

Maes-Jelinek, Hena: Wilson Harris. In Vinson, James (ed.). *Contemporary Novelists*. London: St. James Press, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972, pp. 561-565.

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PUBLICATIONS

Novels

- The Guiana Quartet:*
Palace of the Peacock. London, Faber, 1960.
The Far Journey of Oudin. London, Faber, 1961.
The Whole Armour. London, Faber, 1962.
The Secret Ladder. London, Faber, 1963.
Heartland. London, Faber, 1964.
The Eye of the Scarecrow. London, Faber, 1965.
The Waiting Room. London, Faber, 1967.
Tumatumari. London, Faber, 1968.
Ascent to Omai. London, Faber, 1970.

Short Stories

- The Sleepers of Roraima.* London, Faber, 1970.
The Age of the Rainmakers. London, Faber, 1971.

Verse

- Fetish.* Georgetown, British Guiana, privately printed, 1951.
Eternity to Season. Georgetown, British Guiana, privately printed, 1954.

Other

- Tradition and the West Indian Novel.* London and Port of Spain, Trinidad, New Beacon Books, 1965.
Tradition, The Writer and Society: Critical Essays. London and Port of Spain, Trinidad, New Beacon Books, 1967.

Manuscript Collections: University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica; University of Texas, Austin; University of Indiana, Bloomington.

Critical Studies: Introduction by C. L. R. James to *Tradition and the West Indian Novel*, 1965; *The Novel Now* by Anthony Burgess, London, Faber, 1967; essay by John Hearne in *The Islands in Between*, edited by Louis James, London, Oxford University Press, 1968; Introduction by Kenneth Ramchand to the paperback edition of *Palace of the Peacock*, London, Faber, 1969; *Chosen Tongue* by Gerald Moore, London, Longman, 1969; review by Robert Nye of *Ascent to Omai* in *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 1969; "The Myth of El Dorado in the Caribbean Novel" by Hena Maes-Jelinek, in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Leeds, Yorkshire), June 1971; "The Writer as Alchemist: The Unifying Role of Imagination in Wilson Harris's Novels" by Hena Maes-Jelinek, in *Language and Literature* (Copenhagen), Autumn 1971; "Ascent to Omai" by Hena Maes-Jelinek, in *Literary Half-Yearly* (Mysore), January 1972.

Wilson Harris comments:

Palace of the Peacock through *The Guiana Quartet* and successive novels up to *The Sleepers of Roraima* and *The Age of the Rainmakers* are related to a symbolic landscape-in-depth—the shock of great rapids, vast forests and savannahs—playing through memory to involve perspectives of imperilled community and creativity reaching back into the Pre-Columbian mists of time.

I believe that the revolution of sensibility in defining community towards which we may now be moving is an extension of the frontiers of the alchemical imagination beyond an *opus contra naturam* into an *opus contra ritual*. This does not mean the jettisoning of ritual (since ritual belongs in the great ambivalent chain of memory; and the past, in a peculiar sense, as an omen of proportions, shrinking or expanding, never dies); but it means the utilisation of ritual as an ironic bias—the utilisation of ritual, not as something in which we situate ourselves absolutely, but as an unravelling of self-deception with self-revelation as we see through the various dogmatic proprietors of the globe within a play of contrasting structures and anti-structures: a profound drama of consciousness invoking or involving contrasting tones is the variable phenomenon of creativity within which we are prone, nevertheless, to idolise logical continuity or structure and commit ourselves to a conservative bias, or to idolise logical continuity or anti-structure and commit ourselves to a revolutionary bias. Thus we are prone to monumentalise our own biases and to indict as well as misconceive creativity. A capacity to digest as well as liberate contrasting figures is essential to the paradox of community and to the life of the imagination.

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Wilson Harris's novels grow out of one another like the concentric circles produced by a stone on the surface of a river. This familiar image symbolizes in *Ascent to Omai* a double process of spiritual liberation and growing consciousness. It applies, however, to the author's own works, whose initial and central *Palace of the Peacock* announces the original developments in style and thought which from one novel to another extend the limits of the creative imagination.

The setting of his novels has so far been the impressive landscape of his native Guyana, whose multiracial population stands for the complex make-up of humanity. The *Guiana Quartet* epitomizes the successive historical conquests of Guyana and the victimization of its various racial communities other than its white post-Columbian conquerors. The progress of a skipper and his crew on a dangerous river in the jungle, the harsh life of a poor East Indian in the savannahs, a tragedy of guilt and innocence on the coast, and the scientific measuring of the rise and fall of a river in the heartland, these dramatize man's encounter with the diversified and grandiose South American landscape, itself evocative of a terrible past that still awaits reinterpretation. The originality of Harris's approach lies in revealing beside the conventional version of historical events neglected possibilities of fulfilment for both the conquerors and the conquered of Guyana. He presents the humble and forgotten victims of the conquests and subsequent migrations as mythological personae capable of inciting their conquerors to spiritual rebirth, and thereby emphasizes the mythological and historical significance of humanity's more humble representatives. Though a sense of social justice may urge these conversions, they are not primarily motivated by a social or political ideal but illustrate a need for individual regeneration as a prelude to a new conception of community.

