

Wilson Harris

by Hena Maes-Jelinek

University of Liège, Belgium

Biography

Wilson Harris is a Guyanese-born poet, novelist and critic, of mixed Amerindian, European and African descent, now a British citizen. He was born in New Amsterdam on 24 March 1921 in what was then British Guyana. He was educated at Queen's College, Georgetown, and became a Government surveyor in the 1940s, leading many expeditions into the interior to do mapping and geomorphological research. He began to write poetry as a young man, when he had close connections with a group of Guyanese writers whose work appeared in the magazine *Kijk-Over-Al*. His explorations of the jungle and the coastal areas had a tremendous impact on his imagination and affected his vision of landscapes and people. He first gave expression to this vision in *The Guyana Quartet* (1960-63). He explained it himself as 'the shock of great rapids, vast forests and savannahs – playing through memory to involve perspectives of imperilled communities and creativity reaching back into the Pre-Columbian mists of time'. He discarded several novels in manuscript before he felt satisfied with the form of *Palace of the Peacock* (1960).

Harris emigrated to England in 1959 and lived in London until a few years ago, when he moved to Essex. He is married to Margaret Whitaker, herself a poet and playwright. He is now the author of eighteen novels and two collections of novellas. In 1967 he started giving talks and writing essays which are most profitably read in conjunction with his fiction since they are mutually illuminating. His essays have strongly influenced recent post-colonial theories, though he does not consider himself a theoretician and thinks that intuition plays too great a part in his own approach to the post-colonial experience to lend itself entirely to the rational treatment specific to theorization. All his writings express his intense concern for the future of

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humanity and civilization which, he thinks, have been endangered by the split, resulting from the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment, between intuition and reason (which still functioned in harmony in alchemy) and between art and science.

Wilson Harris has been a visiting professor and writer-in-residence in many universities (West Indies, Toronto, Leeds, Aarhus, Yale, California, Mysore, Newcastle in Australia, and Queensland), and for a number of years he regularly spent a few months at the University of Texas at Austin in both capacities. He was Commonwealth Fellow at the University of Leeds in 1971 and received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973 as well as a Southern Arts Writer's Fellowship in 1976. He received an Honorary Doctor's Degree from the University of the West Indies (1984) and the University of Kent at Canterbury (1988). He was the first recipient of the Guyana National Prize for fiction (1985-87).

Critical Essay

In both form and content Wilson Harris's fiction breaks new ground and marks a radical departure from the realism of the 'great tradition' of the English novel. His objections to realism are literary but also philosophical, social and, by implication, political. He considers it inadequate to render the 'dismembered psychical world' of the Caribbean. The realistic novel 'persuades' the reader that the selected elements it presents (historical and social situations, fashionable manners or conventions and even moral attitudes) belong to an inevitable condition or 'given' plane of existence which most people take for granted. It dismisses as non-existent what it chooses to ignore, even if unconsciously, and is therefore complacent and authoritarian. By contrast, and in spite of his admirable, vivid recreations of the concrete world, there is no privileged plane of existence in Harris's narratives which often initiate a dialogue between the living and the dead (whether actually so or 'lost' to society, like the 'invisible' Amerindians in the jungle or the totally deprived, or the real and/or spiritual ancestors buried in one's unconscious). As a result, the reality of Harris's novels is never imprisoned in what he sees as the uniform mould of realism, but fragmented into many deep overlapping layers. In response, a Harris protagonist is stimulated to a quest, the major effect of which is the regeneration of the imagination. This imagination is humanity's main hope of salvation and the leading theme through Harris's writing.

Two major factors originally inspired Harris's vision of, and his approach to, art: the impressive landscapes of Guyana, alive with the spirit of its decimated peoples (vanished Caribs, barely surviving Amerindians and runaway slaves), and its colonial history, which gave it a multiracial population polarized for centuries into oppressors and victims. The landscape, in the early novels particularly, is the outer equivalent of an inner psychological space. Both contain vestiges of a terrifying past that is being retrieved. Thus resurface the many selves of the protagonist's (man's) 'community of being', when he begins to face and 'digest' a personal or historical catastrophe. Until fairly recently the Caribbean was considered as 'history-less' because of its apparent lack of achievement (in spite of having contributed to the wealth of various imperial powers) and because the traumas of its history, the dismemberment of its peoples, slavery, and its continuing exploitation and exile, were conveniently ignored.

