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## Book Reviews

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### **Abstract**

Randolph Stow's latest novel recounts a series of apparently motiveless murders in the murky atmosphere of an old Suffolk seaport. It reminds us that along with his famous descriptive power, Stow has always been adept at plotting stories which compel the reader with unobtrusive tact. *The Suburbs of Hell* is short and precisely constructed to concentrate the significance of every detail so that it has the satisfying richness of many longer books. This quality is typical of some of his earlier novels, but in *The Suburbs of Hell* he intensifies the suggestive power of a tightly inter-connected plot by using the conventions of the thriller. Not that the reader is simply compelled by the urge to discover who done it; there is a deeper significance in the book than this, hinted by the title, from a speech by Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* which is also one of the novel's epigraphs.

# Book Reviews

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Randolph Stow, *The Suburbs of Hell*. Secker & Warburg, April 2, 1984. £7.95.

Randolph Stow's latest novel recounts a series of apparently motiveless murders in the murky atmosphere of an old Suffolk seaport. It reminds us that along with his famous descriptive power, Stow has always been adept at plotting stories which compel the reader with unobtrusive tact. *The Suburbs of Hell* is short and precisely constructed to concentrate the significance of every detail so that it has the satisfying richness of many longer books. This quality is typical of some of his earlier novels, but in *The Suburbs of Hell* he intensifies the suggestive power of a tightly inter-connected plot by using the conventions of the thriller. Not that the reader is simply compelled by the urge to discover who done it; there is a deeper significance in the book than this, hinted by the title, from a speech by Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* which is also one of the novel's epigraphs.

Harry Ufford, a central figure in the story, reads sensational paperbacks; we learn at the beginning that he is a 'devotee of real-life murder'. His carefully contrived security is shattered when murder is no longer confined to books, but starts to happen around him, and he is implicated in the sinister events which disrupt the society of old Tornwich. It is, we discover, 'a suburb of Hell' where death is sudden and random.

Stow's story is concerned with the immanence of death, the vulnerability of human communities to outbreaks of irrational violence and the delusory element in human nature which lulls us into a sense of false security and persuades us that horror is somewhere outside ourselves, safely enjoyed voyeuristically. This cluster of themes touches on a familiar preoccupation in Randolph Stow's earlier poems and novels, particularly *Tourmaline* (1963) and *Visitants* (1979) — the dark forces lurking at the heart of human nature which reason or good intentions seem powerless to control. At the same time, his writings have reflected a search for spiritual understanding in the face of this bleak insight, and successive poems and novels have embodied the continuing preoccupation differently. *The Suburbs of Hell* is understated, even detached, with a few touches of low-keyed humour, and its tone has a certain similarity (not to be overstressed) with the previous novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980). Like that book, the new novel is richly allusive, but it reverts to a source which has informed Randolph Stow's writing from his earliest poems and novels: Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. In addition to its titular epigraph from *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Suburbs of Hell* draws on citations from *The White Devil*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Jew of Malta*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Broken Heart*, *Richard III* and *The Malcontent*. The cumulative effect of all these references is to invoke the insecure and sensational world of revenge tragedy. This at first seems to contrast with the community of Tornwich, but in fact, it suggests a parallel, which is strengthened by references to passages in *Beowulf* about the monster. Both *Beowulf* and revenge tragedy depict 'suburbs of Hell' and betoken the evil also to be found in Tornwich.

The quotations from revenge tragedy are mostly from speeches by the malcontents: Aaron, Richard III, Lodovico, Barabas, Ithamore, Hieronimo, Orgilus and Malevole —

characters who, despite their villainy, fascinate us by their cunning and even court admiration by their cynical wit. Most of them exercise their attraction through soliloquies in which they explain their machinations, and Randolph Stow uses excerpts from these to preface passages in his novel where we are admitted to the mind of the assassin and witness death from his perspective. These short chapters which intersperse a story otherwise recounted objectively introduce a subtly equivocal voice into the narrative which matches those in the epigraphs, but is understated in comparison with them. The effect is daringly successful. From the brief opening chapter, where in the three central paragraphs the agent of death discloses himself, but leaves the reader in doubt about his commitment to some of his rationalizations and perceptions, we are captured intermittently in the murderer's compulsions and sense their attraction.

In the second chapter, and for the main story-line, Randolph Stow modulates into another register which employs different — and in a sense opposite — allusions. He introduces some of the conventions of the English thriller or horror story: dim winding streets, empty houses, drifting mist blurring lights and faces, creaking stairs, mysterious underground passages, shadowy apparitions, the decaying atmosphere of Autumn turning to winter, and in amongst these, a few niches of apparent security: the warm fug of harbour-front pubs and the fireside from which the tale conventionally begins. The atmosphere evoked recalls Wilkie Collins, passages in Dickens, the Sherlock Holmes stories or, as three of the characters themselves notice, a spooky black and white film of the 1940s.

Despite its use of allusion and convention, *The Suburbs of Hell* is not a self-consciously 'literary' novel. It stands up independently, without distracting the reader's attention to contrivance or cleverness. This is typical of Randolph Stow's self-effacing art. He has always been an allusive writer, but never gratuitously so. Allusion in his novels is assimilated to narrative, description and characterisation. He is an austere artist who is alert to the resonances of his tales, but never forces them, and he can judge precisely the degree of understatement for events bordering on the sensational. In this respect he is just the opposite to the renaissance dramatists from whom he borrows so many allusions.