It appears from Harris's characters that humanity is on the whole divided between hunter and hunted, victor and victim, each category remaining self-deceptively confined to its own monolithic role and trying to extend these divisions to nature and society. But Harris denies the genuineness of those categories. He sees in nature and in all forms of human existence an ambivalence of purpose and design that should be given free play. In the *Guiana Quartet*, for instance, omnipresent nature is both perilous and protective. It is also

a mirror reflecting man's dual nature, his spiritual states as well as his physical metamorphoses. Moreover, the reciprocity between the fundamental opposites, spirit and matter, finds expression in the reciprocity between man and the landscape, while this very relationship acts as an incentive to the recognition of a similar reciprocity within man's divided self and between different kinds of men. The landscape always acts as a prime mover to consciousness in Wilson Harris's novels, stirring man's imagination and helping him to define himself. In the later novels the action tends to take place mainly in the characters' mind as they re-live their past lives, and nature becomes more and more identified with their mental landscape, so much so that in *Ascent to Omai* the cosmic dimensions of the natural setting blend with the heights and depths of the human psyche.

The creation of reciprocity at all levels of experience is a dynamic process which partakes of the ever-changing fabric of life. Since everything grows out of everything else, nothing ever dies completely. There lies at the heart of every "ruined personality", whether of an individual, a community or a nation—and these are in fact one community of being—a frail charcoal residue of life that can only revive through feeling and compassion. However hackneyed these words might sound, they do not refer here to an easy or sentimental attitude. They are associated with a painful process by which Harris's characters become aware of the residues of life or latent opposites in their existences as a part of themselves with which they must come to terms. Like a volcano, the past can erupt and ironically strike back in chain-like reactions. Hence the importance of history, and of memory as an adjunct to imagination, when the characters re-create their personal and historical past in order to understand it. This immersion in the darkness of their antecedents or of the unknown areas within themselves is a difficult journey towards self-knowledge. In their confrontation with the natural, or their own spiritual, jungle, with the lost Amerindian tribes or the other dispossessed of this world, imagination is the mainspring of the emerging dialogue.

As Harris's thought gains in depth and terseness, it becomes increasingly clear that imagination as the source of man's urge to conceive "resensitized perspectives of community" is the very subject of his exploration. From his early novels, in which the dispossessed of Guyana were in a sense mythicised, to his recent "fables" (*The Sleepers of Roraima*, *The Age of the Rainmakers*), in which real Amerindian myths and vestiges of legend are re-interpreted, Wilson Harris has not ceased to inquire into the possibilities of the individual creative imagination to provoke in man a reversal of outlook and stimulate him to a sense of responsibility towards himself and others. The Guyanese, and by implication humanity, have reached a turning point in their history, and their future may depend on their understanding of themselves and their environment. Modern man, however, is often blind to the mysterious in life or unwilling to acknowledge it, though he can be stirred by imagination to respond to it. Mystery in Harris's fiction shrouds those evanescent tribes of Amerindians or escaped slaves who are such an essential part of the Guyanese past. But it is also a significant feature of every possible alternative or "opposite" each individual character learns to recognize at the heart of all life.

The unifying medium between all opposites is itself a synthesis in the making of the primitive, and mysterious, poetic imagination with the modern imagination. Harris shows in *Tumatumari*, a summit in his work, that both are in need of regeneration yet can redeem the individual through the creation of harmony between each other and by uniting with the scientific mind. The union of contraries and the growth of the "alchemical imagination" both as an object and an instrument of exploration correspond to the individual's attempt to break through his self-made fortresses and to his coming to consciousness. Throughout Harris's fiction the creation of consciousness, the opening of new windows on the world, is, as it clearly appears in *Ascent to Omai*, analogous to the artist's creative act. Each novel is an awakening of consciousness through the medium of language, a language which, economic and highly selective as it is, attempts to convey the immediacy and intercommunicability of all being. Harris refuses to impose a "false coherency" on the raw material of life. Not their existence in a social order but their spiritual fulfilment gives his characters substance. Their mental landscape extends in space but eludes chronological time. The limit between the concrete and the intangible is hard to perceive. But with each new novel

the extraordinary possibilities of aesthetic and spiritual stimulation Harris discovers in the individual's immediate environment are a challenge to the reader to probe with him into man's genius for recovery and change.

—Hena Maes-Jelinek