizes the unfinished quest and 'drama of consciousness' in which all Harris's characters are involved, eroding their rigid ego prior to their acceptance of responsibility in all relations. In the next cycle of novels (*The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 1965; *The Waiting Room*, 1967; *Tumatumari*, 1968; *Ascent to Omai*, 1970), the characters experience the state of loss and psychological void that marked the beginnings of West Indian history. They emerge from it through the dual (re)creation

of a self freed from prejudices and a self-reflexive fiction that 'consumes its own biases'.

To a linear or conventional re-creation of history (the 'mimicry of fact'), Harris opposes the originality of myth, a deep-seated pool of cultural variables, the roots of imagination and art, which can reveal and breach the partiality of apparently objective history and generate a change of perspective. One major example is the myth of the Carib bone-flute fashioned from cannibalized Spanish conquerors. Since destruction (cannibalism) and creation (music) came together, Harris expresses through this metaphor his conviction that 'adversarial contexts' (inimical cultures) can generate creativity. Through his novels and two collections of stories (*The Sleepers of Roraima*, 1970, and *The Age of the Rainmakers*, 1971) he reinterprets Amerindian myths and brings to light unexpected parallels between pre-Columbian, Homeric and European myths (e.g., Quetzalcoatl and Faust), modifying their original meaning. Subsequent novels further modulate his approach to creativeness and for the first time bridge continents, mainly Europe and Latin America or India (*The Angel at the Gate*, 1982). They are informed by an inner movement towards otherness, though Harris shows that the deprived other can become possessive in turn, as is clear in *Black Marsden* (1972) in the relations between Clive Goodrich and Marsden. Both reappear in *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), set in Mexico, which initiates what Harris called 'the novel as painting' substantialized in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977) and its sequence *The Tree of the Sun* (1978). In these and later fictions Harris elicits correspondences between various forms of art as well as between art and science, particularly quantum physics with its assumptions of 'simultaneous possibilities', parallel universes and relativization of categories of being. In *Genesis of the Clowns* (1977), a former surveyor realizes that the sun of empire under which he exploited his crew is being decentred, generating a 'Copernican revolution of sentiments' in a globe immobilized in imperial days and stimulating the rebirth (genesis) of the crew.

Henceforth, Harris's writing increasingly blends with metaphysical reflections on creativity without relinquishing its sensuousness. *The Carnival Trilogy* (*Carnival*, 1985; *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 1987; *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, 1990) rewrites European grand narratives, *The Divine*

Comedy, *The Odyssey* and *Faust*, suggesting that, however admirable, their worldview has become obsolete and may endanger the future of humanity. Harris rejects all absolutes. In *Carnival* the quest through Inferno (colonial or contemporary), Purgatorio and Paradiso, rather than leading to eternity shows them as fluid overlapping states in the endlessly changing existential process. Ulysses in *Four Banks* is 'fragmented' into several characters, partial selves capable of forgiveness rather than vengeance; as in earlier novels, European and pre-Columbian myths are paralleled, Ulysses with the Amerindian God of vengeance, Canaima, a relevant archetype in 'a violent and terrorist age' convulsed by expeditions of vengeance. Altering partialities inform the 'infinite rehearsal' (which sums up Harris's creative process) by which the protagonists ceaselessly 're-vision' the past from different angles and with a growing consciousness. It is also 'unfinished genesis of the imagination', itself in need of regeneration.

The resurrection is a major theme in Harris's fiction. In *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill* (1993), schizophrenic characters impersonate great historical figures (dual characters are frequent in Harris's novels), but illustrate Michael Gilkes's concept of a Caribbean 'creative schizophrenia', suggesting that self-dividedness can offer an opportunity to remedy a static condition (blocked psyche). *Jonestown* (1996) evokes an actual massacre of about 1,000 followers ordered by a cult leader, Jim Jones, in 1978. It also evokes the unexplained disappearance of Amerindian peoples, and modern holocausts and genocides. Like earlier Harrisian protagonists, Francisco Bone, sole survivor, writes a 'dream-book' edited by W. H., undertaking a redemptive journey between past, present and future (as in other novels) to bring to light motivations and responsibilities.

The trickster, artist and archetypal hero is a major persona in Harris's fiction, while 'dreaming', from *Palace of the Peacock* onwards, is an intuitive epistemological opening into the unconscious and the mainspring of creativity. The two come together in *The Dark Jester* (2001), which recreates the encounter between Pizarro and the last pre-Conquest Inca, Atahualpa. The narrative springs from the deepest inner dimension Harris's characters explore. The chasm between Atahualpa and Pizarro, pre-Conquest and post-Conquest times, seems at first unbridgeable, as do the closures

we erect in an ordering of life called 'Cartesian form' as opposed to 'Atahualpan form'. It is inspired by pre-Columbian art, which dissolves boundaries between categories of being and contrasts with an anthropomorphic worldview, creating a fiction 'that transcends a merely human discourse'. The novel shows more clearly than ever that the hidden, eclipsed side of history and its victims are the territory of art.

Harris's next novel, *The Mask of the Beggar*, a title inspired by Odysseus' disguise on returning to Ithaca, was published in 2003. Harris recently described his protagonist as 'a nameless artist seek[ing] mutualities between cultures' as well as 'cross-culturalities that would reverse a dominant code exercised... by an individual state' with a 'one-sided notion of universality'. It seems to offer another deep meditation on art and the role of the artist in society.

There is no doubt that, in both form and content, Harris is one of the greatest and most original novelists of the twentieth century, one who relativized the place of human beings in the universe, extending their personality to the extra-human (including the animal and the divine) and exploring the deepest recesses of their psyche in a space also reaching cosmic heights, while blending diverse cultures past and present and freeing language from conventional patterns through his orchestrations of convertible imageries.

Further reading

Hena Maes-Jelinek and Bénédicte Ledent (eds), *Theatre of the Arts. Wilson Harris and the Caribbean* (2002).

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Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Harris, Wilson (1921-)", in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, 2nd ed., ed. Eugene Benson & Leonard Conolly (1994; Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 630-632.