*The Suburbs of Hell* is played down in his characteristic way. The predominant tone of the novel is set by the milieu in which the events occur; a small harbourside community of seamen, labourers, school-teacher, unemployed teenager, retired people, taxi-driver, whose lives intersect mainly in the pubs of old Tornwich. This world is described in precisely observed and telling detail. Stow is alert to the passage of time (it is, in fact, an important theme in the novel) and he has the poet's ability to evoke a moment, in language which captures its sensuous qualities. In the second paragraph he establishes the first day of winter through its clarity of light, colour and distinctive smells, and halfway through the book he records the first signs of spring: '...in a bay of the estuary, a plain of sea-purslane and sea-aster carved with shining brown runnels, he watched mallard waddle and swim, and flocks of dunlin skitter away like blown white smoke over the sculpted mud.' The novel is pervaded with such details which firmly establish time and place, and it is through his fluent descriptive writing that Stow introduces with easy naturalness the atmospheric conventions of the thriller.

He has a matching ear for idiom and eye for gesture, and the finely graded accents of old Tornwich sound throughout the book. The dominant note is the voice of Harry Ufford, the sailor home from the sea. His idiom is captured brilliantly and delicately differentiated from those of his friends and pub acquaintances. We encounter these characters in a variety of situations; over beer or Sunday dinners, quietly conspiring or facing moments of despair or terror, and in all these the dialogue is carefully timed and modulated, so that it rings true while it enriches the story.

The result is a seamlessly constructed novel, fully imagined in naturalistic detail, while it is at the same time a great deal more than this allusively and thematically. It is an excellent antidote to the self-referring fiction currently in vogue, in which novels are accepted as excuses for showing off. *The Suburbs of Hell* has all the connotative attributes praised in the work of noisy novelists, but in Stow's book art is not paraded as evidence of authorial ingenuity, but employed to evoke a fully rounded and allusive vision. This makes it a pleasure to read, and to think about.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

John Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1983. £7.95. 249 pp.

There have been several South African novels in recent years set against backgrounds of civil war or revolution, e.g., Schoeman's *Promised Land* and Gordimer's *July's People*. *Life & Times of Michael K* is the most recent in the series of what seems to be a new 'genre' for South African writers. What it has in common with its predecessors is that the effects of the fighting, of martial law, shortages, displaced populations, etc., are shown in greater detail on farms and country towns than on the big cities. And while, in fact, South Africans are generally very proud of the variety and magnificence of their landscape, in these fictions that same landscape is depicted as too spacious and harsh, too dreary and inhospitable. Perhaps that is how landscape must always appear to helpless, frightened people forced, like Michael K, to travel on foot in search of shelter.

What *Life & Times of Michael K* also has in common with its predecessors is the curiously blurred portrayal of who exactly the opponents are in the fight; why they are fighting; and how they are going about it. Although I realize that the author's intention in every case is not to present an analysis of a revolution, but how a revolution impinges on the consciousness of his protagonist — a protagonist who cannot know all the facts of the fighting — I could not help wondering whether this particular vagueness was a way of avoiding censorship. In spite of the new 'enlightened' policy of the South African Censorboard, it is possible that its members would take action against a book that presented an unambiguous and graphic account of white battalions engaged in conventional or guerrilla warfare with black battalions (armed by whom? The Soviets? The Cubans?). In *Michael K* an officer does say that they are fighting 'so that minorities will have a say in their destinies' — a statement that is ambiguity itself. Who are the minorities? The whites and their allies, or one or another of the African ethnic groups, any one of which, taken alone, could constitute a minority? What does 'having a say' mean? But then, just as protagonists caught in the turmoil of revolutions cannot have a comprehensive view of the war, army officers are unlikely to mouth more than slogans.

*Michael K* is about a young, facially deformed Coloured man who tries to get his ailing mother out of Cape Town during the 'troubles' and back to the farm in Prince Albert where she was born. She dies on the way and is summarily cremated by hospital authorities, so Michael continues his journey alone, carrying her ashes and other effects with him. More than once he is picked up by roving bands of soldiers and interned, both before his long secret sojourn on the farm (the most memorable part of the book, published separately in *Harpers*, September 1983, and *Contrast*, Winter 1983) and afterwards. But

Michael K always escapes, finally ending up back in Cape Town where he started from. The book has three sections. The first and third are close third-person narratives that weave in and out of Michael's consciousness and the second is a first-person account by a pharmacist-cum-orderly who treats Michael in the hospital of a rehabilitation camp and tries unsuccessfully to get Michael to eat the hospital food.

What makes the book compelling reading for me is the way in which Michael's actions, fears, and preoccupations touch and stir almost forgotten childhood memories. When Michael makes a burrow for himself on the deserted farm in Prince Albert, and covers it over from view, I recalled intense and urgent childhood experiences of making shelters out of boxes and tins; building tree houses and couch-cushion houses; burrowing under blankets and even, once, digging a real burrow out of soft soil on a vacant lot. Michael's various meals of raw unripe vegetables, grubs, larvae, insects and lizards were horribly fascinating in the same way that childhood conversations were of what we could and could not possibly eat to stay alive. When Michael fears being bitten by a dog, or imagines what the fire must have looked like when his mother's body was being cremated, I felt an immediate and old empathy within me. *Michael K* is about the will to survive, hidden and alone, in a man who has not lost a child's simplicity and cunning.

All of John Coetzee's books seem to me to touch chords of childishness in us. For instance, all his characters have trouble with their stomachs and their bowels (or are preoccupied with bowel functions), whether it be Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands* splashing his diarrhea over the sides of his wagon, or the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, hidden under the bed in a young girl's room, needing badly to urinate. Michael K has problems, particularly with keeping food down. We, as adults, can mostly control the times and places of our bodily functions, but we all remember nightmare situations of childhood: sudden vomiting in public places; bed mysteriously wet and cold in the morning; shame because of needing a 'convenience' at a time inconvenient for adults. I have heard Coetzee criticized for what seems like an obsession with excretion, but want to rush to his defence, as Patrick White rushed to his own over his characters' flatulence — our bodies *are* troublesome, aren't they? And would be more so under shelterless, menacing conditions.

