

Maes-Jelinek, Hena: Wilson Harris. In Vinson, James (ed.). *Contemporary Novelists*. 2nd ed. London: St. James Press, New York: St Martin's Press, 1976, pp. 602-606.

HARRIS, (Theodore) Wilson. British. Born in New Amsterdam, British Guiana, 24

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March 1921. Educated at Queen's College, Georgetown. Married to Margaret Whitaker. Government Surveyor, in the 1940's, and Senior Surveyor, 1955-58, Government of British Guiana. Visiting Lecturer, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1970; Writer-in-Residence, Scarborough College, University of Toronto, 1970; Commonwealth Fellow in Caribbean Literature, Leeds University, Yorkshire, 1971; Visiting Professor, University of Texas, Austin, 1972. Delegate to the National Identity Conference, Brisbane, 1968; to UNESCO Symposium on Caribbean Literature, Cuba, 1968. Recipient: Arts Council grant, 1968, 1970; Guggenheim Fellowship, 1973. Address: c/o Faber and Faber Ltd., 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AU, England.

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.

Black Marsden. London, Faber, 1972.

Companions of the Day and Night. London, Faber, 1975.

Genesis of the Clowns. London, Faber, 1975.

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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It is now becoming clear that, viewed together, Wilson Harris's short and complex novels form one of the major fictional achievements in English in this century. His is a revolutionary opus: the boldness of his vision, the terseness and accumulated depths of his symbolical language, the impressionistic technique through which significant moments of intuition—counterbalancing, but not opposed to, an objective perceptive of events—determine the structure of his narratives, these are some of the elements that set the novel once more on the path of discovery and renewal. Harris himself has explained his objections to the "novel of persuasion," which, through an apparently free selection of "recognizable items," consolidate a world-view presented as inevitable. In his own novels the individual hero is usually involved in a process of breaking down his biases and self-deceptions as a prerequisite to re-discovery and fulfilment. The inconclusive ending of each shows that what matters is the exploration, the unremitting questioning of all accepted beliefs.

The setting of Wilson Harris's novels is generally the impressive landscape of his native Guyana, whose multiracial population stands for the complex make-up of humanity. The *Guiana Quartet* epitomizes the West Indian situation, revealing the specific character of its various racial communities and offering a way out of the polarizations inherited from the complex circumstances of conquest and colonization. A journey (at once individual and

historical) into the Guyanese interior, the harsh lives of East Indians 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 South American landscape and its inhabitants, both evocative of a terrible past that needs to be re-interpreted. The originality of Harris's approach lies in his discovering in the very traumas of history neglected possibilities of fulfilment for both the conquerors and the conquered of Guyana. He presents the humble and forgotten victims of successive conquests and migrations as mythological *personae* capable of awakening their conquerors to spiritual rebirth, and in this way he emphasizes the significant role of the humble. Though a sense of social justice may be responsible for the conquerors' change of attitude, this does not stem from a social or political ideal but rather illustrates a need for individual regeneration as a prelude to a new conception of community.

It appears, indeed, from Harris's characters that humanity is on the whole divided between victor and victim, each category remaining self-deceptively confined to its own monolithic role. But Harris denies the genuineness of these categories. He sees in nature and in all forms of existence an ambivalence of purpose and design that should be given free play. In the *Guiana Quartet*, for instance, the sensuously evoked landscape is both perilous and protective. It is also a mirror reflecting man's dual nature and stimulating him to a recognition of reciprocity between the fundamental opposites (within himself and in the outer world), spirit and matter. The landscape is always a prime mover to consciousness in Harris's novels, stirring man's imagination and helping him to define himself in relation to others and to his environment. Even in the novels which, from *The Eye of the Scarecrow* to *Ascent to Omai*, take place entirely in the mind of the main character, the convolutions of natural landscapes, their fixity or susceptibility to phenomenal changes, evoke a similar configuration and possibilities of metamorphosis within the human psyche.

The difficulty of Harris's novels—and of the process of discovery in which his characters are engaged—is due partly to his refusal to impose a "false coherency" on the raw material of life or to countenance what he considers as fixed codes of behaviour. Every action, every thought, is potentially good or evil, but will inevitably become evil and oppressive if frozen into a static posture. His vision of the world is essentially dynamic; his rendering of it, eluding conventional notions of character and "reality," aims at keeping in step with ever-changing life, and his protagonists progress through and beyond appearances towards an intuition of the "other." For there lies at the heart of every "ruined personality," whether of an individual, a community or a nation—and these are one community of being—a frail charcoal residue of life that can be revived only through feeling and compassion. What is meant here is the reverse of a sentimental attitude; the recovery of feeling and compassion initiates the painful process by which Harris's characters become aware of the indestructible residue, latent opposites in their existence, 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. Memory, however, can also be deceptive; its own codes and appearances need to be broken down and its premises re-examined so that the characters may escape a conventional imprisonment within its fascinating legacy.

The subjective imagination as a capacity "to resensitive perspectives of community" is the very subject of Wilson Harris's exploration. From his early novels, through the "fables" in which Amerindian myths and vestiges of legend are reinterpreted, to *Black Marsden*, a novel set in Scotland that is also concerned with the plight of the dispossessed, he has not ceased to inquire into the possibilities of the individual creative imagination to provoke a reversal of outlook in man and stimulate him to a deeper 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. But modern man is often blind to the mysterious in life and in "others" or unwilling to acknowledge it. Renewal in Harris's fiction always involves a setting in motion of previously mysterious and "fossilized" landscapes and people so that a dialogue may develop between them and their increasingly conscious "opposites." However, in *Tumatumari*, a

summit in his work, Harris shows that, as a unifying medium, imagination itself is in need of regeneration and must unite with the scientific mind. Its growth both as an instrument and an object of exploration, is indissociable from the individual's attempt to break through his self-made fortresses to achieve consciousness. Throughout Harris's fiction the creation of a "new architecture of consciousness" is analogous to the artist's creative act. The author's belief that form is prior to content is illustrated in his use of language as a means to develop awareness and stimulate the potential rebirth and renewal of sensibility of modern man. Highly economic and selective as it is, his language truly exemplifies the interrelatedness of all being. It is not their existence in a social order but their fulfilment as human beings that gives his characters substance. The limit in his narratives between the concrete and the intangible is sometimes hard to perceive. But with each new novel the extraordinary possibilities of aesthetic and spiritual renascence Harris discovers in the individual's dialogue with inner and outer world are a challenge to the reader to probe with him into man's genius for recovery and change.

—Hena Maes-Jelinek