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Hena*

EXPLORATIONS

A Selection of Talks and Articles
1966 - 1981

WILSON HARRIS

Edited with an Introduction by Hena Maes-Jelinek

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Introduction

With the mutilation of the conquered tribe a new ... artist struggles to emerge who finds himself moving along the knife-edge of change.

Interior of the Novel

The essays collected in this volume were written between 1966 and 1981. They are therefore a natural sequence to *Tradition, the Writer and Society* published in 1967. Except for *History, Fable and Myth*, which has been shortened and slightly revised, they are presented in their original form. Together they represent an imaginative writer's effort to express theoretically the vision to which he has intuitively given shape in his fiction. Indeed, practically each essay was written after the publication of a particular novel during what appears retrospectively as a most fertile period, and so each, as Harris himself suggests, is the fruit of a period of maturation. These essays do not conform to orthodox academic thinking and writing. But then we know that the criticism of imaginative writers, precisely because it is not restricted by any given standards, often opens new vistas which the ordinary critic or reader limited by the criteria of a particular age or fashion is much slower to see through. We turn to those writers, as we still do, for example, to James and Lawrence, when we want to be stimulated by original and challenging views of art.

Wilson Harris's interests are wide; the subject matter of his essays varies considerably. Yet they are informed by a remarkable unity of thought, and whatever they deal with, show a passionate concern for the nature of creativity, the nature of art, particularly of fiction, and the nature of community since Harris seems to view genuinely original art as a token of the renaissance of which a community is susceptible. He sees our civilisation at a turning point, a crisis, and indirectly suggests that its future may depend on man's capacity to respond to some of the challenges with which he is faced. One of those challenges is the need to be aware of and suffer with the apparent void in the history of conquered peoples and in the individual psyche, for in that void lies the source of the heterogeneous community modern man must strive to build if he is to survive. Just as Renaissance man responded to the long suppressed cultures of Greece and Rome to create a new art and establish the foundations of modern civilisation, so twentieth-century man can be

stimulated by the pre-Columbian and primitive art as, for example, Henry Moore and Picasso were in their most original works.

'One of the tragic ironies of modern man', writes Harris, 'is his implacable conviction that traditional values are static.' He himself rejects the view that tradition is synonymous with mere continuity (which is only one face of tradition) because what we are prone to take for a living tradition too often rests on ingrained attitudes and habits of thought. These, like our immovable institutions, inevitably subsist on our ignorance of a living immaterial element that secretes itself at the heart of all appearances. The difficulty of accounting for that living immaterial element explains to some extent the difficulty of Harris's essays; from one to the other one finds him attempting again and again to convey what is nameless and thus hardly definable and may well be terrifying if actually faced. This may be why there are in the essays many different formulations of tradition, whose common mainspring, however, is the frightening void in which conquered and fallen peoples live. It is Harris's belief that this void (if we take it to mean the denial of meaningful outer or inner life) is an illusion in the same way as our solid and realistic plane of existence is when we consider either of them as complete and final. In *The Phenomenal Legacy* his definition of tradition runs as follows: '...something endures at the heart of catastrophe or change which runs to meet one like a feature of unpredictable unity with and through a phenomenal nature one cannot absolutely grasp.' In *Fossil and Psyche* he talks of an 'inexhaustible spirit of patience that is as close as one may come to the Nameless other'. Tradition is a 'principle of endurance', it is 'phenomenal legacy', and is related to 'a ceaseless question about exploitation, self-exploitation, as well as the exploitation of others'. It is thus part of a subterranean plane of existence in which accumulates what Harris calls a 'density of resources' and which contrasts with the 'reality of our world'. It is this 'live and infinite' face of tradition which to Harris must be the source of art and of genuine community, the two being indissociable in his mind since both grow out of a renewed sensitiveness to and imaginative grasp of the plight of violated people(s).

