

# *Paradoxes of Creation: Wilson Harris's "The Secret Ladder"*

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AMONG THE NOVELS OF Guyanese author Wilson Harris, *The Secret Ladder* (1963) is generally considered different from the others because of its relative clearness and straightforward narrative. In the author's design, it forms part of the so-called "Guiana Quartet," together with *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961) and *The Whole Armour* (1962). I personally feel that *Heartland* (1964) must be included in this first period of Wilson Harris's *oeuvre* since *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (1965), the next novel, starts a new series of radically different works exploring the processes of memory and creation. However, despite its apparent simplicity, *The Secret Ladder* already poses the problem of the functioning of the imagination in a subtle way which has frequently been overlooked.

The novel unfolds along a seven-day period, an echo of the creation of the world in Genesis. Art is thus equated with the essential activity which consists in giving shape and meaning to chaos. The title certainly contains an allusion to Jacob's dream in the Bible. Writing for Wilson Harris means the abolition of the barriers between the material world and what, for want of a better word, I will call "otherness." The novel is a dreamlike experience in which the reader, like Jacob, is promised some kind of revelation, the annunciation of visionary possibilities.

Harris's style relies on intricate networks of metaphors which are combined to form ever-changing patterns. Each cluster of images radiates in different directions and collides with others, engendering unexpected evocations. This process could appear gratuitous if it did not rely on a profound desire to break down all entrenched fortresses of prejudices and fixed meaning. Harris

exposes the "novel of persuasion"<sup>1</sup> which he sees as a "consolidation" of premises, a genre which "rests on grounds of apparent common sense" and rarely goes beyond "fashionable judgements, self-conscious and fashionable moralities."<sup>2</sup> Harris's own conception of the novel implies an exploration of the hidden side of actions, of motivations, and of perceptions. For him, the writer is a mediator — and not a translator<sup>3</sup> — who helps the reader to discover hidden layers in perception.

Besides the mystical evocations, the "ladder" also refers to the scientific expedition which is the surface aim of the journey up the Canje river in Guyana. The surveying team uses ladder-like gauges to measure the variations in the levels of the water. The author does not hesitate to draw heavily on the technical knowledge that he gained in his years as a surveyor in the interior of what was then "British Guiana." For him, science and art are not incompatible provided the former is not seen as self-sufficient and exhaustive. On the contrary, Harris believes that each can benefit from contact with the other. This is precisely what Fenwick, the protagonist, discovers: he had come with a perfectly clear mission with only hydrologic and cartographic implications. Yet, once he arrives on the site, he soon realizes that his work arouses a mass of historic, sociological, and psychological problems which he had not suspected. In gauging the river, the men are suspected of preparing for the construction of a dam which will flood the whole basin and will thus rob of their meagre land the descendants of the bush negroes who still live in the area. For the technocrats of Georgetown, this relatively infertile area will not be a great loss once it is flooded. Yet the land symbolizes the hard-won freedom which the rebellious Africans gained in the face of slavery and repeated attacks by the armed forces. In this struggle between roots and science, the gauges become meaningful monuments which, for Poseidon, the leader of the bush negroes, express the tyranny of science. Poseidon burns what has become idols for others. This act raises questions concerning the meaning of progress: on the one hand the reservoirs which will be created will regulate the rivers and prevent the brackish waters of the estuaries from going too far inland during droughts. But this advantage will imply the disappearance of a valuable component of Guyanese

civilization which is often looked down upon. As Fenwick discovers the implications of his work, he wavers between a firm handling of the situation and more understanding for the predicament of the Africans. He finally adopts the latter solution despite the admonition of Jordan, his assistant and adviser. Compassion is shown to be an essential element of creation.

The gauge is graduated above and below the surface of the water. This detail suggests the double face of reality whose hidden side matters as much as the visible. The work of art, like the scientific enterprise, plumbs the dark unknown and studies its relations with the more familiar material world. As in Lewis Carroll, what lies on the other side of the looking glass matters as much as the sheer reflection in the mirror.