Michael K's difficulty in keeping food down begins when he is removed from his burrow on the farm by soldiers and placed in a rehabilitation camp. On the farm he had planted pumpkins and melons and lived a life in tune with the seasons and the temperature, hibernating during the cold weather and creeping out of his hole when it was warm. But his difficulty is more than simply a sensitive stomach revolting against unaccustomed food — it is a rejection of all that imposed confinement, charity, and authoritarianism imply for him. The pharmacist, although not necessarily a reliable narrator, tries to explain his condition thus:

'And now, last topic, your garden... Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camp. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels (*sic*), where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way.' (p. 228)

The book ends with Michael imagining that he and an old man, whom he might meet, would once again set out from Cape Town to the country, pushing a barrow between them and carrying seeds in their pockets to plant. When they got to the farm in Prince

Albert and found the pump broken, they would not be non-plussed, but would get water by means of Michael's producing

...a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of a shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon: and in that way, he would say, one can live. (p. 249)

It is never easy to put in a nutshell just what message Coetzee's novels intend to convey, but it is arguable that this one is about the necessity of our being satisfied with what is meagre and simple, ingenious and genuine, if we are to stay free of 'rehabilitation' and able to preserve the child in us, particularly during times of revolution. The characters in all Coetzee's novels are reduced, actually or in their imaginations, to surviving off the barest essentials. There is Jacobus Coetzee, naked, skipping across the desert, in *Dusk-lands*; Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* living on her own deserted farm off almost nothing; and the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* learning in prison how precious little anyone needs to stay alive. Yet in none of his previous books has Coetzee, in my opinion, conveyed as strong a sense of approbation for a character and his eccentricities as he does for Michael K. Michael's childlikeness, his stubbornness, and his canny simplicity, all seem eminently worthy qualities in a world of lies and violence. That this book intends to appeal to the child in the reader, that Michael's own childlike qualities are shown as valuable, is reinforced, I think, in the passage where Michael thinks of his mother, alive and young, standing in the doorway on the farm in Prince Albert:

And behind that child, in the doorway, her face obscured by shadow, he searched for a second woman, the woman from whom his mother had come into the world. When my mother was dying in hospital, he thought, when she knew her end was coming, it was not me she looked to but someone who stood behind me: her mother or the ghost of her mother. To me she was a woman but to herself she was still a child calling to her mother to hold her hand and help her. And her own mother, in the secret life we do not see, was a child too. I come from a line of children without end. (p. 160)

In other South African novels of revolution, the action ends on an undecided note; for instance, what happens to Maureen in *July's People* when she runs toward the sound of the helicopter? In *Life & Times of Michael K* we are not allowed much closure, but we are convinced that no matter what happens to the country, Michael K and those like him can survive — provided they are left alone to tend their gardens in the desert.

SHEILA ROBERTS

Hena Maes-Jelinek, *Wilson Harris* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982). 191 pp. \$17.95.

Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983). xx, 151 pp. \$29.95.

The past year brought two books of importance to interpreters of the novel and its role in our time, and specifically of the novels and critical theory of novelist-poet-philosopher Wilson Harris — one by his most dedicated and sensitive interpreter, Hena Maes-Jelinek, analysing his fiction from *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) through *The Tree of the Sun* (1978), and the other a creatively revolutionary work by Wilson Harris centering around what he terms 'the cross-cultural imagination', clarifying its potential values to humanity, and illustrating in detail the insights this critical approach, instead of the usual national or regional one, offers into the imaginative works of modern writers around the world.

Even before *Wilson Harris*, Maes-Jelinek had been seen by Harris scholars as the one whose mind and sympathies are most finely attuned to what he voices in his challenging art. Hers has been the most intensive and extensive study of his uses of language, original forms, and the aims of the changing contexts and meanings of images within each novel and within the growing body of his work, which is described by her in the 'Preface' to this book as 'one narrative canvas, at once spiritual autobiography and unrelenting quest for a new art of fiction ... exploring the multilevelled inner space of human consciousness ... and modifying the characters' (and the participating reader's) mode of perception'. Now in *Wilson Harris* she has integrated her thinking on an even higher level than before, refining interpretations and sharpening her assessment of Harris's achievement: the opening words of the 'Preface' boldly state, 'It is no exaggeration to say that Wilson Harris is one of the most original and significant writers of the second half of the twentieth century.' She grants that he is also a difficult writer 'although extra difficulty sometimes arises from the reader's incapacity to relinquish conventional expectations in art' and says that she has tried to deal with 'all major difficulties in both form and content and should like to add that there is no short way to reaching what is most essential in the novels. They must be read with humility and patience'. Clearly this is what she has done in her interpretation of the philosophy and art of what she sees as the three stages of Harris's development through *The Tree of the Sun*.