In this plight or 'catastrophe' merge sacrifice and beauty or the 'vulnerable centre' which, as Harris explains, becomes masked by institutions as these reinforce themselves. Catastrophe is an 'ingredient of rebirth' and lies at the very centre of all Harris's concepts. It is the prime mover of what he means by change, freedom and authority because to be

genuinely aware of it is to reject all cultural imperatives and acquire the necessary imaginative fluidity to participate in and re-live that plight without situating oneself absolutely in it and so merely reversing existing polarizations. Paramount to Harris's conception of the human consciousness is its essential mobility and this determines his conception of the human personality and of character in fiction. He repeatedly asserts the need for an intuitive grasp of values through and beyond the given world, through and beyond appearances. He rejects all imperatives and all absolutes whether they come from dominating or long suppressed cultures. It requires much courage at this time to warn, as he does in *The Phenomenal Legacy* and *The Complexity of Freedom*, against social, racial and political protest that merely leads to another kind of uniformity or authoritarianism. Harris denies the validity of 'total images' whether in life or art. When he talks of 'digesting and liberating contrasting spaces' he does not think that such a liberation can ever be complete. Rather he envisages a movement between two poles that excludes complete identification with either and involves moving towards a third, never wholly accessible dimension. Therefore, when he makes a distinction between reflection as 'passive order' and vision as a doorway *through* the reflected object into 'eclipsed proportions one needs to unravel', he does not mean that vision must supersede reflection but rather that it is *partially* achieved through a *partial* breaking down of what is passively reflected. 'To be authentic', he writes, 'freedom must confess to how it is still masked as it arises to consciousness by the very conditions from which it arises.' Similarly, 'intuition is overshadowed by the very condition through which it breaks'. What Harris implies by vision is a fragmentation of the 'plane of realism' which corresponds to the dislocation of 'inner space' or psyche suffered by conquered people(s). But it is important to remember that this means treading and moving freely on a 'middle ground' between opposites. This to Harris is the way to an authentic Caribbean art inspired by the native experience disregarded for too long. In his essays on myth he shows that both the dislocation and the attempt at re-assembly of the Caribbean psyche are to be found in the African legacy of Limbo and Vodun and the Amerindian legacy of Arawak 'zemi' and Carib bush-baby legends. The very existence of such mythical remnants makes them 'omens of rebirth' that should nourish the 'cross-cultural imagination' latent in Caribbean man and liberate it from cultural monoliths.

These introductory remarks simplify and sum up very inadequately the rich and varied substance of the essays. One also finds in them Harris's

conception of the writer as 'agent', his notion of 'double vision' as a complement to his view of a dual reality; it springs from an 'immersion in elements of myth that we have long ignored' and involves intuition as much as reason and the breakdown of given patterns (even of time) in the perceiver himself. There is his conception of irony as a capacity to distance oneself from one's ego and as a process of breaking through the very biases or material props on which we cannot but subsist. The essays also explain Harris's conception of the 'architectonic of self' and his views on the novel as 'painting' or as 'symphony'. They offer illuminating comments on his own art (see in particular *A Talk on the Subjective Imagination*) and in this as in all other respects are an indispensable complement to his fiction. Harris's comments on other imaginative writers, the Caribbean poets A. J. Seymour, Martin Carter, Brathwaite and Walcott, the novelists Joseph Conrad, Patrick White, Janet Frame and the dramatist Wole Soyinka, are most stimulating; they compel us to go back with a new insight to the works discussed and to discover unsuspected aspects of them. The essays can be read again and again with increasing benefit. They are full of fundamental questions which the author answers with shattering honesty. I would propose the following one for our special attention:

Can the life of the imagination in intuitive overshadowed depth genuinely breach the perfectly natural historical biases and prejudices that seek to imprison us very often in the name of common sense or ritual convention?

As a passionate plea for the freedom of the human mind, Harris's own essays are the answer to that question.

HENA MAES-JELINEK

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