1980

Interview with Wilson Harris

Wilson Harris
Interview with Wilson Harris

Abstract
INTERVIEW


*How do you consider* Palace of the Peacock *nowadays in the context of your literary production as a whole?*

*Palace of the Peacock* has for me a very important place in the context of the work I have done over the past twenty years and in particular in the context of the first nine novels up to *Ascent to Omai*. In part, I suppose, I relate to it within a ground of compelling emotion. It comes out of my first major confrontation with, and immersion in, the heartland of Guyana. I was a young land surveyor who
had come from the coastlands where I was born into an interior beyond my wildest dreams. It took me many years in the wake of many other expeditions to write this book.

Perhaps it may be of interest to mention that the names of the crew in the novel were adopted from a real party I led on that first expedition. The apparently allegorical significances in those names are no invention of mine: Carroll (the singing boatman), Jennings (the engineer), the Da Silva twins (mercurial characters), Wishrop (a climber who scales a cliff as if roped to the web of heaven), Vigilance (the lookout, the eye of the crew, peeled for hidden rocks and shapes in the dangerous water).

Palace was the fourth novel I wrote but my first published novel. I abandoned and destroyed the first three except that in the late stages of the third book I felt the beginnings of a shudder of pace (like a turbulence or stream that grips and tugs at a boat) within the language. I find I have no other way to describe an intuitive force that became the summons to embark at last on Palace of the Peacock. I can only describe it by saying that the words were alive and consistent with what I deeply knew and felt; the pace I had discovered, however strange, was real, it was a generation of rhythm that seemed to belong to the long immersion I had had in a landscape of rapids, waterfalls, of smooth calm interludes and reaches that could prove suddenly deceptive and precipitous, a landscape of brooding rain forest and great savannahs alive with ghosts and waving grasses, solitary trees, a landscape that threw up startling cliffs, an area of conflicting cultures reaching into the South Americas, into exploiter and exploited from pre-Columbian times to the twentieth century, whom the crew of the novel symbolized in its representatives of many races, a world of illusive El Dorado, cities of gold and of god that were dangerous as well as marvellous potential of the imagination.

Looking back at Palace I would say I was intuitively involved in an architectural or architectonic theme. There was an element of paradox in that this theme was a dream of inner space as well as a concrete metaphorical composition. Paradox is there also in the way the novel also has a curious intimate rapport with the conquistadorial character Donne in order to overthrow subtly — without prejudice if possible, without setting up in turn biases of revenge — violations rooted in conquest built into the family of mankind; and in overthrowing such violations to begin to move away from imposition into a form that immerses itself in living fragile texture, neglected tones, neglected ingredients of place, hinges of light, etc., etc. All this is profoundly pertinent I believe to the recovery of buried sensibility native to oneself, native to one’s other half, one’s
exploited kith and kin, in the very ground of lost cultures and of the 'world's night'.

*Which one is your favourite novel, among the many you have written?*

I find it difficult to pick a favourite among the novels I have written for it seems to me that everything I have done constitutes a growing unfinished body of work and each instalment, so to speak, could not exist without what has gone before. But if I were compelled to make say two choices I think they would be *Palace of the Peacock* and *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (which has a sequel called *The Tree of the Sun*).

*Would you define Palace of the Peacock as a 'South American' novel, not only in terms of locale and sensibilities but in terms of 'marvellous realism' and what passes for the characteristics of the South American novel?*

I do feel a certain kinship with the South American and the Latin American novel. In part it is setting, in part it may be antecedents. My antecedents are mixed. Some are Arawak or Amerindian, others European and African. The concept of 'marvellous realism' constitutes for me an alchemical pilgrimage, nigredo, albedo, cauda pavonis. The search for the lapis or the marvellous stone is a ceaseless adventure within the self and without the self in natures and beings that are undervalued or that have been eclipsed or imprisoned by models of conquest.

*Do you consider yourself a Guyanese, an English or a South American writer?*

The honest reply is to say I am all three by tradition and history. Guyana is in South America and possesses a complex and challenging inheritance that relates to South America and to the Caribbean. I have always greatly and spontaneously admired from my youth English poetry such as the work of Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Coleridge and Hopkins. My relationship to the English language is a peculiarly native one in that the language belongs to me and is also a medium in which images from cultures other than English arrive and alter narrative preconceptions to enrich a body of associations in depth. This I believe is the case with all the major European languages, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, that are now native to the South Americas and to the Caribbean.
Do you consider the quest of El Dorado, i.e. the pursuit of inaccessible material wealth, a major theme in the novel?

El Dorado is, I believe, a theme that could be transformed into a quest for wholeness. In such a context it may serve to repudiate the hubris of conquest, and the legacies of conquest that govern the imagination, by asserting that institutions and images which seem total and absolute in character are partial. In confessing to their partiality they lend themselves to dialogue with other apparently alien parts, that masquerade as wholes, and thus to a complex of real and genuine change in which no part assumes absolute sovereignty over the rest. Wholeness can never be entirely achieved and therefore it rouses the imagination to release itself from monoliths of complacency or cruel bias. I believe El Dorado can be explored as a caveat of this order. It is the city of gold that mutates into a god to apprise us of our limitations in order paradoxically to equip us for ceaseless creativity or movement into relationships of flexible parts, horizons, living contrasts.