The first stage consists of the novels in what has been called the Guiana Quartet, to each of which she devotes a chapter, giving each a name that expresses what she finds central to the work. To cite an example, the most well known of these novels, *Palace of the Peacock*, is analysed in a chapter she calls 'Voyage into Namelessness', thus placing her emphasis on the idea that in Harris 'Namelessness, as opposed to racial identity ... is the source of genuine community and is experienced as a preliminary to spiritual rebirth. It is associated with the sacred or the divine, which in Harris's fiction is not a transcendental ideal but suffering humanity (here the 'unwritten lives' of the folk) exiled beyond the pale of history.' In each of the works in the Guiana Quartet, as in the case of all the novels discussed in her book, Maes-Jelinek follows the text, explicating it as she proceeds; analyses the central ideas and the central recurring and changing images that convey them; explains Harris's use of what she sees as 'double time' and of dreams to free his readers or characters from the tyranny over their consciousness of a particular time; discusses his sense of a 'multiple reality which exceeds by far the perceptible world'; illustrates the use he makes of the mobility of nature to contrast with human resistance to change or to signify his 'agents' fleeting new conceptions of community; clarifies his

sense of character as a nucleus of selves; explains his rejection of 'absolutes' and of the idea that those who are oppressed should become oppressors in their turn, and his conception that catastrophe, if relived and digested, can lead to truly creative change and renewal; and illumines his re-creation of myths, as he interprets their meanings, from many parts of the world and many cultures. She even clarifies his distinctive, ever previously puzzling to me, use of the word 'and' over and over.

Maes-Jelinek then moves to *Heartland* which she views as a transitional novel between the first phase and second of Harris's development, in that while 'the main character ... is stimulated by events and characters outside himself', as in the work that immediately precedes, like the characters in the later novels 'he becomes a vessel in which the past is re-enacted and modified as «vision» increases; in which also the tension between life and death plays itself out continually in different shapes.' I am not at this point happy with Maes-Jelinek's division of the novels into 'phases', but her discussions of her reasons give insight into crucial aspects of what is, I think, more of a continuum (the 'one narrative canvas' of which her 'Preface' speaks — and which the division into groups seems at least partly to contradict — or 'one deepening cycle of exploration' to use the phrase Harris chooses to describe his critical essays in the prefatory note to *Tradition, the Writer and Society* and which I sense also describes his fiction as a whole). Insight of this kind comes in the opening paragraph of Chapter Six, 'The Heart of Inarticulate Protest: *The Eye of the Scarecrow*', in which, while she explains her conception of the next phase, much else is lighted up:

In both form and content *The Eye of the Scarecrow* and the three following novels make up a new phase in Harris's fiction. Their subject-matter is, even more specifically than in *Palace of the Peacock*, the subjective imagination, its working on memory, and its transformation of the raw material of life. Experience in these novels is wholly internalized. The protagonist is not the author but he too is engaged in creating fiction insofar as he is an 'agent' in whose consciousness the reconstruction of the past takes place. His quest is for a new way both of apprehending life and of rendering it. The main character's disorientation in the earlier fiction culminates in *Heartland* in the equation of his consciousness with a 'vicarious hollow'. This is now the protagonist's initial state of emptiness or breakdown, a state that results from catastrophe but goes together with a freedom from the tyranny of conventional reality, the tyranny of facts as opposed to their inner truth. We recognize here the creative possibilities Harris discerns in catastrophe, which does not merely bring about a change of outlook in the protagonist. The 'crash' which shatters his safe, known world reveals the livingness of the subterranean reality it (the crash) brings to the surface. One has the impression of a dialogue between the perceiving consciousness and the material it perceives, 'the flood of animated wreckage' (15) that runs to meet it and on which the protagonist refuses 'to impose a false coherency'.

The introductory section of Chapter Nine, 'A «Novel-Vision of History»: *Ascent to Omai*', also casts light beyond the idea of a second fictional cycle on which it too focuses:

*Ascent to Omai* is the climax of Harris's second fictional cycle, his most daring experiment with the form of the novel, and it comes nearest to actualizing his concept of narrative as a dynamic structural design. It could be likened to an abstract painting whose components would have the capacity to move. This novel brings together the different perspectives from which Harris has approached his material since *Heartland*

and initiates yet another line of development. The first part of the novel alone combines the inland expedition fundamental to *Heartland* and *The Eye* with the spiral-like progress of the lovers in *The Waiting Room* and the coincident movements of ascent and descent to be found in *Tumatumari*. The fragmentation that characterizes the earlier novels is still a necessary stage of discovery in *Ascent* but it goes together with a constant awareness of wholeness. It seems even that, to understand it rightly, the reader should be able to grasp the novel as a whole while discerning at the same time its interwoven elements and the correspondences between its several layers of meaning. He must also keep in mind that this novel is more clearly than any other about writing a novel and that it offers the most eloquent example in this cycle of Harris's conception of character as a vessel for other existences.

The concluding chapter, '«The Novel as Painting»: From *The Sleepers of Roraima* to *The Tree of the Sun*', is a series of splendidly concentrated discussions of 'Yurokon' and its myth in *The Sleepers of Roraima*, *Black Marsden*, *Companions of the Day and Night*, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, *Genesis of the Clowns*, and *The Tree of the Sun*. In these works Maes-Jelinek finds the main theme to be the 'resurrection' of humanity as an open possibility; and in *The Tree of the Sun* she sees aspects of the second and third cycles coming to a head:

The joint process of interiorization and expedition into 'otherness' that began with *The Eye of the Scarecrow* is still linked with a probing into the working of a creative mind as into the very nature and mystery of creativity.... I have had occasion before to draw attention to the complexity and unifying quality of his language, particularly the metaphors. In this novel they once more convey several layers of meaning like 'the tree of the sun', basically a metaphor for the process of creation, which combines several modes of achieving vision.

Maes-Jelinek's book summarizes itself with this conclusion about *The Tree of the Sun*:

The reciprocal movement between the living and the dead, the conception of characters who are at once themselves and other than themselves in another dimension, the fluidity of the narrative form, and the rich complexity of a language which presents together and in their constant movement the antinomies of existence, are the fundamental aspects of an opus as much concerned with the spiritual salvation of man as with the renewal of the art of fiction. It is an open-ended opus since, like each novel, it finds no resolution but rather presents life in the making with its self-deceptions and revelations, 'a hand dissolving the elements, constructing the elements' (72) in the hope of running into the moment of vision.

