

HISTORY AND MYTH IN
WILSON HARRIS'S SHORT FICTION :
« THE MIND OF AWAKAIPU »

It is a strange inconclusive story, with no indication of the real state of Awakaipu's mind.¹

The Guyanese novelist, poet and critic, Wilson Harris is also the author of some eight short stories². With the exception of one³, these were published in two separate volumes, *The Sleepers of Roraima* (1970) and *The Age of the Rainmakers* (1971) which are best understood as part of his evolution as a novelist. Harris's fiction has developed considerably since his first published novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960). The Guyanese landscape so impressively evoked in its own right and as a metaphor for the Guyanese psyche in the *Guyana Quartet* has gradually receded from the foreground making room for a more global setting spanning continents. Nevertheless his concern for subject or victimized people(s) eclipsed by catastrophic conquest is to be found throughout his work and has remained as intense as ever. So has his conviction that the dislocation under the impact of catastrophe of a given social order or a consolidated and static situation can bring to light a seed of possible renewal or rebirth. Whether Harris explores the consequences of the past in conquest-ridden Guyana or of twentieth-century forms of barbarism all over the world, the impact of history on the individual consciousness remains central to his work ; it involves a necessary reinterpretation or re-vision of the wounds and deadlocks entailed by history.

This is what Harris does in the nine novels which precede the publication of his short stories. He recreates Guyana's catastrophic past and shows that the meeting between the native

populations (local or imported) and the successive waves of their conquerors miscarried. The clash between them resulted in hideous polarizations and the possibilities of creating a new heterogeneous community were lost. Through the personal predicament of individual protagonists Harris throws light on the void or nothingness in which they have been living. The breakdown which some of them suffer reflects the state of their society precariously balanced between recovery and total collapse.

Harris, however, refuses to take history at its face value, and this is paramount to an understanding of his philosophy of life and his art. For history, as he sees it, usually presents as objective and whole a reality which is in fact one-sided and partial (in the sense of *both* incomplete and biased) if only because it ignores the reactions of those who are involved in it and carry its real burden. History records facts and stops there. So does, in Harris's eyes, the realistic writer who, while he may explore the consequences of those facts, does not basically question the way they are presented. Harris, on the contrary, makes a major distinction between the factual and logical discourse of history, on one hand, and the capacity of art and the creative imagination, on the other, to see *through* the partial historical versions of fact and to grope intuitively towards the hidden resources inherent in any given situation. This « seminal » element in catastrophe can offer possibilities of renewal. An important function of art is to *see* it and retrieve it to counteract despair.

In the power of art to transform catastrophe into bearable experience myth plays an essential role but, again, Harris gives this term his own idiosyncratic meaning. It is not for him a mere archetype or a pattern structuring the work of art or, as Northop Frye has suggested in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, a literary mode. Nor is it, in George Steiner's words, « some context of belief and convention [in live force] which the artist shares with his audience »⁴. It seemed at one stage that Harris's definition of myths as « variables of the imagination »⁵ had a lot in common with Levi-Strauss's interpretation of myths as various expressions of one language which correspond to basic mental structures or principles of thought. Harris still agrees that structuralism has encouraged the arts to make a descent « into "inarticulate" layers of community beneath static systems whose "articulacy" is biased. The "inarticulate" layers may be equated with variables of the unconscious »⁶. But there the similarity stops. If I understand rightly, what Harris objects to in structuralism is the notion of a *structured* logical system underlying

the variety of myth since for him myth is, on the contrary, an « *unstructured* » instrument of « mediation between partial systems »⁷.