Such images often raise questions of identity and this novel is no exception. Yet Wilson Harris is not concerned with self as a construction which isolates people from others. Characters do not so much stand on their own as take part in a wider complementary pattern of potentialities. In his novels, personality becomes a highly evolutionary notion. Characters *become* more than they *are*. In this process of transformation, the reader learns to perceive a deep network of relations between the characters: Weng, the Amerindian, Chiung, the Chinese, Perez, the Portuguese, Bryant, the African, Stoll, the mulatto, Van Brock, the tall black man, can be seen as the representatives of the ethnic groups which compose the nation of Guyana. Fenwick synthesizes this wide diversity within himself since he has African, Amerindian, and European ancestors. This group, which reminds one of the varied crew in *Palace of the Peacock*, is threatened by internal quarrels whose disruptive force eventually produces positive effects because it forces the men to face the brutality and ruthlessness in themselves and to discover the possibility of a truer bond of community. Harris here suggests that any solution to the history of ethnic oppression which has plagued the Caribbean for centuries cannot lie in one group ignoring the needs of the others. The author sees the necessity to break down all fixed structures in order to reach a deeper and richer form of intercourse.

In Wilson Harris's works, creation implies the integration of time in one's world view. In *The Secret Ladder*, as in many other

novels by the same author, one of the first problems is to find one's origins. This quest appears symbolic of the peculiar conditions which affected the West Indies in previous centuries because of the pattern of conquest and slavery. Yet, far from stumbling on the obstacle of bastardization, Harris provides a more positive approach to the question.

Van Brock's grandfather is officially a Dutch planter. Yet he might also well be a gold-digger who disappeared in the "nameless falls" of the interior. Van Brock's identity remains problematic like Fenwick's "family myth."<sup>4</sup> The word "myth" must not be taken in the sense of an untrue story but as a vital creation of the imagination, a dynamic structure which gives meaning to otherwise sterile life. The search for the origins which most characters are engaged in reveals to them the fickleness of equating their identities with any unchangeable figure from the past. Harris suggests that one's roots, like one's self, are multifarious and contradictory. In the writer's opinion, one must not let a particular branch rule the others for fear of identifying with tyrannical representations. Creative progression thus implies the realization of one's contradictory inheritance.

In order to experience this radical revision of premises, the characters in *The Secret Ladder* learn to free themselves from fixed structures which they had always considered to be reality. The plot abounds in catastrophes: Chiung is nearly struck dead on the "stelling" while he keeps the night watch. He has put on clothes belonging to Fenwick, which gives a new dimension to his experience of symbolic death. Through Chiung, Fenwick perceives what should have happened to him. Chiung becomes a kind of double to him, an image at once separate and intimate.

Other visions of incompleteness include Fenwick's dream of the "decapitated mare."<sup>5</sup> In the same scene, the dreamer fails to see the horseman who was there at the beginning and who has vanished mysteriously, leaving a blank space in the picture. This episode suggests that reality is always composed of visible elements and of others whose shadow flickers on and off to eventually disappear before the whole tableau becomes complete in the viewer's eyes. Reality, for Wilson Harris, is made up of a mosaic of diverse elements which one tries to piece together, only to discover in the

end that there are missing links and unmatching edges. The novel provides an opportunity to revise one's conceptions as a preliminary to more genuine creation.

Harris uses the myth of Perseus beheading Medusa. Fenwick's assistant is called Jordan, a name which rimes with Gorgon.<sup>6</sup> Fenwick learns to sever the bonds attaching him to the man who protects him from reality.<sup>7</sup> As K. Ramchand says, he "casts off Jordan (beheads his Medusa)"<sup>8</sup> and, Perseus-like, learns to come to terms, though indirectly, through Bryant, with the woman who arrived at the camp on the boat aptly named *Andromeda*. Thus creation and progress imply the "beheading" of the characters' prejudices. In Harris's world, outer shapes must be broken up before a fruitful process can take place. Faces are suddenly perceived as if they were going to burst open. We see this process at work with Bryant who is described with "a couple of sharp razor-bones [jutting] against the skin of his face" (p. 182). Similarly, when Fenwick and Bryant are travelling upriver and nearing Poseidon's house, Bryant suddenly moves "his jaw as if the sharp spirit in his voice had sliced each word in half so that only the mutilated shadow of humour appeared on his lips" (p. 153). What the characters say can also appear fissured, as if to unveil the hidden powers of language to evoke the unsayable manifest behind every utterance.

Such experiences, which open to more creative perspectives, often involve an inversion of perception or mirror effects: when Bryant and Fenwick go back to the camp after their first meeting with Poseidon, the African chief with the name of a Greek god, the landscape is seen in terms of reflection: "... the trees had settled once again into their dual place, reflected in the water at their ancient tug-of-war with the ribbons of the sky" (p. 157). When Fenwick sees Poseidon on the Kaboyary,<sup>9</sup> it is through the inverting sight of a telescope. These reversals of normal proportions often herald a radical change in the characters' conception of reality.

