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John Thieme

The Legacy of Conquest: In Conversation with Sir Wilson Harris

John Thieme Wilson Harris, some readers of your work find it extremely difficult. What would you say to this kind of reader? How would you defend yourself against this charge of unnecessary hermeticism?

Wilson Harris I think the issues which one is engaged in are issues that have to do with a change that I feel is occurring in imaginative fiction and in part I think this relates to the fact that in the Caribbean, for example, and in the South Americas, one is aware of a peculiar kind of void and that void has been created I think by the fact of conquest, which has been exercised for centuries and therefore many cultures have disappeared, have vanished. The problem that arises in this context is basically the sensation one has that though these cultures went underground, they are still alive and their reappearance seems to me essential if one is genuinely to come into some ground of authority, which would make freedom a reality. Now I don't think that freedom is a reality in many areas of the world. I think that something has gone very wrong. One sees the rise of authoritarian states, one is aware of rigged elections, one is aware of many activities in politics which would appear to me to be an extension of conquest – a group comes to power and asserts itself absolutely and wishes to remain in power absolutely.

The issue for the imaginative writer is a complex one, because with the rise of these cultures from the past, it seems to me that an alteration is occurring in our institutions and in our narrative preconceptions. Institutions which seemed absolutely sovereign before can no longer be conceived of as sovereign – one has to see them as partial. When I say partial, I mean that one has to realise that there are certain biases planted in institutions and also that those institutions are part of a greater whole. That greater whole, that greater wholeness, it seems to me will never structuralise itself absolutely. It will always remain in some degree beyond our grasp. I would define it as a sort of unnamable centre or unfathomable wholeness. Nevertheless it is a reality and once one is aware of it as a reality, it seems to me that images and institutions which one would tend to seize upon as an absolute become partial signatures, in that they point to this wholeness, but at the same time they confess to their partiality. In confessing to their partiality, it seems to me the opportunity exists for a deep-seated dialogue between areas of experience which may appear at first sight to be incompatible or to be so polarised from each other they can never enter into any kind of relationship and thus can seem to have no alternative but to fight each other. One is drawn into conflict between these polarised arras, each polarised area assuming itself to be absolutely sovereign and therefore relinquishing nothing, as it were, in favour of the other part.

Now what it seems to me arises here in the case of imaginative fiction – as soon as you sense the images are partial and institutions are partial, you can no longer take them for

granted in the way one may take them for granted in a comedy of manners novel, because what one senses is that behind the brilliant and sophisticated façade of refinement, which let us say a novelist like Jane Austen does so remarkably well within her context – you have the sense that all sorts of behavioural patterns are analysed, are refined, are looked at – but behind that façade there exists a conviction of sovereign structure and this comes out of the fact that she was writing in a society in which there were largely settled values, shared values if you like. There was a middle class, a working class, an upper middle class and so forth and these all had functions and purposes and one could sense a degree of tolerance within that framework, so that it was possible to take certain things for granted and to work within a body of value that most people accepted as homogeneous. Whereas, to return to what I was saying earlier, in the sort of heterogeneous world from which I came, it isn't possible I think to write that kind of novel. I mean, that kind of novel is important, it is very important within a certain perspective of values. But in the sort of situation in which one finds oneself, it seems to me that one can no longer take for granted the notion of an absoluter sovereign structure which lies behind the comedy of manners position. Rather we have to begin to conceive of something which I would tend to describe as *comedy of psyche* and by that I mean that when one begins to look at character, one is drawn to a much deeper ground of experience, which would lie in certain kinds of myth perhaps, which would lie in the sensation one has that because images are partial, they have roots which one ceaselessly explores in order to find connections with other partial images that cannot be taken for granted. The paradox which exists in the partial image is that it has to lend itself time and time again to a deep-seated dialogue with other parts of the world that are apparently incompatible areas, but which are not necessarily as incompatible as they seem. The possibility exists that we could discover a changed capacity for community, precisely because community no longer invests in absolutes in the way that it may invest in absolutes if it is conditioned by comedy of manners, where you have a certain code of reason that operates and you analyse behaviour in terms of what is reasonable, what is apparently just. Whereas in comedy of psyche you have to pay much closer attention to all sorts of irrational features which lie under the ground of experience. One has to assume that reason, for example, has its roots in layers of irrationality and unless reason accepts this, it cannot purge itself of hubris, it cannot purge itself of the desire to conquer others, because reason would normally assume such and such an institution is the right institution – it is invested with reason. Since it is invested with reason what appears to be outside of the realm of reason has to be overcome, has to be pushed under, has to be conquered.