I have already indicated that for Harris history imprisons facts in a given period of time and is therefore inevitably coloured by the biases of that time. One of his statements on the subject runs as follows :

criteria of evaluation ... must accept the deep fact that all images (or institutions or rituals) are partial, are ceaselessly unfinished in their openness to other partial images from apparently strange cultures within an *unfathomable*, and a dynamic, *spirit of wholeness* that sustains all our hopes of the regeneration of far-flung community in an interdependent world.⁸

« Unfathomable spirit of wholeness » implies that one can never reach the whole truth of a given situation, never grasp in its entirety the community of being (or of emotions and types of behaviour) which underlies polarizations in history. One can only attempt to approach that unfathomable truth, and one way of doing this is through myth.

In the definitions of myth referred to above it is clear that myth is something other than itself, i.e., something other than a mere story explaining some religious belief or accounting for the experience of men. But whether it expresses deep-seated trends or a common body of beliefs, there is an element of unchangeableness or of self-perpetuation about it. The emphasis would be different in Levi-Strauss's definition for whom myths are « devices to think with, ways of classifying and organizing reality » and who says that « myths think themselves through people rather than *vice versa* »⁹. Again, I think that Harris might share with Levi-Strauss the notion that myth is a method of approach to reality but would object to myths being systems or codes of communication. Indeed myths for Harris have the unpredictability of an « untamed and untameable » force. They are « unconscious variables »¹⁰. Above all, and this is where myth differs essentially from history, myth « begins to breach the mimicry of natural fact »¹¹. Thus unlike history, it is not a reproduction of a necessarily partial reality; it attempts to *break through* the apparently « implacable identity »¹² of such reality. Essentially, myth becomes synonymous with creativity which always implies the creation of a community (between individuals, social groups, mankind). Hence the double function of myth as a means of breaking through history and as a « mediating force », a force that « mediates or arbitrates with "unstructured" intensity between all partial structures »¹³. Harris

expresses in yet another way the capacity of myth to bridge the gap and move towards a reconciliation between the partial views of history when he writes that

myth is a capacity for the conversion of deprivations and humiliations that may plague a culture and lead to violence and despair ... a transformation utterly essential to our age is to achieve a renaissance of cultures.¹⁴

The stories in *The Sleepers of Roraima* and *The Age of the Rainmakers* are all reinterpretations of myths and vestiges of legend or of historical incidents in which the Amerindians were involved. I have chosen to deal with « The Mind of Awakaipu » which appears in the second volume because it illustrates particularly well Harris's distinction between history and the mythical function, a distinction which, as suggested above, corresponds to one between rational discourse and the intuitive imagination.

In *The Marches of El Dorado*, the historical record of a journey into the interior of Guyana, Michael Swan speaks of the « well documented » and « amazing » story of Awakaipu, an Arekuna Indian, who was used as a guide by the explorer Richard Schomburgk on his expeditions. Swan writes that « Schomburgk speaks in admiration of the way [Awakaipu] behaved when attacked by pirai — "biting his lips with the raging agony he rolled about in the sand; yet no tear flowed from his eye, no cry passed his lips" »¹⁵. He further reports that Awakaipu instigated a large group of Indians to massacre one another, persuading them that after the sacrifice they would be reborn as white men. Swan concludes that he has « no doubt of the substantial truth of the incident »¹⁶. The portrait of Awakaipu he conveys is of an at once stoical and cruelly savage primitive man, a portrait symbolical of the character of a whole people. In the introduction to his story inspired by Swan's report Harris does not suggest that it is untrue. But he argues that such tales, frequent in the nineteenth and even the twentieth century, are used to fix or conscript the character of a people into a given image because of a lack of imagination, « a loss of imaginative scale »¹⁷.

The story is divided into three parts entitled *Gorge of Awakaipu*, *Matope of the Snake* and *Races of Matope*. Matope is a place name in Guyana designating rapids, mountains, or « a timeless ... immaterial gorge which exists as a gateway between worlds, between times » (42-43). Thus the dual dimension of the world the I-narrator enters is established from the start. In his « dream of primitive ancestors » (39, italics mine) he glimpses « the ruin of a gorge called Awakaipu ». The word dream indicates that he is penetrating the timeless land of myths accessible

through a deeply perceptive imagination. That the gorge should also be called Awakaipu shows that to explore the Indian's mind amounts to exploring his inner self or « space », and we shall see that this psychological investigation is largely conveyed in spatial terms¹⁸.