## WILSON HARRIS'S 'THE WOMB OF SPACE: THE CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGINATION'

The relationship Wilson Harris perceives between the inner world of consciousness/imagination and the world of flesh-and-blood people acting in time and space has always been more directly communicated in his critical essays than in his fiction, though the essays no less than the fiction are expressions of his poetic imagination. They are filled with passion against divisions in humankind and for a vision of an evolved humanity integrated and creative as a result of the fertilization of imagination by the artist, whose

responsibility is therefore sacred. Harris's critical theory (a complete break with the usual view of separate regional, ethnic, or national literatures), very much developed and unified in *The Womb of Space*, is his clear expression of this passion for a transformation of the inner and outer world. Never before has his perception of universal images central to myths of many places and to many modern novels and poems, created in many parts of the world and in many cultures, been so richly demonstrated. To Harris recurring images of terror, of falling, of pregnancy, of creation, of resurrection, of flying, of metamorphoses, of doubles and twins, of merged animal and human, of harlequin figures, of the 'sent dead' as in Haitian *Vodun*, of rainbow bridge and tree linking sky and earth, and other variable images of life-in-death, death-in-life all attest to the ways in which the past can speak to the present and future as well as to people of all cultures. They are images which, because of the 'dynamism of metaphor' (Rimbaud) are capable, Harris feels, of changing our ways of relating to others since they reveal 'the necessity for community to evolve through complex visions of apparent catastrophe' and the necessity, especially in a time of nuclear war possibility, for a vision of the rebirth of humankind in contrast to the 'death of Man' popularized by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, and evidenced by widespread nihilist literature, theatre, film, and television.

John W. Blassingame and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. give this succinct summary of *The Womb of Space* in their 'Series Foreword':

Harris is concerned to show the fundamental unity of the human community, both by underscoring repeated patterns of symbol-making or 'figuration' in the world's cultures and art and by revealing the movement from unawareness to consciousness as depicted in the mythic symbol. By discussing texts from the American, Latin American and European literary traditions, Harris analyzes that quality which 'mythical' novels share.

It should be added that Harris looks deeply into almost a score of well-known modern works — poetry as well as prose fiction — from the Caribbean, Africa, Australia, and Asia, as well as the areas named in the foreword.

In his 'Introduction' Harris compresses the literary philosophy that constitutes a breakthrough in modern critical theory, the latter being so generally negative about the possibility of language to communicate and about the possibility of any shared interpretation. He states the purpose of his 'cross-cultural exploration' as an attempt 'to bring into play certain disregarded and yet exciting pathways that bear upon cross-cultural capacities for genuine change in communities beset by complex dangers and whose antecedents are diverse'. He explains his selection of novels and poems in his exploration (Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Jean Toomer's 'Box Seat' in *Cane*, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, Jay Wright's *The Double Invention of Komo*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Patrick White's *Voss*, Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, Emma Tennant's *The Last of the Country House Murders*, Claude Simon's *The Flanders Road*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, and several works by poets of the Caribbean, Africa and Asia); he states that he sees them as gateways into the largely submerged territory of the imagination, but that other works could have been chosen: 'In this particular study, and within the stresses of exploration rarely undertaken by readers or critics, I had no alternative but to limit my selection in order to highlight variables of dialogue that tend to be suppressed in so-called normal classifications of fiction and poetry within regional scholarship.' The works Harris analyses are related by him not only to the myths,

folk lore, and visual art of earlier times but are continually related, chapter by chapter, to each other through cross-cultural images, thus forming a cross-cultural web that reflects his conception of a 'cross-cultural loom'. Harris explains that his exploration will start with his reflections on *Intruder in the Dust* since this analysis will clarify at once some of the issues and possibilities involved in a cross-cultural perspective:

It is unlikely, as we shall see, that Faulkner was aware of how strangely his imagination had been pulled in this novel.... Let me dwell a little on the phenomenon of otherness that moves in the novel yet remains curiously beyond Faulkner's vision, so to speak. Had he seen it — had the life of heterogeneity, in unconscious or intuitive dialogue with his creativity come home to him — he would have been driven, I think, to revise the one-sided moral conclusions built into the closing premises of the novel. What perhaps I should say now is that the phenomenon of otherness borders on the validity of mental images as distinct from intellectual conclusions. (My italics — J.S.A.)

In the opening chapter, 'Reflections on *Intruder in the Dust*', Harris finds that the 'barren philosophical climax of the work ... gives some weight to the charges' often directed against it, but that *Intruder in the Dust* has a capacity 'that breaches conventional logic and gives the novel its complicated power and focus'. He is struck first by young Mallison's precipitous fall which is an ascent in that it turns the world of the segregated South in the novel upside down; then by the coincidence of Faulkner's fictional events with the Haitian belief in the 'sent dead' invoked to destroy the living — a fate countered only by a *hungan* figure who can succeed in making the dead let go; then by the 'twins' Faulkner sees (Mrs Beauchamp and Miss Habersham) who have dwelt in separate life-destroying ghettos, one black and one white, and in the parody of that twinship in the double-headed coffin and elsewhere. To Harris, Faulkner's ending of his novel with a defense of 'territorial-immoral imperative' is an instructive failure, showing how the unconscious creative power of the novelist in this book 'freezes and aborts itself'. To Harris, 'This brings home the reality of evil, in which cultures are enmeshed in codes to invert or overturn each other rather than become involved in complex mutuality, and the difficult creation of community'. Because this mutuality and community constitute Harris's idea of the goal of imaginative literature, the epic is what he feels the novel should aspire to.