The tasks which an imaginative writer faces, who is aware that codes of reason are rooted in irrationality in the way one is torn between the demon and the divine, in the way one is torn between the animal inheritances as well as the mutations which have occurred, which have made us what we are, which have made us psychical – all those areas which lie much deeper than reason are the soil of reason. It is in this sense that an imaginative fiction may have to move into exploring elements that it would not normally explore, if it felt the safety of an order that was absolute.

JT You began by suggesting that this kind of freedom is initially something deeply rooted in the Caribbean and Latin American psyche, but from what you've said subsequently, I begin to wonder if you wouldn't feel that it's equally important for creative writers generally, whatever tradition they come from. Do you feel that that is the case?

WH Tradition obviously varies from culture to culture. I find at the moment that there is a tendency for most cultures to shut themselves off from other cultures, particularly in the sort of world in which we live, in which so many dangerous elements exist. In spite of the fact that we're supposed to live in a world which we can encircle in thirty-six hours perhaps by plane and in spite of the fact that one has communications on a massive scale – radio, television, newspapers – in spite of this, it seems to me that cultures today are very polarised. What one sees between the superpowers illustrates what is happening on a smaller ground, as it were, between cultures. For this reason it may be necessary to redefine what one means by tradition and this is a difficult task. I would think that tradition means the search for cross-cultural connections. By cross-cultural connections I'm suggesting that you do have in an imaginative fiction what one could call the ego – by ego I mean that area of imagination that is conditioned by history, by historical considerations, by *immediate* realistic considerations of self-interests and so on and so forth – and self-preservation. But there is also that deeper, stranger side which one could call the intuitive self, I think and in the intuitive self there is a kind of concentration that seems to come up from very deep-seated memories – I am not sure that the word is memories, but very deep-seated elements of experience that would seem to relate to the fact that existing within oneself are so many non-selves that are strangely alive nevertheless, which act on us through our dreams and through all sorts of peculiar sensations which we have. Now that intuitive self, I would think, can break the shell of the ego and when that happens fiction is rich with resources that relate to other cultures.

To trace that relationship means that the critic as distinct from the imaginative writer has a task to do which depends on his kind of scholarship which may have to move from the strict literary traditions. He may have to have an awareness, for example, of what occurs in areas of painting, or sculpture, or areas of folk practice and so on and so forth and make connections from the novel with other areas of creative activity, so that one senses that the novel is not as isolated as it appears to be within the strict framework to which it apparently belongs. Now this applies also between writers, between novelists. One could find connections between a black American novelist and a particular kind of European novelist, though on the face of it you would think there is absolutely no ground that they hold in common. But the ground they hold in common lies in this deep-seated aspect of the intuitive self, in which one is tapping roots that reveal a certain kind of universality, but it a universality that is complex and cannot be taken for granted. Unfortunately, in the sort of world in which we live this is not easy, because the tendency at the moment is for cultures to continue to divide themselves from each other and to feel so endangered in the face of the world that quite naturally they concentrate on their own patch as it were.

JT Perhaps we could move on to discuss particular aspects of your work. Your early volume of poems, *Eternity to Season*, has been recently republished by New Beacon Books and it's been republished in a rather interesting form – it comes in the form of a revised edition to which the original text is added as an appendix. Does this represent some kind of compromise between yourself and John La Rose, the publisher?

WH John La Rose very much wanted to keep the original text, because he felt that there were readers who were very interested in having the original text, but it was important to revise these poems. When I accepted his offer to have them republished, I felt that it was necessary to revise them. Therefore, in a sense, it is a certain kind of compromise. Looking at it now, I think perhaps it is useful to have it in that way. The poems could have appeared revised as they have been without the early text.