Such scenes may also imply a distancing effect for the character who suddenly sees himself apart from himself, reflected in someone else. When Weng, the hunter, arrives to see Fenwick, the leader of the group is seized by "the grotesque sensation that

the frame of the tent and the placid river mirrored his own uneasy shadowy reflection" (p. 175). Weng appears as a sort of twin. The process opens to the discovery of otherness in what had seemed familiar up to then:

Fenwick had seen Weng focused in the reflection of himself, and being drawn out again from within his own eye like a rubber twin turning into substantial alien being — Weng, quite distinctly, after all. (p. 175)

Creation is achieved through and beyond reflection, a process which bears similarities with death, as we can see from Chiung's experience when he is lying on the "steling" coming round after the blow he has received:

He sounded as if he had changed places with his listeners and could see the shadow of himself (born with death) created in the dark pool of their eyes and striving to be understood. (p. 235)

For Wilson Harris, vision implies the recognition that one's own image is different from what one had always imagined. This feeling of dispossession is a necessary prelude to the edification of a more authentic self.

This radical revision of possibilities has linguistic implications: When Poseidon speaks to Fenwick on their first meeting, the facial movements of the old bush-negro leader do not quite fit the words he is saying:

His mouth moved and made frames which did not correspond to the words he had actually uttered. It was like the tragic lips of an actor, moving but soundless as a picture, galvanized into comical associations with a foreign dubbing and tongue which uttered a mechanical version and translation out of accord with the visible features of original expression. (p. 156)

Through the use of pictorial metaphors (which are developed in such later novels as *Da Silva da Silva* . . . [1977] and *The Tree of the Sun* [1978]), Harris expresses the radical otherness of speech which is composed of signifiers evoking, without absolutely adhering to, the corresponding significata. Words always go beyond what their author wants them to mean. Harris presents speech as a form of dubbing, an equivalent and a betrayal of the initial purpose of the speaker. Words, which are the novelist's tools, are

so pregnant with various connotations that they surprise the one who has uttered them. His so called mastery is exposed. The product bears the marks of meretricious artistry and of shabbiness, an ambiguity which the narrator expresses with the image of a piece of fabric:

An air of enormous artifice rested everywhere, the gnarled shadow of cloaked branches, naked leaves pinned fortuitously to the sky, these worn materials of earth stretched almost to the limits of enduring apprehension. (p. 195)

Such a description underlines the radical distance remaining between desire and its realization.

In this unveling process, the characters try to perceive transparency in the heart of darkness. The "window" image occupies a privileged place in this context, though it is given fuller scope to develop in the final part of *Palace of the Peacock*. The trees in *The Secret Ladder* invite Fenwick "to look through windows upon the empty savannahs."<sup>10</sup> In such crucial episodes, the eye contemplates scenes which wrench the protagonist from the blindness which normally limits his perception. The window assumes the same function as the frame round a picture: it encloses and focuses vision which is then invited to reach beyond appearances. Seemingly immobile elements come alive and become significant.

In such creative moments nature becomes the seat of metamorphosis, as we see during the storm which surprises Fenwick and Bryant:

... branches of lightning appeared in the sky on which grew a sudden bursting pod of rain. First stinging wayward seed—broadcast by the rising wind—pelted their face and hands. Then a forest of rain sprouted and enveloped them thicker than the grass in the water. (pp. 156-57)

Here top and bottom are inverted and communicate. Terrestrial life becomes one with aerial elements while all is pervaded by an enormous sensation of fruitfulness. The prolonged metaphor which is used here relates two representations which are not normally linked. The visionary landscape created by the author proceeds from the combined working of identification and difference. Such synthesizing process also affects characters: when Poseidon

appears, he is described with "flapping ragged fins of trousers on his legs" (p. 155). His white woolly hair makes him resemble a sheep and "the black wooden snake of skin peeping through its animal blanket was wrinkled and stitched together incredibly." He has animal, vegetable, and human features and belongs to the water and the land. Through the "wood" image, he also evokes a tree, a creature rooted in the earth and with its limbs in the sky. His "wooden" skin expresses the paradox of hardness: for Wilson Harris, people with "wooden" expressions seem impenetrable. They have stony faces like Jordan. Yet, in such evolutionary contexts, stones are potentially fruitful elements. They can be the "lapis" of the old alchemists, a field which, as M. Gilkes<sup>11</sup> has rightly noticed, has provided the writer with many important imaginary representations. But then wood is also an element which can be carved, as we see in the final part of *Palace of the Peacock* with the carpenter image,<sup>12</sup> an allusion to Joseph, Jesus's foster parent.