The first page and a half or so clearly suggest that the I-narrator is both re-awakening Awakaipu, his ancestor, from the realm of the dead and bringing to life primordial images (paintings) that lay buried in his (the narrator's) consciousness and that of his race¹⁹. Across the hundred years which separate them, « callous » years in historical time but « fire years » for Awakaipu, the narrator perceives a slight tremor over the Indian's face superimposing and contradicting his mask of indifference. Already he suspects that Awakaipu who had been « educated » by his master and could read and write may have behaved as he thought he was expected to (41). As the tremor communicates itself through him, the narrator feels driven « to play in turn at senseless self-persecution, to play a role of uncanny fortitude which bordered on the inhuman, the manner of the inhuman. Never to shed a tear » (41). The I-narrator now becomes Awakaipu and the rest of the story is a dramatized re-enactment of the incidents that won the Indian his reputation of courage and savagery.

There is no linear progression in the story from the narrator's confrontation and identification with Awakaipu to some kind of discovery or final resolution. For one thing the identification does not remain complete and the narrator soon combines a subjective with an objective approach as he stands « half-within, half-without the mould of Awakaipu » (44). Also we are made aware at the outset of alternative versions of reality and that each given fact can be prized apart to reveal another, hidden face, another dimension previously ignored. So the narrator is at first astonished that the tremor he has noticed on Awakaipu's lips is « a minuscule spark of tenderness [that] had endured to repudiate the straitjacket of the gods » (42), i.e., the character in which Awakaipu was imprisoned by his employer Schomburgk. Actually, the latter had misconceived the character of his guide, overlooking the tremor or psychological landslide he experienced. In Harris's fiction the landslide, like the waterfall or the toppling down an escarpment, is a metaphor for the psychological fall into the void experienced by the victims of conquest. Here the landslide gathered into rocks at the entrance of Awakaipu's gorge (in two senses of the word). It provoked a « seminal » tear which, unnoticed by Schomburgk, had been

collected in the cupped hands of the medicine man who knelt at Awakaipu's side when he was bitten, to shelter it « across the gamble of the centuries » (43).

In *Matope of the Snake* the headland at the entrance to the gorge of Awakaipu fascinates Schomburgk as a symbol of the purity and greatness he sees in the Amerindian character as a result of what he takes for Awakaipu's show of strength. But « across the thaw of time » (46) the I-narrator reads anew and differently the events of the past. The blow Awakaipu received when bitten by a snake seems to have coincided with the blow of conquest and to symbolize it. It fused in Awakaipu European and Amerindian vision. The I-narrator who has inherited this double ancestry realizes that each has disregarded an essential element in the sins of the other. He grows aware of « the seminal tears of heaven as the tragic deeds of men which had congealed on the face of the gorge » (46) (of the sorrow with which Awakaipu's deeds were accomplished). But he also sees that the « gorgon of drought » conquest brought to the land possessed « a scale of resources » and a « scale of atonement » (46). The « holocaust of sacrifice » (the massacre) in which his Amerindian forebear was involved appears now as a « model crime of wish-fulfilment » committed in the fire of ambition. The image of the forest fires crackling in Awakaipu when bitten (43) and across the site of the gorge (46) at the time of the holocaust clearly links the two events. The snake of evil had entered the Amerindian world with conquest, but fear rather than pride seems to have been Awakaipu's motive. At the end of this second part it seems that the « voices of fire » of the « precipitate races » « far down in the mind of Awakaipu » (48) are those of an « inner community » (both victims of Awakaipu and of European conquest?) crying to be released.