In Palace of the Peacock, death appears as spiritual regeneration and the religious imagery is prevalent. Can one decipher the final scene as a parable of a Christian epiphany or did you have different intentions in mind when writing it, however?

The final scene in Palace of the Peacock is, I hope, a kind of Christian epiphany but it subsists as well on the Amerindian psyche. In Amerindian legend the Arawak zemi is a kind of icon that confesses to an inner space or inner body within the costume or investiture it wears, thus a hidden equation may exist between conqueror and conquered in the American context to alert us sensuously to the unfathomable capacity of Christ to uncover the past, to regenerate the past, to transform violations inflicted in his name and to spark into being a new creation in the light of the living body of the present.

The seven stages of the journey to the interior can be seen as those of the alchemical process from nigredo to cauda pavonis. Did you pattern the narrative with that comparison in mind when you wrote the story?

I can say quite honestly that I was not aware of the alchemical process when I wrote Palace of the Peacock. But over the years in research and reading I have become convinced that an intuitive equation exists. In
alchemy one striking issue is the matter of psychical projections upon the world, projections of fear, of beauty, of hate, of harmony, etc., etc., from the individual psyche upon nature. On the surface this is anthropomorphic but in depth, I feel, it confirms man's essential and enigmatic relationship with the qualitative mystery of creation, qualities of emotion, god-like, animal and human, in worlds that are made from primordial elements and forces that inevitably arouse various qualities akin to distinctive feeling or emotion. Mathematics itself is an art, a gift of perception, of grace, of intuition. Or so it seems to me. Creation therefore springs from a qualitative and primordial base that releases conflicting tones and feelings that cannot be wholly reconciled or erased from objective practice however apparently clinical that practice, however apparently austere. Creativity embarks on unceasing therapy, an unceasing quest for the reconciliation of alien universes or parts of unfathomable genesis. That the individual imagination, in all its frailty, engages in the qualitative mystery of origins is, it seems to me, a hopeful omen of enduring capacity in creation itself to relate to its vulnerable parts in the midst of furies, man-made or nature-made, that seem unhuman and overwhelming at times.

How do you stand in relationship to Conrad and his vision of 'savagery' in Heart of Darkness?

Conrad's Heart of Darkness, in my judgement, is a great novel because it brings home the tormenting issue of form, the necessity for a change of form, if the modern novel is to sustain heterogeneous contents without one culture suppressing or exterminating the other or hypocritically claiming to be liberal while maintaining its fixtures of bias. Conrad's European inheritance was a novel-form that came by and large from homogeneous situations in which ruling images or institutions of communication, geared to consenting classes and common values, seemed natural, beautiful and right. In Heart of Darkness he became aware of the partiality of such absolute rule and the implicit polarizations not only in Europe but glaringly in European empires around the globe. That awareness set up meaningful distortions in his vision of Africa. He was unable to do more than bring the novel-form to a frontier on which the necessity resided for a change in inter-relationships and imagery within the narrative tool he used. Nevertheless though he stopped there it was a significant achievement. The fact that he was able to disclose the bias of homogeneous cultural form within patterns of
conquest, masquerading as light, tested him to the core for his own fears of security, the way he had himself been conditioned and educated, were at stake. The issue of form is a formidable one. Imaginative art is form, complex form. Without the change in form new content is invalid and that is why protest novels or protest media or protest politics do little to change the texture of a civilization or alter the habits of power, of territorial imperative, as it is called, in any profound way.

I believe your style is somewhat disconcerting to the reader who approaches Palace of the Peacock with preconceived ideas about what a plot and a novel should be. Were you conscious of that difficulty and did you attempt to create a style that would be capable of allowing experience on a direct, sensuous level as well as providing glimpses of the metaphysical?

As I explained in reply to questions 1 & 2 my arrival into Palace of the Peacock came from a deep-seated concentration upon materials I needed to immerse myself in that confronted me in the Guyanas. I felt the necessity to do more than describe that world. I needed to uncover it in some degree, to recover what had been apparently lost, to see it from within as well as from without. It was thin interwoven necessity that triggered off the kind of style in which the book was written. I never thought it would prove disconcerting for as I wrote it it seemed to me basically true to an inner body of complex fact that has continued to assert itself in different ways in successive novels.

How do you think this tension between the sensuous and the metaphorical can be achieved and maintained stylistically?

I think this kind of tension resides in an exploratory sensation that all images are partial and therefore they imply a thrust backwards towards hidden wholes and forwards towards new wholes that are in themselves, in the past and in the future, unfinished shapes of reality. Why a writer should find himself committed to such a process is unanswerable. It isn’t a popular process and yet it seems to me vital to human community. Perhaps I reveal an obsession in saying this but it is an obsession I think that relates to curious powers that can help the individual imagination to be and to obey impulses of otherness beyond the historical prejudices of the generation to which he belongs.
How do you react to the publication of Palace of the Peacock in France?

I am pleased that my novel is to appear in the French language. For this brings it, I hope, a little closer to a great tradition from which writers as diverse as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Proust, Balzac, Flaubert, Aime Césaire, Camara Laye, Claude Simon, St John Perse, Genet and Robbe-Grillet have come. It is the remarkable combination of intuition, concentration, profound imaginative truth allied to a quest for new form in poem and novel, that gives the French tradition an inner momentum that flowers in individual works of great originality.