The Guyana Quartet explores the consequences of these catastrophic

experiences and the possibilities of rebirth from the ensuing psychological and spiritual void. It offers a composite picture of Guyana, of its geographically contrasting settlements outside the two major cities and of their racially diversified populations. The characters range from illiterate laborers and peasants, experienced money-lenders and well-to-do farmers, to the educated younger generation and the intellectual representatives of technological civilization. *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), the first book of the *Quartet*, and probably still the most widely read of Harris's fictions, boldly initiates the quest that underlies all of Harris's short dense novels. It also presents the major features that would re-occur in his later fiction. The plot moves on two planes: it is both a description of an actual event and an imaginative re-enactment of the first (and all subsequent) expeditions into the heartland of Guyana. A multiracial crew led by Donne, the ruthlessly ambitious skipper whose name nevertheless evokes the creative imagination, travel from the savannahs through the forest, hunting down the Amerindians they want to use as cheap labor. As they pursue them on a nameless river, the obstacles they meet provoke the 'second death' of each in turn until Donne reaches the waterfall above which the Amerindians have taken refuge. The expedition is reconstructed by Donne's brother or alter-ego as a 'dream', which allows for depth and freedom of imagination, unrestricted by space and time. This process allows Harris's characters to bridge life and death, the conscious and the unconscious, in their recreation of the past. When the I-narrator says 'I awoke with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye' (19), he evokes both the factual and the imaginative perspectives interwoven in the narrative as well as the double vision that enables him to penetrate the blind actions of the past and to eventually envisage their effects and consequences. What this suggests is that the conquest of the Americas need not have been so destructive. Both the Pre-Columbians and the Europeans were the prisoners of rigid codes of behaviour and values. Their meeting could have unbalanced these codes to trigger off evolution. Instead, it produced destructive stasis. Harris's view of life is essentially dynamic, and in his fiction any catastrophe which breaks down petrified situations or inflexible attitudes contains the seed of rebirth. That is why he sees in the very dislocation of outer and inner selves (also the condition of modern man) a prelude to salutary change and a regenerated consciousness.

In all of Harris's novels the characters are transformed through the experiences they are capable of visualizing. For example, in *Palace of the*

Peacock, the most allegorical novel in the *Quartet*, a short-lived reconciliation is achieved through the re-fashioning of Donne's vision and the temporary union of pursuers and pursued, when the sun, at first a symbol of destructive power, breaks into stars. These then merge with the leaves of the tree of life (themselves symbols of the pursued natives) and turn into the eyes of the peacock, a metaphor for diversity-in-unity:

The bark and wood turned to lightning flesh and the sun which had been suspended from its head rippled and broke into stars that stood where the shattered leaves had been in the living wake of the storm. The enormous starry dress it now wore spread itself all around into a full majestic gown from which emerged the intimate column of a musing neck, face and hands, and twinkling feet. The stars became peacocks' eyes, and the great tree of flesh and blood swirled into another stream that sparkled with divine feathers where the neck and the hands and the feet had been nailed.

This was the palace of the universe and the windows of the soul looked out and in.

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The *Quartet's* other novels take place in less remote and therefore more immediately recognizable settings. In *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), set on the East-Indian rice plantations between the savannahs and the coast, it is Oudin's illiterate wife, who is nevertheless capable of *reading* the constraints of the bond between Oudin and the money-lender Ram, who becomes an agent of change. In *The Whole Armour* (1962), which takes place on a precarious strip of land between bush and sea, Cristo, a young man wrongly accused of murder, agrees to sacrifice himself to atone for the violence and guilt of his community. In *The Secret Ladder* (1963) the land surveyor Fenwick and his crew chart the river Canje prior to the building of a dam that will flood that part of the jungle from which the descendants of runaway slaves refuse to move. The crux of each novel lies in the possibility of upsetting a fixed order of things, and of eroding the certainties and imperatives that lock the protagonists within a one-sided and rigid sense of self. Hence the crumbling rather than 'consolidation' of personality, the disturbing resemblances between dead and living characters, the reappearance of the dead among the living, and the frequency of doubles or twins to 'break through from patterns of implacable identities'. In keeping with Harris's emphasis on process rather than achievement, the end of the *Quartet* is inconclusive. A central motif running through its four movements

is the need for the Guyanese, as for Donne, 'to understand and transform [their] beginnings', though the 'mystery of origins' can only be *partly* penetrated by 'dismantling a prison of appearance', a course of action initiated in the *Quartet* and also pursued in the later novels.