I find that everything I wrote before *Palace of the Peacock*, which comes out of three novels in a sense which were written before – when I say comes out of, I mean that over that period of writing, one suddenly came into a position where the style of *Palace*, the style in which it was written, became true and authentic and that was a crucial phase in imaginative writing as far as I'm concerned, because it meant that a certain kind of threshold had been arrived at, which would lead into the novels that came after – everything that was written before that seemed to me in need of revision and the *Eternity to Season* poems, when I was invited to have them republished, I felt that they needed subtle and careful revision, because they came before that crucial moment that had to do with the writing of *Palace*. But as I say, John La Rose's interest had been in the original edition as it had been printed in 1954.

JT You mentioned *Palace of the Peacock* as the first of your works with which you now feel fully satisfied. Along with two other parts of *The Guyana Quartet*, this has been republished, but the second volume of the *Quartet*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, has not been republished. Is this by design, or by intention, or does it represent the fact that critics initially gave a less favourable response to this particular part of the *Quartet*?

WH Yes, critics did give a less favourable response to *Oudin*. Within the past few years there has been a new interest in *Oudin*, from letters I receive, articles that are written on it. But at the outset it was a novel that moved much more slowly. Critics attacked it and I think it tended to fall by the wayside, or to sink away. I think there's a misunderstanding about this novel. I was speaking a little earlier about comedy of psyche and the curious thing about *Oudin* is that the comedy of psyche lies in the magical corpse of Oudin. Now this magical corpse myth is a notion which goes back to pre-Columbian times. The magical corpse is the – sort of – hero figure, who falls from the broken bridge. The broken bridge arches – the bridge in fact is a sort of penis – it's a phallic bridge that is supposed to arch from one bank of experience to the other. Then the bridge breaks. The hero may cling to one end of the bridge and become a spectator. He looks at the stream of life. He never immerses himself in it. His lucidity is drawn from his spectatorial powers, the distance that he establishes between himself and the stream, whereas the hero who falls into the stream is immersed once

more in the fabric of creation which has its contradictions and irrationalities. When that figure is pulled out of the stream onto the bank of the river, it seems to be a magical corpse in the sense that it seems to have died, but it also appears to be subtly alive and I often wonder if a myth like that goes right back to some apprehension of the origins of life, when life was so subtle that no one would have guessed it existed at all. These space explorers who go out to detect life on Venus or Mars – extremely difficult. Life may be there, but so subtle that in fact you can't see it. And the magical corpse has this notion.

Oudin dies at the outset of the novel, but the magical side, the magical corpse, suggests that there is a voice of life in it which rebukes Ram, the moneylender, and from that moment the whole novel begins to unravel itself, because one goes back over the thirteen years of his marriage, one retraces one's steps over the ground which these men have followed when they murdered their half-brother. All these figures lend themselves to a peculiar reinterpretation in the light of the magical corpse, because one begins to discover that all these figures are in fact part of a much deeper and stranger wholeness that they had, in a sense, violated in some degree. They had also stultified that wholeness in some degree and they all thought themselves sovereign figures. Ram thought himself the sovereign moneylender, Mohammed thought himself the sovereign ruler of his particular clan or tribe and suddenly – for that very reason – they had violated the ground of the family. Ram violated the whole language which he ruled by fear of money, if you like. But in the light of the magical corpse the whole thing unravels itself and one begins to see that even these men who seem evil begin to reveal that their evil lies not simply in themselves as members of a particular tribe, but in the way in which they became obsessed by conquest, because conquest is the greatest evil I would think, in the way they became obsessed by the conquest of others. When that shell breaks a little, one discovers that the capacity exists for regeneration. It's a difficult regeneration; it's a complex regeneration. But it's a regeneration which has to be traced by looking closely at some kind of essential mystery, which resides in that place. For example, if one takes the figure of Kaiser: Kaiser burns up in the shop – you may remember that. There is a black Kaiser, the schoolteacher, who lives on a hill and in fact Oudin and Beti go to this hill and they meet the black Kaiser there – you may remember that. Well, the black Kaiser resembles the man who was burnt up in the shop. That resemblance is presented in order to suggest that there is some kind of essential psychical mystery, which resides in these characters and is transferred from character to character, from appearance to appearance. At one level that essential mystery seems to have an element of plague in it, of fire, of catastrophe. But by relating these figures together, you sense that they are simply garments worn by their psychical body that seems to have in it – one side of it seems to be scarred or burnt – but the other side has in it a scope for regenerative vision, as it looks back over the pathways that have been taken, as it looks back over a whole episode in the historical imagination and begins to sense that the episode is not as absolute as it appeared. As it looks back over that episode, you have a sense therefore of something being released, of something coming out, of some visionary faculty coming out that helps us to review what has happened and to see it quite differently. In other words even one's remorse is a creation of a certain vision of conscience and therefore a certain vision of community and thus you get

