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“An Experiment in the Technique of Awakening”—A Response to Duane Edwards

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The historian and political activist Walter Rodney and the novelist and poet Wilson Harris are not often set in conversation with each other. Yet despite their very different disciplinary backgrounds and the great disparities in their approach to politics, Rodney and Harris have reached audiences outside of their respective disciplinary affiliations. With this in mind, Edwards's essay examines how Rodney's and Harris's approaches to social change may be able to affect the contemporary reality of the Caribbean. The title for Edward's piece is derived from a question posed by Rodney, which goes to the heart of each writer's political philosophy: "What happens when we stop dreaming? Does the tree we uprooted in our dream not confront us again with equal or greater obstinacy?" Rodney's question challenges Harris's emphasis on creative dream work and the importance Harris ascribes to "the life of the imagination" (1999, 43). By implication, one might say, Rodney challenges the effectiveness of literature as a political tool.

### **Wilson Harris's Work**

I am familiar with Wilson Harris primarily as a literary figure. However, the fact that Harris's work is frequently discussed outside of this context attests to the presence of an ethics and an epistemology in his work that lends itself rather well to interdisciplinary readings, as Edwards rightly suggests. Andrew Bundy, editor of *The Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, refers to Harris's body of writing as a "single continuous dream-book" (1999, 13). Beyond that, it is perhaps best described as a "philosophical poetics", a term used by Paget Henry to refer to literary works that engage in philosophical debates (2017, 1). Henry, whom Edwards discusses in detail, devotes a whole chapter in *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (2000) to the work of Wilson Harris and its contribution to Caribbean philosophy, marking him out as a foundational thinker in the region's history of ideas.

By contrast, Rodney's approach is more historically grounded and actionable in its approach, aiming to raise political awareness in people of all educational backgrounds about the global inequalities created by European colonialism. While his writing was never intended to be "literary art", he was allegedly a gifted orator and thus someone who, like Harris, was able to use the emotional power of words to reach his audiences. At the same time, Rodney's work and especially the circumstances surrounding his premature death have inspired a number of literary responses, among them pieces by major Caribbean poets like Kamau Brathwaite and Linton Kwesi Johnson.

Edwards's essay is admirable in its analysis of how and where Harris and Rodney meet intellectually and politically. Though credited with the more expansive vision, Harris's approach is met with some scepticism in Edward's analysis, and with good reason: Harris believed in the numinous power of art and the creative imagination to effect political change. However, his vision is grounded in a deep mysticism, inspired by indigenous Amerindian beliefs and folk tales, European esoteric traditions, the writings of William Blake, and the work of C. G. Jung. As such, he is fundamentally a different thinker to Rodney, which is addressed in Edward's detailed discussion of Harris's poeticism.

If one wanted to align Harris with Marxist writers, then Ernst Bloch or Walter Benjamin would make for more congenial partners in this conversation, at least to this reader, though it would invariably remove Harris from the political and historical reality of the Caribbean that is the focus of Edwards's discussion. However, it is a conversation worth dwelling on as Harris, in a similar way to another poet-philosopher from the region, Édouard Glissant, sought to position the Caribbean in a global context. Bloch and Benjamin are related—at a distance in time as well as space—to Harris's vision in that they emphasize the importance of dreaming in their work.

In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch develops his understanding of anticipatory consciousness in relation to what he calls the “darkness of the lived moment” (1995, 290), which can never experience itself fully unless we surrender to a state of wakeful dreaming, an “*anticipated keeping still*” (1995, 289). Bloch argues that what we anticipate in this state of stillness is a sense of existential homecoming—*Heimat* as he calls it—and significantly, he opens *The Principle of Hope* with a series of spiritual questions modelled on those formulated by Blaise Pascal: “Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?” (1995, 3)—questions that could also stand over the entire work of Wilson Harris.

### **Dream Analysis**

Similarly, Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* acknowledges the power of dreaming and—more importantly—the act of dream analysis in the creation of historical knowledge. Benjamin cites Bloch several times in his seminal fragment on the material history of the 19th century. For Bloch as for Benjamin the past is still present—and for Benjamin in particular in the form of artefacts and architectural features that have lost their original purpose and meaning and yet linger, disturbing the present as a dream disturbs or lingers in the consciousness of the awakening sleeper. The act of awakening, a central methodological aspect of *The Arcades Project*, is coterminous with the act of interpreting the (dream of the) past and to achieve catharsis in the process. As such, Benjamin's work answers Rodney's question “What happens when we stop dreaming? Does the tree we uprooted in our dream not confront us again with equal or greater obstinacy?”

Benjamin would argue that the dream tree is present in our waking life as a remnant of the past, as “a side turned towards dreams” (2002, F°, 7) that manifests in every generation's experience of its historical epoch. Benjamin specifically refers to a generation's youth: “A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience <*Erfahrung*> of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream-configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned towards dreams, the child's side. [...] What follows here is an experiment in the technique of awakening” (2002, F°, 7). The immediate postcolonial period anticipated in *Palace of the Peacock*, for example, Harris's first and most enduring novel published in 1960, would indeed represent the experience of his own generation's youth, with the novel itself being “an experiment in the technique of awakening”.