Heartland (1964) is a sequel to the *Quartet*, but it also prefigures Harris's later, more self-reflexive fiction. After a reversal of fortune, Stevenson, the protagonist of the novel, works as a government agent in the heartland. There, he meets three characters who had vanished from ordinary life in the *Quartet*. He also helps an Amerindian woman give birth to her child, possibly the fruit of her relation with Donne. There is a sense in which these inhabitants of the forest 'guide' Stevenson towards self-realization, always an unfinished process in Harris's narratives, as we see when Stevenson disappears leaving fragments of letters and poems in his half-burnt resthouse. Just as Harris had 'revised' the commonly accepted version of New World conquest in *Palace of the Peacock*, the Dantean epigraph of *Heartland* and the main character's quest through the forest foreshadow his later 're-vision' of *The Divine Comedy* in *Carnival* (1985).

All Harris's novels are 'revisions' which transform the conventional expectations of narrative fiction: through the recreation of personal and historical experience his protagonists question the apparently obvious. They descend into 'areas of tradition that have sunken away and apparently disappeared and vanished and yet are still active at some level'. We see this in the novels following upon *Heartland*, in which the protagonists envision or experience a condition of void or loss. At the beginning of *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), which evokes the economic depression of the twenties and the Guyana Strike in 1948, the narrator suffers 'a void in conventional memory' as a result of an accident. In *The Waiting Room* (1967) Susan Forrestal, deserted by her lover and blind after four eye operations, finds herself in a physical and psychological void. She and her husband die in an explosion, and the substance of the novel is drawn from their half-obliterated log-book as 'edited' by the author. Prudence, the heroine of *Tumatumari* (1968), suffers from a nervous breakdown after the death of her husband and the delivery of a stillborn child. In *Ascent to Omai* (1970) Victor explores the heartland in search of his lost father, who disappeared after serving a sentence for setting fire to the factory in which he was working. These novels are preoccupied with states of loss incurred in the past and with the kind of fiction that the artist, narrator or protagonist attempts to conceive. The narrator in *The Eye of the Scarecrow* who keeps re-living his past through

different approaches, Susan and her lover re-living their affair through the author's editorship, Prudence re-creating twentieth-century Guyanese history from her own memories and her father's papers, and Victor writing a novel about his father's trial, are all creators in search of a 'primordial species of fiction'. This implies that the stuff of fiction is to be found in the 'sunken areas of tradition' I have mentioned earlier, while the fictional process itself is a 'conversion of deprivation'.

The protagonists' disorientation in the course of their quests also throws light on Harris's 'revised' conception of fictional character. They are not self-sufficient or 'strong' personalities but rather move towards a state of non-identity and become 'agents' in whom other selves surface. This multiplicity of being is also informed by a conviction that all truths are partial. Nevertheless, Harris's rejection of all absolutes differs from the Postmodernists' emphasis on subjectivity and representation of meaninglessness in so far as 'decentering' in his fiction, while denying hierarchy (the dominance of the self to begin with), always involves the protagonist in a search for an invisible reality, of which he can have intuitive and partial perceptions but which he can never fully attain.

Myth also plays a major part in bringing to light the regenerative capacity of catastrophe while illustrating Harris's view that civilization (e.g. that of conquistadorial Europe) owes a considerable debt to so-called 'savage' cultures. But myth with Harris is neither a mere archetype, literary mode, or 'story' explaining some religious belief; nor is it merely a pattern to structure a work of art. From the early poetry and *Palace of the Peacock* onwards, Harris has re-written both European (mostly Greek) and Caribbean myths, which in their modified versions become themselves transforming and mediating instruments 'between partial systems' (*Explorations*: 132). Ulysses is the mythical character who most frequently returns in his novels, although he does so in different guises, and while performing deeds, that radically subvert the traditional interpretation of the Greek hero's adventures. The seven stories which make up *The Sleepers of Roraima* (1970) and *The Age of the Rainmakers* (1971) all involve re-interpretations of Amerindian myths, vestiges of legend or historical incidents. They throw light on the distinction Harris makes between historiography (as static consensus of opinion) on the one hand, and myth (as carrier of the seed of renewal) on the other ('Myth begins to breach the mimicry of natural fact' [*Explorations*: 101]). Though most of these stories deal with specifically Amerindian experience, they also form an essential link between the earlier and later