these strange resemblances charted through *The Far Journey of Oudin*, in which on one side of the picture you're aware of something that is corrupt and horrible and dead and on the other side you're aware of a flickering element of light that seems to be coming up out of the magical corpse and that flickering element of light transfers itself to other generations that are to come later and who pick up this burden and are not consumed by it, precisely because this light impulse runs through them beyond their own station in existence and illuminates the future. So there is a real future; there is a real capacity for change.

Oudin charts that kind of thing in a totally different way from how one sees it in, say, *Palace of the Peacock* or one is to see it again in *The Whole Armour* or *The Secret Ladder*. I mean, because one is dealing with a different area of the Guyanas, the coastland area which seems in a sense so flat that you would tend to think nothing could happen there which could have any kind of eminence, that there would be no position on which you could stand which would help you to look much deeper than the terrain, or to look across the terrain and thus the whole style, the faculty of life has to secrete itself and run quite differently from how it runs in *Palace*, where the landscape is different, the theatre, as it were of emotions, of the psyche is different.

JT I'm sure that will represent very helpful clarification for readers who have had difficulty with the novel.

In all your novels, there's a highly original use of language and in particular of imagery and also I think it's fair to say that you expect your reader to become involved in a way that the reader of the traditional novel (what you have elsewhere called 'the novel of persuasion') generally isn't. So, in a sense, your novels are written in terms of a new syntax of the genre. Would you agree with this and, if so, would you care to expand on it?

WH May I say something in this context about metaphor? It does seem to me that metaphor is an area of experience which is coming more and more into focus and this resides I think in the sensation one has – in fact, I would say in the fact that one lives in an asymmetrical cosmos, not a symmetrical cosmos. For that reason, the sensation of metaphor is becoming more and more far-reaching and strangely pertinent. If one may give a swift example: I recall something that happened. I was in a room with a small child and the sun was coming through the window. There was a vase of roses in the middle of the room. The sun struck one rose which was illumined. The child said, 'The sun is a rose' – marvellous spontaneity – I found it quite enchanting. The curious thing about this is that one knows that children are aware of metaphor. They are aware of metaphor, because they come to language through images, through their early experience with the things they see, the things they feel. And one finds this, of course, very much at the heart of savage cultures, that in fact – in savage cultures the beginning does not lie in the Word, as in St. John's Gospel. The beginning lies in the image, in the gesture, in the hieroglyphic painting, in the sculpture, in the mask and, when one comes to metaphor, one has the sense that language may have its roots in the way images broke their moorings to come into psychical consciousness and metaphor is at the heart of this mutation, because this mutation would seem to be an infinite development or

progression, an infinite descent into the world. When one says, for example, the sun is a rose, one is involved, I would suggest, in an unnamable centre of light that exists between the sun and the rose, so that in fact one looks through the sun into that unnamable centre of light and it is as if the sun is a reflection of that light and the rose is also a reflection of that light, as if the rose carries facets of that light and the sun carries facets of that light. What is that light? I mean, one knows of the ancient view, the light that never was on land or sea, the light that never was and yet the light that one is aware of as existing and that is what I mean by the unnamable centre, the unfathomable centre. And therefore the sun becomes an aspect of this and the rose becomes an aspect of this and why in fact this metaphor is revitalised, I would suggest, is because there is no model, there is no symmetrical model that could give us a complete version of the cosmos in which we live. We have all sort of clues and these clues will assemble themselves at times into a satisfactory model, but one has to sense all the time that that model is an approximation and that in some sense one is looking through that model into something that defines it, but which cannot be structuralised. The thing that defines it, which I call the unnamable centre, cannot itself be absolutely structuralised and one approaches it through the various images, the rose and the sun and so on.

