

## Introduction

*The Contact and the Culmination* is a phrase which owes its nice alliterative impact to Anna Rutherford's experience and inventiveness, and to her admiration for the formulaic wealth of a writer like Shirley Hazzard. As a title for this volume of essays in honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek, we believe it has great relevance and suggestiveness on at least three counts.

First of all it is a tribute to the quality of Hena's contacts across the globe that all the scholars invited to contribute to the volume responded promptly and enthusiastically, and indeed agreed to stay in touch with the editors in busy times when the book did not seem to make much headway towards a completion — let alone the culmination! We hope that the palette of personalities represented here will bear testimony to the centrality of Hena's position in the midst of an impressive network of connections and friendships inspired by a common literary and political vocation. In this respect, it seems fit that two relatively discrete generations of academics and writers should have been brought together in this *Festschrift*, for Hena does belong to the generation of the pioneers who first explored and mapped out the New Literatures in English, while she also has something in common with a younger generation of critics who capitalized on the findings of their predecessors by giving the discipline a more theoretical, sometimes systematic, twist. After post-colonial literature, post-colonial theory was born: importantly Hena Maes-Jelinek writes this rare brand of criticism, which spans tendencies and keeps primary text and post-colonial theory in necessary contact.

Moreover we have chosen to include a third generation of post-colonial critics into this volume, in the persons of several former students of Hena's, whose teaching 'past the posts' has generated a number of vocations in remarkably outlying fields.<sup>1</sup> This was a difficult decision, since making room for the young inevitably meant excluding some more established critics who also wanted to acknowledge their closeness to Hena; yet we feel confident that she, who always knew the importance of creating contacts across generations and who accordingly became the model of the dedicated teacher, will endorse our choice, which is vindicated in any case by the range and depth of the scholarship offered by her 'disciples'.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, Hena's valuing of

---

<sup>1</sup> The study of the New Literatures in English was initiated by Hena Maes-Jelinek as early as 1969 at the University of Liège. This, of course, occurred alongside the continuing tradition of British and American literary studies in this University, and it may not have been the least stimulating aspect of her teaching that she allowed for a degree of cross-fertilization between the branches of learning, so that for example established Western classics were assessed against alternative ontologies which the 'Great Tradition' had in effect obliterated, whilst post-modernist tendencies in contemporary fiction always called for a comparison with their post-colonial 'other'.

contact is apparent in her belief in a kind of 'cross-culturalism' which is inspired by Wilson Harris and which eschews both radicalism and depthlessness, two of the more grimacing masks sometimes donned by the many-headed monster of theory. In our view, this makes her a more unusual sort of post-colonial critic than might at times be realized. For if Hena's reservations concerning 'theory's cancellation of the real',<sup>2</sup> or the suspension of the referent fashionable in post-structuralist circles, are bound to be shared by a majority of post-colonial critics who believe in the possibility of affirming alternative realities presented as 'the antithesis of the thesis of white supremacy',<sup>3</sup> some are perhaps likely to have a quarrel with her avowed universalism, a notion often rejected nowadays as 'an expression of cultural imperialism'.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, though, Hena's universalism is not of a kind that can be equated with the self-engrossed frame of vision of a conquering mind. Rather, she is with Wilson Harris in that she keeps nodding in the direction of 'a psyche mutual to protagonist and antagonist',<sup>5</sup> which offers the promise of a release from the danger of escalation implicit in a post-colonialism that would retreat into a form of one-sided militantism. But we do not wish to substitute ourselves for Hena Maes-Jelinek, who devoted many pages of criticism to the circumscription of this complex cross-cultural reality evoked in Harris's writings; suffice it here to mention a few characteristics, in as much as they reflect on her position as a critic as well.

As Hena often reminds us, Harris's cross-culturalism is more than a form of multi-culturalism, a term 'which designates the co-existence and recognition of different cultures',<sup>6</sup> but not necessarily their contact and interaction. The distinction is a crucial one because the mutuality of being envisaged by Harris implies an intuition of an 'absent body [. . .] rooted in an understanding of presence which lies *beyond logical presence*';<sup>7</sup> and while this kind of daring imaginative leap may

---

<sup>2</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Teaching Past the Posts', in *Liminal Postmodernisms*, ed. by Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 1994), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, '"Numinous Proportions": Wilson Harris's Alternative to All "Posts"', in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, ed. by Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (London/Calgary: Harvester-Wheatsheaf and University of Calgary Press, 1990), p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Teaching Past the Posts', p. 155. See also Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, ed. by Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège: Liège Language and Literature, 1992), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, '"Numinous Proportions"', p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson Harris, 'Interview by Stephen Slemon', *Ariel*, 19.3 (July 1988), 49.

be staple fare for a creative writer like Harris who is famously privileged with a vision of eclipsed realities and peoples, for a rationally-minded critic like Hena this kind of quest may require even more of an act of faith, or an affirmation of value in the face of our century's spiritual and cultural exhaustion. Moreover it is possibly an aggravating circumstance that, for all Harris's glimmering apprehensions of contact, the cross-cultural culmination is never reached — it is, to use a fashionable phrase, endlessly deferred —, with the result that Hena's personal quest for value might also belong to the never-to-be-finished variety. In a way, this is a fortunate state of affairs, and it so happens that she never seemed more active than she has been in this first year of her retirement. Therefore, one can only hope and ask for many more pages of wisdom, replete with intuitive clues, (always provisional) truths, and indeed with the occasional awe-inspiring statement of her faith in the power of the imagination.

Marc Delrez  
Bénédicte Ledent