The chapter that follows, 'The Schizophrenic Sea', looks back to an earlier work Harris feels to be a forerunner of many self-divided twentieth-century works, *Intruder in the Dust* among them, and that is Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Again he concentrates primarily not on the author's conscious intention but on his intuitive self as revealed in his images. It is not possible here to outline Harris's analysis of the 'schizophrenic genius of Edgar Allan Poe in this strange narrative', except to say that it too features odd twinships between black and white of which Poe must have been unaware and Poe's 'Freudian slip' when he refers to himself and Peters as the only *white* men on the island in spite of the fact that he had earlier associated the Amerindian Peters with the 'Negro' toward whom Poe had obsessive feelings of aversion (as evidenced by his portraiture of all the black characters in the work) to such an extent that the very teeth of the later 'metaphysical blacks', as Harris describes their role, are black, to show them utterly frightening. Harris relates *Pym* to pre-Columbian myths of cannibalism and to distorting reports by Spanish explorers about 'cannibal' Indians: 'The excesses of Poe's *Pym* begin to yield to judgments and criteria born of the twinship of intuitive self and myth.' As I understand it, Harris feels that there is something intrinsic yet still buried in the human species, only as yet momentarily resurrected and seen, and that in *Intruder* and *Pym* these impulses and their related images (such

as the twinships of black and white) break through, creating fissures in the authors' partial views that 'masquerade as totality'.

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* Harris sees a novel that is epic 'in thrust'. To him it tells of 'foetal man' in the womb of an age who neither aborts nor comes to birth, repetitively dying yet psychically re-awakening in each phase of the novel, each phase representing one of the 'concentric horizons' that give this chapter its title. In *Invisible Man* Harris convincingly sees a blend of Homeric, Anancy (African) and Christian imageries that is 'substantial to the womb of evolutionary space that Ellison seeks in dying (awakening) epic god on each horizon or concentric ring'. To him the invisible man of the novel is a black Odysseus 'in whose fictive musical blood Anancy runs' and who is pursued, as much within his own skull as from without, by Cyclopean 'nightmare'. Harris makes an outstanding contribution to an understanding of the role of the female characters in the work for he stresses 'the bleakness of awakenings black Odysseus experiences when the female is consistently disadvantaged'. Nor does Harris limit this point to black Odysseus, for he stresses, too, the need to understand the significance of women in relation to the rainbow arcs or bridges between cultures and by implication between male and female human beings.

The question of the place of women in the minds of men becomes an important element in the chapter 'The Untamable Cosmos', playing a major part in the discussion of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and pre-Columbian Mexican myth in which Harris finds Rulfo's fatalism rooted:

The hidden status of the female in pre-Columbian myth — as well as the conscripted and debased faculty of women in modern fiction — does place, as we have seen in Ellison's major novel, in Toomer and in Rulfo, a bleak capacity upon gestating hero or man/god. So it is not surprising to find that ideologies harden into a conviction of the demise of pregnant spirit; once that position is reached the next step, for whatever philosophical reasons, becomes the 'death of Man' in an age of computer-robots and dread of nuclear technology.

It is because of Harris's deep sense of the fundamental human significance of this question that I am encouraged to ask that he and other critics of world literature written in English take another look at Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* which is consistently depreciated when Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is (justly) appreciated, something which I find too facile. I would strongly urge readers to give their attention to the interpretation in the 'monumental' work by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, in which, in their chapter on *Jane Eyre*, they document meticulously their reading of Bertha as Jane's double, an avatar of Jane, whose deeds duplicate Jane's anger and dreams, even to the desire to burn down Thornfield Hall, symbol of Rochester's mastery and her own servitude; it is only when Thornfield Hall is burnt down and a marriage of equality is possible that Jane can happily enter into a mutual relationship with him, something that Antoinette in Jean Rhys's work might also have found satisfying. Of course Charlotte Brontë does not have Jean Rhys's knowledge of slavery and conquest in the Caribbean nor what Harris refers to as her 'imaginative inheritances' both 'white' and 'black' which link her imagination to Arawak myth through her awareness of Caribbean *obeah*, but neither is it a work to be dismissed as an expression of a rigid view imposed by a partial culture masquerading as totality, at least insofar as the relationship between men and women is concerned. Women's studies in the field of literature have often widened the scope of our understanding of the literary

imagination and its role in enriching life, and very often these studies, too, have helped to cross cultural barriers, since what Harris calls the consistent disadvantaging of women cuts across place and time. I feel Gilbert and Gubar's analysis should be studied before critics again dismiss *Jane Eyre* as a work in which Jane and Bertha are intended as polarizations, angel and monster, sanity and madness; Jane's feeling of madness, of wild rebellion and rage and their parallels in Bertha need to be reviewed.

'The Whirling Stone' chapter adds a new dimension to the conception of doubles in literature itself: Harris sees many works as parallels in unsuspected ways, as in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Double Invention of Komo*: 'Neither mirrors the other in like rhetoric or appearance, yet a significant likeness exists when one perceives the extremities that live in each work.... The catholicity of *Wide Sargasso Sea* turns into subtle *coniunctio* of cultures that address the sparked cradle of Komo.' Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* parallels works involving a 'death of Man' symbol in Harris's view, and he feels that a parallel can be charted to Poe's *Pym*, seeing, as I understand it, an ambivalent rebellion within each work. While her intuitive imagination uses flying and falling motifs running through Icarus, Anancy, and flying trickster folklore and oral African/American traditions of slaves longing for wings to fly home, the novel, on the face of it, presents the 'folk body' of an imaginary Caribbean island as so resistant to change as to make the novel seem what Harris calls a 'comedy of manners' work of fiction. He feels that she has not pursued the clues her intuitive imagination has expressed that might have opened up the possibility of change. Only 'involuntarily' does the novel expose 'adventitious «timeless order» built on terror of the unknown'. Nevertheless the 'seminal force of arbitrating genius' in this work, as in the others previously examined, 'is never entirely vanquished'. A potential of dynamic cross-cultural perception resides, Harris seems to be saying, in the intuitive imagination that can lead to change in the inner and outer life of humanity. While it is too late for Poe to consider this, Paule Marshall will find it thought-provoking.