Harris, Bloch, and Benjamin also have in common a language that combines the poetic and the philosophical. The English translations of Bloch's and Benjamin's texts do not always capture the poetic luminosity of the original German, which has a similarly powerful effect on the reader as Harris's English prose. Benjamin in particular demonstrates an inclination towards the numinous and even shamanic at times, which aligns his writing very closely in places with Harris but also with other Caribbean writers. One of the most beautiful fragments in *The Arcades Project* suggests that the task of the historian is related to that of the shaman: "At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table" (2002, N15, 2). Benjamin's wording of the work of the historian, especially when read in the context of Caribbean arts, evokes, for example, George Lamming's 1960 collection of essays *The Pleasures of Exile*, which frames the act of engaging the historical and literary past of the region with the Haitian ceremony of the Souls:

This ceremony of the Souls is regarded by the Haitian peasant as a solemn communion; for he hears, at first hand, the secrets of the Dead. The celebrants are mainly relatives of the deceased who, ever since their death, have been locked in Water. [...] The Dead need to speak if they are going to enter that eternity which will be their last and permanent Future. The living demand to hear whether there is any need for forgiveness, for redemption; whether, in fact, there may be any guide which may help them towards reforming their present condition (1992, 9–10).

Benjamin's banquet for the dead and Lamming's account of the Haitian ceremony of the Souls share an almost uncanny similarity of sensibility, and they both serve a cathartic purpose in the act of awakening the dead. One of Benjamin's major influences was the work of Marcel Proust, and Benjamin's intended methodology chapter of *The Arcades Project* seeks parallels with the beginning of *In Search of Lost Time*: "Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else" (2002, N4, 3). Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, and indeed his entire subsequent oeuvre, is in its essence a Caribbean *In Search of Lost Time*—a literary ceremony of the Souls in style as much as in subject matter.

### **Dreaming, Art, and Imagining the World**

The political concerns of *Palace of the Peacock* cover the historical period from the region's early colonization by Europe to the more immediate context of the time when Harris was writing his novel: British Guiana's decolonization from British rule in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The central character and narrating consciousness, Dreamer, is described as being blind in one eye but this blind eye can see into a dream reality—an ability which for Harris is synonymous with the creative imagination of the artist, with its power to rewrite the dominant narratives of the colonial archive. Significantly, the characters, who in the novel undertake a journey up one of the main Guyanese rivers, are revenant ghosts. All of them have done this journey at least once before and died in the process. The Dreamer as narrator has the same function as Benjamin's historian or Lamming's *houngan* (Vodou priest): they

summon the dead and let them relive their story.

In the Dreamer's vision and in the process of the narrative, relationships between individual characters and between European settlers and American land, formerly characterized by oppression and exploitation, are allowed to shed their exploitative and destructive characteristics and instead culminate in a sense of existential homecoming and spiritual belonging—or *Heimat* in the Blochian sense. At the end of Harris's novel, this narrative of homecoming develops into a broader vision of how Guyana's colonial past can be meaningfully integrated into a narrative of its postcolonial future.

The project that Harris began with *Palace of the Peacock* and which he pursued throughout his writing career is a cathartic reimagining of colonial narratives, among them Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Emphyre of Guiana* (1595) and Richard Schomburgk's *Reisen in Britisch-Guiana in den Jahren 1840-1844*. Returning to Benjamin's terminology, one could say that Harris's work represents an awakening from and analysis of the nightmare of Europe's colonization of the Americas. For Harris, this dream work has to happen at the level of literary language and not, as in the case of Rodney, historical analysis and political activism. In his essay "Resistances to Alterities", Harris observes: "No deep, philosophical, and rhythmic changes occurred in the language of the Imagination in Europe as it came into play around the globe" (2004, 5).

In the same essay, Harris praises the literary achievement of Dante but criticizes Dante's art for remaining trapped within the worldview of Medieval Christianity. Harris focuses in particular on the figure of Virgil, who in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory but is barred from entering Heaven because he died in the pre-Christian era, i.e. a heathen. Harris reinvents the figure of Virgil in his novel *Carnival*, where the Roman poet appears in the guise of Everyman Masters in a 20th-century setting, "wear[ing] the masks of Christian and pre-Christian heritages" (2004, 4).

The perpetuation of what Harris calls the "hardening principles of exclusivity" accompanying the European conquest of the globe during the age of empire led—in Harris's thinking—to the division of people and the polarization of thinking. For Harris, the arts of Europe reflect this political and philosophical reality, and the example to which he returns time and again and takes issue with is the plot-driven realist novel. Harris is not alone in pointing out that literary genres exported to the colonies were largely imitated there and seldom questioned. Harris's own radical revision of the novel form is intimately linked to his ideas of political change.

The numinous power of art, so effectively articulated in his writing, affects us as readers in a similar way to how Benjamin observed the power of true art: "In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition" (2002, N9a, 7). In other words, the aim of art is to shift the way we imagine the world we live in. In fact, true political change will follow naturally out of what Harris calls "literacy" of the imagination (1999, 75). The potential of

the creative arts to facilitate such literacies of the imagination is the real political challenge in our contemporary world.

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