The peculiarity of this is that it seems to me to suggest that one lives in a world where change is real. There's a tendency in us to think that the ground of reality is changeless. The ground of reality in an absolutely ultimate sense may be changeless, but it remains for us something which is unnamable, something which cannot be structured and therefore as we move into it through various facets, through various images, as we move into it, we are drawn to sense a capacity for change, real change, change that carries in it an element of pain, of catastrophe, because it is not always easy to move from a safe position into something that may have an element of precariousness in it. And yet, if we do not make that move, the chances are that the safe position which we idolise secretes a catastrophe in it which will erupt, whether we like it or not, and will erupt in such a way that it may very well suffocate us or overwhelm us. On the other hand, if we can enter into a dialogue with that capacity before it erupts, it means that that catastrophe becomes the ground of urgency that moves us to sense the possibilities of change and therefore to enter into a creative capacity that has to do with change, to endure in some sense the pain, but it makes that pain significant and violable, because it helps us into another area, which will possess its own ecstasy and its own values and its beauty. But this is a ceaseless area in which we are involved. There may be times when we can rest on what we have achieved, but we rest on this knowing in fact that it could never sum up all that we would like it to sum up.

Now this brings us back to the position of metaphor. If one lived in a symmetrical cosmos, it is possible to conceive of a model which indeed would be final and then one could say, well, one has achieved all that could be achieved, but since one lives in an asymmetrical cosmos, there is no possibility of escaping from the consequences of change, whether those consequences erupt in a disastrous form or whether we are able to enter into them creatively and to make them into visionary issues that take us through into other areas of comprehension that allow us to deal with the crises and difficulties of the age in which we live, because we live still very close to the scene of conquest, when it was felt that it was possible to make

an invincible resolution of the dangers that confronted a society, a society strong enough to deal with elements that seemed antagonistic. Now when one senses that in the world of science we are aware of this asymmetrical cosmos, this helps us to feel that metaphor is not an ornament, it is not a conceit. Built into it is a sensation that all images witness to a reality that is ceaselessly deeper than the very moorings from which they originally sprang.

JT In your more recent novels, such as *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, the pictorial plays an important part. Is this because you want to suggest that experience is a matter of *seeing* and that one can see the same object in radically different ways, different ways which might well be related to the use of metaphor which you've just been speaking of?

WH Yes, well this is a fine illustration of something which it seems to me is important to see. The life of images and the way they mutate is at stake in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, because Da Silva is a painter and each painting is – reveals itself – I mean I'm simplifying for purposes of our discussion – but each painting reveals itself as a lamp which appears to be devoid, which – let me restate that – each painting corresponds with a lamp which carries its hidden genie. There comes a moment when he rubs the painting and the genie of light springs out. So that years could pass before that kind of light springs out. This works in the novel to suggest that the surfaces of our experience are surfaces which are important in that one recognises them as partial. When I say partial here, I mean that in the sort of progression that Da Silva makes through his paintings, he is aware of various signals that affected his life, which were not apparent to him in the moment when they shone. He did not see them, even though they did shine. There comes a moment, however, when he is able to go back over the ground that he has traversed and, as it were, to touch that particular surface of experience in the right place and that light comes up again. He's suddenly aware of the fact that that light was there. It comes up again. There is a light – all sorts of resources of light that exist in a work of the imagination and those resources may not always make themselves apparent. Some time may pass before, in fact, those resources come up again like the genie in the light. So the paintings that Da Silva enters into are ways of suggesting to us that the language we use is never perfectly transparent, but the language can carry within it layers of illumination that mutate and come to the surface and that means that a work of the imagination has a strange life which goes far deeper than the historical decade or framework in which it is set. That's an aspect of it.