A very important strand in the cultural web Harris weaves in *The Womb of Space* is his interpretation of Patrick White's *Voss* and of what the cross-cultural approach can help us to see better in 'another deceptively realistic novel ... by the great Australian novelist Patrick White'. (He has in mind 'the realist texture' of the work that tends to give a common-sense vision to events.) He relates *Voss*, throughout the section called 'Paradoxes of form', to the works earlier considered, through its images of pregnancy; mental travel; doubles and shadows; seals on the imagination blocking mutuality; the alchemization of hubris, bridges between day and night, 'perpetual discovery', alchemized stone, expanding circles, 'invisible man', and finally the Rainbow Serpent that writes itself with stars in the sky, revealing the death of Voss as 'consistent with creation myth rooted in the necessity for community to evolve through complex visions of apparent catastrophe'. It is not the apparent realism that fascinates Harris in *Voss* but its 'curiously subversive fantasy'. The reader of *The Womb of Space*, too, will draw parallels — between White's partial interchange of disadvantaged and privileged lives and Harris's dialogue with otherness; between Harris's *alchemization of hubris* and the thrust in the novel toward this alchemization in the white explorer Voss who would cut himself off from all 'flesh-and-blood contact' (Harris) with others, who jubilantly saw himself as God, whose 'implicit obsession with conquest turns ... upon him'; and between the Rainbow Serpent, 'the Great Snake, the grandfather of all men ... come down from the north in anger' and Harris's 'untamable cosmos'. And in many other ways the fantasy in *Voss* seems to be closely related to the imagination of Wilson Harris. Both are subversive of divisions in humanity.

In all the works I have mentioned and in those treated in the last two chapters, Harris finds clear sparks of the 'intuitive' imagination. Only in regard to *The Serpent and the Rope* by the twentieth-century Indian writer Raja Rao does he find that kind of imagination very much suppressed, though he considers the work an imaginative achievement of a sort, perhaps the most remarkable 'and profoundly intelligent example' of the combination of Western historical consciousness and non-evolutionary Indian stasis', a combination that he feels characterizes much twentieth-century Indian literature. The discussion (need I say?) shows no animus toward India (where part of his own ancestry lies) nor toward Rao. One gets the impression that Harris wrote this section as a duty, to reveal 'patterns of consent' to things as they are, rather than to creative change, to a 'seductive passivity' in the face of what is supposedly 'the incorrigible pathos of time'. The novel's symbols are rooted in the concept of a 'timeless order of mind', of 'absolute Non-Dual Ego' of 'absolute order'. Such a philosophy divorces itself from conceptions of 'evolutionary marriage between cultures and peoples'. God in Hindu theology, Harris tells us, is not 'Other' but pre-empts all selves within absolute Non-Dual Ego, subjecting all natures 'in concubinage' to the Ego, not to a true marriage. 'Changeless order ... is stained by mental incest,' says Harris, thus making a connection with *Intruder in the Dust* imagery. These things make Rao's novel 'a profoundly revealing, confessional fiction of conservative Southern India. Equally fascinating is the degree in which it resembles European despair and the philosophies of the absurdity of mutual existences or genuine wealth in reciprocity between cultures'. What Harris feels is absent is 'the conception of psychical re-dress leading into economical or cultural metamorphosis'. Harris, however, senses also 'remorse and misgiving, if not the torture of the damned' in Rao's book.

The last two lines in *The Womb of Space* are by Whitman and never has Whitman's meaning been more clear to me than in this context: 'O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,/ O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you.' American-born Whitman could be saying this to Harris; Guyanese-born Harris could be saying it to Whitman; each of them could be saying it to each of us. That, among a wealth of other things, is what *The Womb of Space: The Cross-cultural Imagination* conveys.

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Wilson Harris, *The Angel at the Gate* (London: Faber and Faber). £7.50.

Since *Palace of the Peacock* Wilson Harris's writing has developed considerably as his philosophical and aesthetic explorations gradually modified the metaphorical design of his fictions. The latest 'London' novels present a very different world from that of the *Guyana Quartet*. But one constant in his work, at first intuitively groped for, then consciously achieved, is the joint attempt to present a transformed vision of reality and to do so in a genuinely original form or language. Originality for Harris is not synonymous with difference or novelty, even if these characterize his work, but is rather an attempt to recover traces of an ancient or an eclipsed reality usually ignored by the factual recreations or descriptive analyses of much realistic writing. It implies a contrasting juxtaposition between what he sees as the realist illusion and the deeper reality — relations in depth — that the breakdown of the objective world can give access to.