Part Three, *Races of Matope*, presents yet another, deeper exploration of the same events, through which the native imagination represented by the medicine-man or rainmaker prevails. It is now even more obvious that the narrator does not so much recreate historical incidents as the manner of perceiving them. As in Harris's earlier fiction, the imagination that perceives a reality is as much in need of regeneration as that reality itself and the revival of both occurs simultaneously. A close examination of the path of the landslide reveals it now as « one of the earliest pathological manifestations of races of men » (49). It is the very origin of misconceptions that the narrator investigates as he sees the « bite or fang, snake or deed ... conscripted into a fiend or barrier to love » (49). Originally, a « monolith of

vision » (50) was created when men raced like pebbles down the landslide of conquest. Conviction of evil on one hand, fear and anguish on the other, locked European and Amerindian into misunderstanding. The narrator actually evokes the state of « terrified consciousness »²⁰ that results from such incomprehension. But he envisions now a way out of that pathological state :

As I peered through that seeming mask of peace, *through* that deed of calm that had once smitten me with such indifference (peered through like one who stood both within and without his shell of time) — I was aware of the pathology of eternity and it seemed to me now that the gorge of Awakaipu ... Possessed, in a transition of ages — for the first revealing time — a *self-corrective void* or *seminal proportion* as the sorrow of freedom. (51, last italics mine.)

In the first concluding section of Part Three, entitled *Sorrow of Freedom*, the I-narrator first sees his « stunned » ancestor in the « self-corrective void » or « hollow cave » (52) in which they were confined by the landslide of conquest, though it seems that they had already begun to fall along its staircase when they received the *Blow to freedom* ... « Blow to or blow of freedom » (53). These last words show that the blow which deprived them of freedom actually offered two possibilities though the « captive lifeline » alone prevailed. By intercepting that blow now the I-narrator/Awakaipu sees it as an « intercessional », a mediating « wound » (58) which, instead of blocking vision as it originally did, makes it possible to see his age « — the age of the dead — growing out of its prison of arrest » (53-54). It is a question of *seeing* that the blow of fate (« snake that bit me on Matope » [53]) need not pin one down forever. There was an « inconspicuous seed » of fertility in the wound or blow which branches now « as the cured gorgon of heaven (pearl [tear] beyond price falling out of my head) ... that released the fatality of the universe from an unconscious snake ... into Awakaipu's tree of Adam » (54). This metaphorical sentence sums up the significance of the narrator/Awakaipu's « cured vision » (54) which perceives the possibility of a release from fate into a new race (« Awakaipu's tree of Adam ») or community, « Races of Matope », as the title of Part Three suggests.

In the second concluding section, *The Cured Gorgon of Heaven*, the seed reveals yet another possibility as it is seen to have « aged ... into its own cure of memory's bite — snake of the mind » (54). So memory, once also a poisoning evil (the « snake of the mind ») which kept conquered and conqueror apart, is the instrument of its own recovery. Other metaphors reveal a similar

duality. The « body of darkness » in the gorge of Awakaipu is also an « original fountain » (55). The « seminal sponge of ages » which had absorbed Awakaipu's tear (his hidden sorrow) is both « consistent and inconsistent with the age of love » (56) : consistent in that its dual features of « absorption » and « precipitation » generate a « fountain of compassion... new seed, new birth » ; inconsistent for, by raising the « question of ultimate fluid responsibility », it is easy to brand Awakaipu again as an « awakener of drought » (56). It seems as if from inside the mind of Awakaipu and from his standpoint in the past the I-narrator is aware that his anguish and despair would be ignored and he can feel « the prophetic monolith of inhumanity (white painted black, black painted white) » (57). Yet he does not deny Awakaipu's responsibility for « the seal of god » (the conqueror's imprisoning view) imposed « on the face of [his] people » (57). He only suggests that his motivations were more complex than realized.