fiction because they update Harris's concept of cross-culturalism (as distinct from multi-culturalism, i.e., the recognition of different cultures that do not necessarily interact) so important in all the later novels. The story 'Yurokon' fictionalizes the effect on the last surviving Carib child of his ancestors' bone-flute, the musical instrument they carved from the bones of their cannibalized Spanish enemies after eating a morsel of their flesh in order to enter their mind and intuit the kind of attack these strangers might launch against themselves. The Caribs also saw in the bone-flute the very origin of music. The flute was therefore 'the seed of an intimate revelation ... of *mutual* spaces they shared with the enemy ... within which to visualize the *rhythm* of strategy, the *rhythm* of attack or defence the enemy would dream to employ against them' ('On the Beach': 339, italics mine). The stigma of cannibalism has long hidden this 'mutuality' but in Yurokon's reconstruction of his ancestors' withdrawal from their territory, the rage, 'inner fire' and the hideous prejudices of the enemies gradually yield (in more complex and poetic terms than can be suggested here) to an 'annunciation of music'. Through the bone-flute metaphor Harris expresses his conviction that 'adversarial contexts' such as the encounter of inimical cultures can generate creativity. Both destruction (cannibalism) and creation (music) come together in the instrument. Thus, catastrophe can destroy the monolithic outlook of a people so as to offer an opportunity for spiritual renewal, as the last words of 'Yurokon' imply: 'Eastertide again ... annunciation of music' (81).

All this does not mean that Harris envisages an actual rebirth of the Caribs. It does mean that he envisages the rebirth of an eclipsed native consciousness, which is itself part of a collective or universal unconscious. Unlike other Caribbean writers, Harris has always dissociated himself from any clearly defined and, even more so, from any militant notion of national or racial identity. He believes instead in the 'cross-cultural psyche of humanity' that 'bristles ... with the fabric of encounters' between antinomical cultures ('Comedy and Modern Allegory': 137). All his novels attempt to break that antinomy. They are informed by an inner movement towards 'otherness', though Harris is always careful to show that the deprived 'other' can become possessive in turn. This is a major theme in his next novel, *Black Marsden* (1972), which takes place in Edinburgh but, like the novels following upon it, bridges continents. The bridge metaphor extends to most of the characters in these later novels, as they travel actually or imaginatively from the U.K. to the Americas or India, as in *The Angel at the Gate* (1982). Moreover, the very

fabric of these fictions is a ceaselessly elaborated bridge between the unconscious and what Harris calls 'the miracle of consciousness'. Clive Goodrich in *Black Marsden* comes upon the 'half-frozen spectre' of Doctor Black Marsden in the ruined Dunfermline Abbey and invites him to stay in his house. Marsden brings along the beautiful Jennifer Gorgon and introduces Goodrich to his other 'agents', Knife and Harp, all of whom exist in their own right as well as being part of Goodrich's personality or the *tabula rasa* theater within himself. The fusion of 'vision and idea' in this phase of Harris's development as a writer goes together with a superb rendering of the sense and spirit of specific places, whether it be Edinburgh, Mexico in *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), or London in *DaSilva daSilva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977) and *The Tree of the Sun* (1978). In *Genesis of the Clowns*, published in one volume with *DaSilva daSilva*, Frank Wellington travels back in memory to Guyana and enters into a new dialogue with those he had unconsciously exploited in the past:

Across the years looking back now from the Thames to the Abary I feel myself riveted into a breathless tapestry of revolving continents, landscapes and rivers I once possessed that may have started then. ... It is difficult to say when. ... As though the wheel of empire began to turn anew when for many it had already stopped, began to return to me as a moving threshold of consciousness.

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In all these novels except *Genesis* Marsden is a spiritual though sometimes demonic guide (like Masters in *Carnival*). In all of them Harris created what he called at one stage 'the novel as painting'. Already in *Companions*, Goodrich 'edits' the diary, paintings and sculptures of Nameless who has 'fallen' through history into Mexico and who has discovered 'unsuspected corridors, underseas, underskies, of creation' (32). In *DaSilva daSilva* and *The Tree of the Sun* DaSilva (reborn from disasters and death in *Palace of the Peacock* and *Heartland*) is a painter who, as he prepares his canvases for an exhibition, is spurred on to a profound 're-vision' of these paintings and the experiences they call to mind. The increased sensuousness of these novels in no way impairs the double vision that Harris's highly poetic prose always creates, the real world *through* which hidden depths are perceived:

DaSilva would paint his way past [a demolished area] on a summer evening long ago it seemed (though perhaps it was only yesterday) with

his brush dipped into the sky. He felt a tightened grip in his flesh, a sense of deprivation in those rotting beams or walls that belonged to a past economic code or day, and yet he was utterly amazed as the paint seeped out of the sky – transparent densities of blues and greens, white fire, edges of orchestrated delicacy touched by unfathomable peace, consensus of open-hearted privacy in a dying sky – as if to alert him to the reality of the radiant city within every city, the reality of the genie's gift, the genie's potential reconstruction.