Gradually also, contrary to the impression created for many readers by *Palace of the Peacock*, it has become clear that the purpose of the protagonist's quest in Harris's novels is

not a vision of totality or absolute truth, which in his eyes are associated with unbearable terror and beauty. A recurring theme in his recent fiction has been man's lust for infinity, for Paradise, for impossible utopias (a major temptation in *The Angel at the Gate*). This usually entails the idealization of a given reality and the assumption that it can be whole and self-sufficient. Harris's reverse view that truth is unfathomable, that no reality is final or sovereign has led in his fiction to a breakdown of the continuous objective narrative. Because reality is not one, it lends itself to a division into successive layers ('divisions within divisions' as the narrator says in *The Angel at the Gate*) between which the exploring consciousness moves. Hence the unrealistic plot and the frequent shifts in the narrative between 'objective' reality and the irrational, paradoxical but no less real associations and reversals of situation which become perceptible at a deeper level of consciousness. Similarly, the human personality is not one but a series of selves extending through experience to apparently lifeless objects (like the wheel and carpet sold together with a slave girl in the eighteenth century in this novel) as well as the natural and the animal world. Rather than clearly recognized and categorized areas of experience, Harris's protagonists explore a 'no man's land' between entrenched and opposed positions which he, as narrator, 'translates' for his readers.

The role of the narrator (W.H.) in *The Angel at the Gate*, as in *The Waiting Room*, *Companions of the Day and Night* and *The Tree of the Sun*, is to reveal the intensely real material that emerges from the subconscious of the protagonist, Mary Stella Holiday, through her automatic writing and her conversations under hypnosis with Father Joseph Marsden, a character first introduced in Harris's fiction in *Black Marsden*. The deep commitment and seriousness of the narrator's task makes him the very reverse of the 'fabulator' of much contemporary fiction. A major theme here is that modern society is diseased, our civilization dying, and a new sensibility is in the process of being born. The disease and the possible rebirth are both presented through Mary's experience, the malaise she suffers from and the hope embodied in her three-year old son John, the 'miracle child' born at once of her marriage with Sebastian, an unemployed drug-addict, and of her spiritual union with Joseph Marsden, who employs her as secretary at Angel Inn and thus supports her and her family.

As in most of Harris's novels, each bare fact offers the possibility of understanding what he sees as the 'variable forces' (angelic or daemonic and terrifying) at work in human beings and in the universe. Each event can lead to very different developments, just as similar actions can entail different or wholly unexpected results that contradict their motives. Reality is thus never imprisoned into an inevitable mould, and this constant capacity for openness and transformation gives the novel its form. The most striking example in the plot of *The Angel at the Gate* is the splitting of Mary Stella's diseased personality into Stella and Mary. Since Mary Stella is in a sense the muse of an ailing modern imagination, the splitting amounts to a 'fissur[ing of her] sovereign death-wish' (Wilson Harris, 'The Quest for Form', *Kunapipi*, V, 1, 26-27). The death-wish is enacted when Stella commits suicide, though after death she intensifies Mary's visionary powers and stimulates her imaginative quest into other cultures. This occurs through Mary's apprehension of the life and predicament of three 'angels', Indian Khublall, black Jamaican Jackson and British Wheeler, through her perception also of the ways in which catastrophic events in their lives (the death of Khublall's child-bride or the disappearance of Jackson's 'daughter of man') can be converted and become part of the conversion of the age. Individual tragedies and real or threatening disasters that may affect large numbers, such as atomic warfare, are evoked concomitantly and seen either to possess the seeds of change or a 'capacity for conversion of deeds to avert catastrophe' (p.88). In a remarkable

passage (see p.88) Marsden, who lies wounded on the pavement after being struck by a bale fallen from a lorry, emerges with the miniature world the bale has become and reveals through the prophetic grace he lights in Mary's body the possibility to transform the 'mesmeric quantity' of atomic fire into 'qualitative mystery', a new dimension in the mind (thus a revival of imagination) to cope with atomic fire and prevent the terror it arouses from blinding us.

This complex image (less paradoxical, however, in the light of the Fiery Furnace episode in the Bible) is one example among many of the way in which visions of apparently implacable catastrophes are reduced and seen to possess a constructive element. The surface fragmentation of the narrative is not an end in itself; it shows that the images in man's psychological space are all partial and must not be mistaken for a whole that remains elusive. Similarly, the shift of interest in the second half of the narrative from the deprived 'holy' family of Sebastian, Mary/Stella and John to Khublall and Jackson as Mary envisions their experience in the mirror of Marsden's Angel Inn is not so arbitrary as it may at first seem. The men are 'living masks' of Marsden whose spiritual authority has grown out of the suffering or 'slicing' imposed on him by fate in different parts of the world. Joseph (Marsden), not Mary, has the redeeming role. Like his mythical forbear two thousand years ago (a Yeatsian analogy), he is the protective and compassionate man who looks after Mary and cures her. But unlike Yeats's pessimistic prophecy, his 'annunciation of humanity' (p.31) is envisaged as a real possibility through Mary's encounter with other cultures, other forms of violence and deprivations the 'angels' (who are also 'prey of the furies') were involved in.

Actually, both Mary's 'son of man' and Jackson's 'daughter of man' have the same grand-father, Mack-the-Knife, an infamous character who with a set other personae, Lucy Brown, Sukey Tawdry and Jenny Diver (the mother who reappears in times of crisis) comes straight out of a Louis Armstrong song, itself inspired by John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Harris's well-known equation of writing with other forms of art has led here to his using music as a 'profound metaphor' actualizing through its mutes and voices the rhythms of Mary's consciousness and the movements of the characters who come into life within it when she effaces herself. Music plays the same role as painting in the earlier novels bringing together and creating a 'mutuality' ('Quest for Form', 22) between alien or seemingly incompatible characters and elements in their lives or the cultures they represent. The musical metaphor is the structural design which sustains what Harris calls 'a profound alteration of fictional imagery in narrative bodies' ('Quest for Form', 26). Possibly, in the alteration we find in novel after novel lies the secret of his inexhaustibly inventive genius.

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