In order to express the paradoxes of creative vision, Harris resorts to figures such as the oxymoron. He talks of the trees near Benim Creek which "hardly moved save in the unison of a still gallop ceaselessly barring the way" (p. 196). Each dense phrase serves to break up reality into two parts, one belonging to the ordinary world of reality, the other to that of vision. Through merely adding an adjective, the author suggests the existence of this second and more essential level.

Before creation can take place, the characters must undergo radical dispossession. They are reduced to a minimal form of existence akin to death. Alluding to Genesis, the narrator says that "seven days it had taken to finish the original veil of creation that shaped and ordered all things to be solid in the beginning. . . . Perhaps seven . . . were needed to strip and subtilize everything" (p. 206). The working of the imagination is a genesis in reverse in order to go back to the roots of the creative process:

The seven beads of the original creation had been material days of efflorescence and bloom to distinguish their truly material character. But now the very opposite realities of freedom were being chosen (not phenomena of efflorescence but *shells* and *skeletons*)



to distinguish an immaterial constitution (which after all was the essential legitimacy of all creation). (p. 206)

The words "shells" and "skeletons" which I have italicized are opposed to the spectacular flowers of material creation. These hard shapes correspond to life reduced to its minimum, stripped from all the more obvious attributes of fruitfulness and movement. The imagination helps the artist to regress into these primal shelters in a sort of descent into hell. As the T. S. Eliot epigraph before Book III reminds the reader, "We are born with the dead." When spectacular beauty is reduced to shreds or ashes, the essence of beauty can more easily be perceived, an idea exemplified by the broken butterfly wings which lie on the ground after Jordan has savagely lashed at the insect:

The fantastic wings were shattered save for the spirit of their design which persisted on the ground like stars of gold painted on the blue skeleton of crumpled heaven. (p. 207)

The word "design," as elsewhere in Harris's novels, must be taken in the dual sense of "drawing" and "intention." The visual representations, because they are fragmented, witness to a creative purpose which is waiting to be manifested.

The narrative structure of *The Secret Ladder* follows a relatively straightforward line, both in the succession of events and in its temporal organization. The plot unfolds in a linear way and is conveyed to the reader through an alternation of dialogues and narrative interventions. The third-person narrator describes settings, suggests moods and frequently interprets the characters' thoughts. It definitely stands "behind" most of them and more particularly behind Fenwick. The voice which speaks through this third person might appear omniscient. Yet the only certainties which it provides concern the impossibility to *know* anything for sure, to distinguish appearances from the hidden life which binds the elements in creation. Its comments are never definite except in unmasking prejudices. They provide paradoxical representations which, far from closing the plot, question any possibility of exhaustive meaning. Wilson Harris leaves few opportunities for the reader to "translate" images into one-sided equivalents. Metaphors become significant only through the networks of ever

changing relations which they form. Even if the world of *The Secret Ladder* is less puzzling than that in *Palace of the Peacock*, the reader can rely only on the narrator's intervention to guide him through a maze of complex evocations. The latter becomes a guide who lets the former into a less and less recognizable land where certainties vanish one after the other. The reader is like Dante following a sort of Virgil whose words become more and more mysterious. Through the device of "omniscience," the narrator of *The Secret Ladder* proves that omniscience does not exist.

The threefold organization of the novel (Book I: The Day Readers, Book II: The Night Readers, and Book III: The Reading) follows the process of creation which starts from polarization, establishes a mirror pattern and finally comes to the essence of transformation. Unsurprisingly it is in the third movement that the narration becomes the more intricate. The reader who had grown used to a linear sense of time and to a third-person commentator who spoke mostly through Fenwick's mouth is surprised by oddities in what appeared a well-oiled mechanism. First Bryant dreams of the death of his grandmother<sup>13</sup> and of how he reclaimed her gold ring from the cesspool. This ornament links the old woman with the past and evokes the process of transformation from vile matter to precious metal which was the alchemists' preoccupation. In finally slipping the ring round his dead grandmother's fingers, he acts "as a dutiful priest at the wedding of memory" (p. 246).