From his exploration of the mind of Awakaipu the I-narrator has not elicited a new version of facts but a new interpretation of them, the hidden motives and emotions of those who were victimized and may have « run wild »²¹ without any effort being made to understand their terror and anguish. This journey into the native imagination shows that the events of the past can be a source of compassion and a warning for the future :

Yet he (the medicine-man of space) could harness his flood of compassion from my drought and remorse like a miracle of antithesis — like a river of *caveats* in a desert — like the sponge or age of newborn host as I relinquished my race of heaven to the rain of nativity. (57)

« Rain of nativity » contrasts with the earlier « gorgon of drought » and announces a possible rebirth of community or humanity, a major theme in Harris's subsequent fiction. Only a detailed analysis of its metaphorical texture could do full justice to this story but I hope that the chain of associations Harris weaves between Awakaipu's reaction to the snake-bite, the massacre he is supposed to have initiated, and the impact of conquest on him is clear. The I-narrator's re-vision of the three facts and his sympathetic insight into them has allowed him to reappraise the relationship between conquered Amerindian tribe and European conqueror who need not remain polarized into monster and god. This is no optimistic conviction that the creative imagination, identified here with the mythical function, can transform catastrophe in a literal or absolute sense. Only that it can breach the « perfectly natural historical biases and prejudices that seek to imprison us in the name of common sense or ritual

convention »²² and can bring to light the « seminal », regenerative dimension of catastrophe :

The thrust ... translation sets parallel cultures in motion, the partial living and the partial dead, in which the eclipse of a past civilization secretes the paradox of ceaseless originality to unravel, in complex degree, the hopes, the dangers, the stresses of survival in present generations.²³

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NOTES

- (1) Michael Swan, *The Marches of El Dorado*, Jonathan Cape, 1958, p. 245.
- (2) A Guyanese by birth, Wilson Harris emigrated to England in 1959 and is now a British subject. Some of his early stories were published in Guyanese magazines but were never collected and are not readily available.
- (3) The story not included in these volumes in « Kanaima » published in *Commonwealth Short Stories*, ed. by Anna Rutherford and Donald Hannah, Edward Arnold, 1971, reprinted by Macmillan and Dangaroo Press, 1979.
- (4) George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber, 1961, p. 318.
- (5) Wilson Harris, *History Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*, The National History and Arts Council, Ministry of Information and Culture, Georgetown, Guyana, 1970, p. 9.
- (6) Wilson Harris, *Explorations*, A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981, ed. by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Dangaroo Press, 1981, p. 132.
- (7) *Ibid.*
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 99, italics mine.
- (9) Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, an Introduction*, Blackwell, 1983, p. 104.
- (10) *Explorations*, pp. 125 and 126.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- (13) Wilson Harris, « Metaphor and Myth », in *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. by Robert Sellick, Adelaide, Crnle Essays and Monograph Series n° 1, 1982, p. 2.
- (14) Wilson Harris, « Character and Philosophic Myth », in *A Sense of Place*, ed. by Britta Olinder, Gothenburg, 1984, pp. 124 and 130.
- (15) *The Marches of El Dorado*, p. 243.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- (17) « The Mind of Awakaipu », in *The Age of the Rainmakers*, Faber, 1971, p. 38. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.
- (18) In *Palace of the Peacock* Mariella is both the name of a mission and of the Amerindian woman and muse the conquerors pursue. For a more detailed account of the equation between self and space in Harris's fiction see Hena Maes-Jelinek, *The Naked Design*, Dangaroo Press, 1976.
- (19) Wilson Harris is himself partly Amerindian.
- (20) An expression coined by the West Indian critic Kenneth Ramchand in *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, Faber, 1970, quoted by Harris in *History Fable and Myth*, p. 11.
- (21) Harris explains in an essay that catastrophe imposes such a difficult transformation of habits of power (some Amerindians were themselves fierce warriors before the conquest) that « the psyche of possibility within nature and man, has no recourse but to run wild, to become an irruption of terror ». *Explorations*, p. 98.
- (22) *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- (23) « Character and Philosophic Myth », p. 130.