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Although this is true of the earlier fiction as well, the DaSilva novels are more specifically about the nature of creativity examined through the joint interiorization of experience and of the expedition into 'otherness' that is characteristic of all the novels. In *The Tree of the Sun* the DaSilvas come across an unfinished book, and letters which the former tenants of their flat secretly wrote to each other. DaSilva's editing of this material is the subject both of the novel and of his paintings. Not only does he bring the dead to life, *they* bring *him* to life in their writing and envision the role he plays in their future existence. In this dialogue between the dead and the living, and in their awareness of each other across time and space, lies the way to what Harris calls 'the resurrection of the self': the return to life of buried antecedents or the surfacing and assimilation of unconscious elements into the consciousness.

Harris's latest trilogy, *Carnival, The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990), foregrounds this dialogue between the author/'editor'/creative protagonist and his characters. *Carnival* was an immediate success with Harris's readers and elicited many critical commentaries. The penetration of masks has been an essential aspect of his fiction from the beginning, leading, however, not to Truth, but to many partial truths and other masks. 'Carnival', another one of Harris's paradoxical metaphors, 'hides us from ourselves, yet reveals us to ourselves' (86). Above all, through Harris's continuing fusion of art and life, the 'Carnival of history' (Guyanese but also contemporary world events) transforms traditional genres and values, and gives our world a new direction. *Carnival* is a 'divine comedy of existence' which shows the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso of Dante's time to have become inadequate categories, transformed here into fluid, overlapping states. Man's incorrigible desire for the infinite is what led to the conquest of the world and its division into higher and lower cultures in the first place. This is further shown in *The Infinite*

Rehearsal (a phrase which epitomizes Harris's writing process), 'a spiritual autobiography' which sifts 'unreliable fact from true play' as the narrator 're-writes' Goethe's *Faust* (associated with the Mexican plumed serpent god Quetzalcoatl) and as he conceives of the kind of fiction that could redeem the world from its tyrannies and suffering:

Fiction relates to presences and absences. ... Fiction explores the partiality of the conditioned mind and the chained body, chained to lust, chained to waste. Fiction's truths are sprung from mind in its illumination of the sensible body again and again and again, in its illumination of our grasp of intuitive theatre and of deprivation in the materials with which one constructs every quantum leap from the sick bed of humanity.

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In *The Four Banks of the River of Space* it is the relationship between Ulysses and Penelope which is being revised through English and Guyanese characters and setting. In these latest novels, through his quest for the survival of civilization and the renewal of fiction, Harris experiments with, and gives new life to, the traditional forms of allegory, comedy, tragedy and epic, simultaneously transforming our visions and the beautiful but static formulae in which we tend to sublimate and imprison them.

Harris's language is incredibly rich in intertextual allusions. As it is in the masterpieces and the myths he revises, his language is rooted in the 'unconscious' and in the 'universal' imagination. Harris has recently expressed his conviction that English, his native language, is 'a living possession after generations of conflict in the Americas. It has absorbed ... some of the rhythms, some of the incantatory spirit, of the alien tongues of those who were my distant ancestors' ('In the Name of Liberty': 12). He also wrote that 'Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe are as much the heritage of black men and women as of white men and women' ('Comedy and Modern Allegory': 137). The deep and genuine cross-culturalism of his writing makes him hard to classify. He belongs with the great innovators who make us look at our world in a new light. In our now global landscape conflicts are interdependent, but solutions still lie in the individual soul:

There is no short cut to solutions of famine, to the pollution of the globe, to authoritarianism and rigged elections in the so-called Third World, to nuclear peril, to violence, to drug addiction, etc. Yet creative solutions do exist, and such solutions hinge, I believe, in significant part on a profound literacy of the imagination.

('Validation of Fiction': 40)

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