This third book does not include any direct dialogue. The exchanges between the characters are relayed to the reader through a third person whose status cannot be clearly defined. When Van Brock first starts his tale, the different embedded levels can still be perceived because of the "he told Fenwick" which enables the reader to understand the "he remembered the someone now" (p. 242) as a distanced form of "*I* remembered . . .", the first person being Van Brock. Yet, in the next sentence, the narration is carried by a third-person outside narrator who can see "behind" the character and interprets his experience. The story moves, without any transition, back in the past. It is told alternately through Van Brock or through that outside narrator of uncertain status. The transitions from the one to the other are not

easy to distinguish, which leaves the reader in doubt about who is speaking.

A similar pattern is taken up again in the story told by Bryant and Catalena. There it is difficult to tell whether the third person speaks on behalf of Fenwick, Catalena, Bryant, or someone else commenting on the events. The reader needs to ponder carefully in order to find out where the voice is coming from. Even then, shifts are so frequent that he is likely to lose his bearing, a strategy consciously devised by the writer. Sometimes we feel that we are made to relive the story as it happened. Then, the next moment, the outside narrator reminds us that all this is taking place as Fenwick is interrogating Catalena. Sequences of events follow one another in the narrative, often unfinished and punctuated by three dots.

Perhaps a key to the understanding of this strange pattern is provided by the outside narrator himself when he describes this "uproar of questions [which] seemed to come from a dreaming past, the chaotic present, and an inquisitor who split everyone's skull to survey the depth of crucial interlocution" (p. 256). The narration becomes a kind of trial in which every character's mind is broken open and linked with the thoughts of the others to try to bring out basic relations between them through past and present. The meanders of the narrating person mirror the different attempts made by the third-person outside voice to discover these vital links. The tendency which that voice has to be situated in no clear time or place hint at the essential quality of the vision introduced here. As if to underline the peculiar quality of that perception, the novel ends on Fenwick dreaming "that an inquisition of dead gods and heroes had ended, an inquiry into the dramatic role of conscience in time and being" (p. 258). The dead heroes and gods stand for the sacrificed one-sided reality which, the author thinks, must be shed if a deeper level of perception is to be reached. When the novel closes, the reader is left with the reminder that "in our end is our beginning." The story has only been a necessary prelude to the discovery of more basic links beyond the boundaries separating times, places, and people.

Through his subtle handling of the narrative structure, Wilson Harris shows what he sees as a prerequisite of genuine creation,

which involves the laying bare of various prejudices and a descent into the profound meaning of history, of time, and of oneself in relation to others. Science and art are associated in this radical revision of premises which closes on "the dawn of the seventh day" (p. 259), an indication that only the pattern has been set. Now genuine life may begin. The rhetoric of the novel, though less intricate than in later works, exemplifies this progression from simple polarities to more complex resemblances. At once familiar and bewildering, *The Secret Ladder* is perhaps the easiest threshold into a world of complex thought and craftsmanship. But its surface simplicity must be penetrated in order to expose the rich network of images and evocations which characterize the artist's vision.

## NOTES

- 1 Especially in "Tradition and the West Indian Novel," an essay included in Wilson Harris's collection, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon Books, 1976).
- 2 Harris, *Tradition*, p. 29.
- 3 Here I use the term "translator" in the sense of someone who provides a definite key for the exhaustive interpretation of meaning.
- 4 Wilson Harris, *The Secret Ladder* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963). All subsequent references will be to this edition.
- 5 Harris, *Ladder*, p. 165.
- 6 Harris, *Ladder*, p. 171.
- 7 This severing of material bonds must be linked with the episode when Van Brock's grandmother is dying and "the cords in her neck" loosen (p. 246). The symbolic "decapitation," like the slaying of the Gorgon, liberates creativity.
- 8 See Kenneth Ramchand's excellent essay on *The Secret Ladder* in his *Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature* (London: Nelson, 1976). This quotation is taken from p. 170.
- 9 Harris, *Ladder*, p. 180.
- 10 Harris, *Ladder*, p. 154.
- 11 See Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (London: Longman, 1975).
- 12 See in particular, in the paperback edition of *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 136-38.
- 13 Harris, *Ladder*, pp. 241-46.