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### **Abstract**

Le Palazs du Paon, the French version of Palace of the Peacock, was published in Paris by Les Editions des Autres in May 1979. With the help of Hena Maes-Jelinek and Claude Vercey, Jean-Pierre Durix, now a professor of English literature at the University of Dijon, completed an accurate and inspired translation and contributed a short preface to the 164-page volume, emphasizing the Guyanese blend of cultures as well as some of the difficulties the reader, unused to 'the destruction of the classical conception of a character as a distinct and separate entity', was likely to encounter. He ended on the novel's final vision: 'The windows of the place are no longer material eyes with their limited perception. They have become those of the peacock with their innumerable variations, perspectives of otherness that open onto the infinite.'

MICHEL FABRE

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## The Reception of *Palace of the Peacock* in Paris

*Le Palais du Paon*, the French version of *Palace of the Peacock*, was published in Paris by Les Editions des Autres in May 1979. With the help of Hena Maes-Jelinek and Claude Vercey, Jean-Pierre Durix, now a professor of English literature at the University of Dijon, completed an accurate and inspired translation and contributed a short preface to the 164-page volume, emphasizing the Guyanese blend of cultures as well as some of the difficulties the reader, unused to 'the destruction of the classical conception of a character as a distinct and separate entity', was likely to encounter. He ended on the novel's final vision: 'The windows of the place are no longer material eyes with their limited perception. They have become those of the peacock with their innumerable variations, perspectives of otherness that open onto the infinite.'

French reviewers were thus somewhat guided in their appreciation of Harris's novel. Moreover, the authors of the reviews which appeared in two leading literary magazines, *Le Monde* and *Le Magazine Littéraire*, were quite conversant with Harris's work.

In *Le Magazine Littéraire* (Sept. 1979, p. 8), Hena Maes-Jelinek analyzed the ethno-cultural background of the novel, concentrating on the psychological impact of the setting upon the protagonists. Yet, more than half of her article focussed upon the relationship between the 'spiritual' narrator and Donne, and the process of resurrection as integration into universal consciousness, the equation of the end and a new beginning. This was enhanced, as she made clear, by Harris's symbolism and the ambivalence of the figure of the peacock, which also 'suggest human vanity and the metamorphoses men are capable of'. It is a symbol of wholeness, as well. The article made it clear that 'creation also is re-acknowledgement of otherness, linked to the liberation of the self. Such is the essence of this splendid novel and of the liberating art of Wilson Harris'.

*Le Monde* granted the review the choicest space in its literary section, 'Le Monde des Livres' (which appears every Thursday), i.e. the illustrated cartouche on the left side of the inside page, which signals outstanding contributions to the literary world. (The drawing was a portrait of Harris by Berenice Clive.) 'The Quest of Wilson Harris' briefly evoked Harris's career and the scope of his reputation as an introduction to the review proper, subtitled 'An Invitation to Mysticism' by the editor. The reviewer, Michel Fabre, attempted to make the world of *Palace* more familiar to the French reader by alluding to the film 'Aguirre', which had been shown in Paris with considerable success, to Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*, and to James Joyce and his manner of working with language. An implicit reference was made to Rimbaud through the phrase, 'l'alchimie du verbe', used here to hint at 'an active and concrete process'. A subsequent issue of *Le Monde* mentioned the book as one of the best published in 'Littératures Etrangères' and called Harris, 'the best Caribbean novelist of today'.

Interestingly enough, the third longest review appeared in *La Libre Belgique* (23/24 May 1979). This very laudatory piece by 'S. de V.' went into rather considerable detail in retracing Harris's career: 'born on August 21, 1921, at New Amsterdam, British Guyana ... nominated several times for the Nobel Prize', as well as in establishing, for instance, that in the novel *Schomburg* evokes Richard Schomburgh, who explored Guyana from 1840 to 1844 and was 'the first important European

influence there' — this information having been gleaned from Durix's introduction. The reviewer for *Le Soir de Bruxelles* (8 August 1979) spent more time summing up the most vivid moments of the narrative, concluding that 'the crew all die inexorably like in the Aguirre expedition filmed by Werner Herzog'. He found that *Palace*, the first French translation of a 'remarkable Guyanese writer', reflected not only on 'the domination of white over black but on the death instinct inherent in man'. *Nord-Eclair* (31 May 1979) found the novel 'astonishing, and surprising in many ways'. Beyond its possible exotic appeal, it was 'a true novel, with a brilliant style and unique metaphors' which had deservedly been compared to Rimbaud's 'Bateau Ivre'. *La République du Centre* (4 May 1979) noted Harris's career as a surveyor and the world-wide reputation of the novelist, hitherto practically unknown in France. Although *L'Aurore* (29 May 1979) only mentioned the publication of the book, *La Liberté* (17 August 1979) managed to give, in a single, long, Proust-like sentence, an impression of the extraordinary vegetal background of the novel, 'as much an adventure story as an initiating quest for El Dorado, as much an ethnographical novel as an oneiric leap'. 'P.F.', in *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest* (26 June 1979), mentioned the novelist's nationality and background but dwelt almost exclusively on the dreamlike qualities of the book: 'the quest for some inner reality, to be unearthed from the innermost depths of memory. And what memory! It is a poetic accomplishment'. In an article entitled 'Ecrivain Guyanais' *La Dépêche du Midi* spoke of this 'superb novel, the first of a Guyana series'. Writing for *Le Méridional* (17 June 1979), Alex Mattalia admitted that he had first been disconcerted by the slimness of the volume. Then he had found himself plunged headlong into 'a sort of poetic reality ... vehiculating authentic images, bearing dreams and symbols'. He concluded that 'the book is sometimes disconcerting but always interesting, not easy to read but engrossing'. *L'indépendant* (June 1979) mostly quoted the opinion of a British critic, claiming, again, that *Palace* can sustain comparison with 'The Drunken Boat'.

Other reviews have undoubtedly appeared which have not yet come to my attention. What one can gather from those available is the earnestness with which the novel has been approached. Its 'exotic' appeal might have been played up (and it is probable that many reviewers did not differentiate between Guyana and French Guyana, either out of ignorance or because they were more interested in a geographical landscape than in political boundaries), but only once is the exotic singled out. On the whole, the specific qualities of Harris's writing,

although they were found disconcerting by Alex Mattalia and although other reviews in dailies seem to equate 'dream-like' and 'disconcerting', were not considered a hindrance for what one might call the 'general reader'. Perhaps this is because the tradition of French writing has always made room for innovation, even when disconcerting. Or perhaps this is because French reviewers are fairly conversant with avant-garde novelistic techniques. At any rate, the début of *Palace of the Peacock* was such that one can predict that Wilson Harris will soon find an audience here.