The other aspect of these paintings, of course, is that Da Silva is both a spectator and a participant, because he *lives* in his paintings. As he moves in the street, it is a painted street. As he moves in the various areas of his house, he is moving into paintings. Thus what one is suggesting is that there is a degree of blindness in his activities, as in fact occurs in all activity. As one moves on the street, there are many things one does not see, so that the place you move over for ten or twenty years always has some new element in it, something you did not see and it is as if the painting is coming alive in the depths of itself, is coming up. Resources which lie there, which have always lain there are now visualised differently from how you visualised them ten years ago and therefore Da Silva's constantly moving in his

paintings. The entire world in which he lives is a world he paints. Thus he confesses in part to his blindness. He confesses also to a potential illumination that will come up at some stage and in that way one senses that the life of metaphor resides not in an original word, but in an original gesture or painting, an original sensation to do with light on darkness. It is from sources like that that our language has become what it has become. If we fail to understand it, we are going to fall into the trap of breaking our communication into two parts. In one part we will pretend to have a transparent medium of the world, which is a deception. In the other part we are going to fall back more and more on visual images – in magazines, in newspapers, on television; we are going to become subject to the gorgon's head, as it defines itself in television. We see this with children today – they read less. At some degree one has to face this complex challenge of asking ourselves what are the roots of the word. The roots of the word lie in the way images have mutated into language, so that images have a life of their own apart from the coherency of the narrative, which is largely the sort of – Cartesian coherency ('I think, therefore I am'). That is a kind of conceit which resides in the word as absolute, as if the word is absolutely symmetrical, whereas the word has pulled up its life from very dark areas of experience. Unless we confess to that and understand it, it means that language become more and more obsolescent. Even when it seems to be lucid, it becomes simply a tool that journalists use to inspect the world around them, without necessarily looking into the cultures they inspect, without necessarily immersing themselves in the deep-seated dangers as well as potentialities and it is in this sense that the *Da Silva da Silva* novel is written, and its sequel, *The Tree of the Sun*.

JT Alchemical symbolism figures prominently in your work. Do you see your role as a writer as being related to that of the medieval alchemist?

WH Well, alchemy has always seemed to me an enormous tradition. If I may give a quick example from *Palace of the Peacock*, to show how it functions. There is the figure of Vigilance. Vigilance is someone who is very conscious that the crew as it pursues the folk are hunters and the folk are the hunted. As they pursue the folk, there comes a moment when Vigilance is aware that the whole ship of the cosmos has altered and that the crew itself is being hunted, by space, by arrows that seem to come out of the battlements of the cosmos and when he senses this he identifies himself with a wounded animal, a wounded tapir. He identifies himself, because he sees this – it's a sort of dawn, a sort of light, the dawning light which in alchemy is called the *albedo*. He suddenly has an awareness of this. It changes the whole sensation of himself, because he's no longer committed to the hunt in that way, as he was before, and he has a sensation that in seeing this he participates in the hunted creature, even as he looks at the hunted creature, and therefore it is as if the disaster of the hunt is not final. There is an opening, a crack, which brings him out into a new arena, in which he has some conversation with the very animals he hunts and the very folk who seem to fly before him, alien as they are. Now with the other members of the crew, that knowledge does not exist in that form. You may remember that immediately after this episode with Vigilance, you see the members of the crew in the stream and they're fighting each other. They're tormented

by a sensation of danger – one man, I think, kills the other – they're tormented by all sorts of peculiar elements of darkness if you like. In other ways, they are hunted too, but they do not have the same *albedo* perception of it, so they dramatise it and that is the *nigredo*. The *nigredo* means that one has entered a terrain which one is exploring, but one is blind to the implications of the exploration and what occurs in that stage in the life of a culture is that the culture dramatises its torments. It does not see deeply enough to understand and comprehend what is at stake. It dramatises it as if it is a dark action, as if they're all masked from each other, so they don't see each other. Nevertheless they are encountering each other. Now this is a dangerous time, but it is also a time that may be necessary in the life of a culture, because that dramatisation is one way of expressing the kinds of dangers, the kinds of necessities which that culture has to cope with, the kinds of exploration it has to cope with. The other level of it, of course, is the Vigilance level, where he sees it so deeply that he doesn't need to dramatise it. It becomes a fantastic perception in depth, so he knows what is at stake, as it were, very deeply and his kind of vision is not simply a spectatorial vision. It is a vision in which what is happening in the stream where these people are dramatising this thing, you see, mutates and comes up to him, as if he is in the stream too. So he's learning from them, but he has a perception which is like the rising sun – this is the *albedo* phase, the dawning light. So there you have the two: the *nigredo*, where you dramatise the thing without the members participating in the drama seeing what they're doing – it's like people acting in a play without understanding what the play is all about, but they're still acting out the parts, whereas there's another figure who's in the play, but also seems a little bit outside of the play and he sees the deep, fantastic meaning of the play – and there you have your *nigredo* and *albedo*. Now when it comes to the *cauda pavonis*, which is the stage of the colours of the peacock, one is involved there in the riddle of perfection in the sense that this is supposed to be perfection, but one can never grasp it entirely. So there's a tendency for the *cauda pavonis* to come back into the *nigredo*, as if you have a continuous circuit of imaginative elements and therefore when you leave the *cauda pavonis*, you go back into the *nigredo*, you come back into the *albedo*. Each time the dramatisation may be deeper and stranger, the illumination – the Vigilance illumination – also alters slightly and becomes deeper and stranger, the *cauda pavonis* element could be enriched, as it goes by. Now in the novel, of course, the *cauda pavonis* element comes up, I think, in the tree of flesh and blood that swirls with the eyes of the peacock when the sun is shattered and seems to recreate itself in the eyes of the peacock, in the stars, on the various leaves – the whole tree that swirls.

So one has those elements: the *nigredo* element, which is the dramatisation, in which the players do not seem to know – the one man looks up and says 'those are parrots'; the other man looks up and says 'no, they're vultures' and so on; and the Vigilance eye which sees; and the *cauda pavonis*. That circuit of the imagination is a deepening circuit, as well as a circuit that heightens itself and relates to other cultures as well.

JT Currently there have been some dramatic political changes in the Caribbean – I'm thinking of Grenada and Dominica and even in Guyana it looks as if the status quo isn't as invulnerable as it seemed to be a year or two ago. Would you care to make any comment on these developments?

WH The comment I would make here is that I think the Caribbean is very much in the *nigredo* phase. A dramatisation is occurring – of the disasters, the crises. It is all being dramatised. I don't believe that there is a perception as yet, in the community as a whole, which one could see as the *albedo* phase. I think obviously this is present in potential form, because once the *nigredo* phase exists, the *albedo* phase is potentially there. But in the Caribbean at the moment, the struggles, the whole scene – the Grenada scene, the Dominica scene, what is happening in Guyana, what is happening at another level in Trinidad, Jamaica and so on – one senses a ferment. It's like the ferment of a play, in which the players do not know what the play means. Nevertheless the rich potential is there and I think this is why Caribbean art needs to enter into its complexities. There is the danger that they may subscribe to various newspaper versions which attempt to chronicle their view of the conflict and those may be useful in some degree, but the issues are so much deeper, because when one looks at the Caribbean, looks at the South Americas, one must be aware that there are cultures that have existed in the soil, which have their origins in a mutation of images and that in fact the importance of imaginative fiction in this context is that it has to offer us the sensation of participating in the word at a depth which would allow us to sense these dimensions of ferment without bypassing the complexities and dangers that exist. In other words there's no short cut for territories like that – in my judgement.

JT One final question. I believe you're currently working on a critical study. Would you care to give us a foretaste of what it's about?

WH The critical study – what I'm attempting to do is to take certain examples which are drawn from novels in America and in the Commonwealth and, in one or two instances, in Europe as well and to sense cross-cultural connections between them. That is one phase of it.

And also to sense a cross-culture between imaginative literature and various areas of experience which are non-verbal, to sense how these are working on each other to give us an illumination of relationships that can enrich one's grasp of certain novels, which we may tend to pigeonhole in the wrong way, and certain areas of the imagination, whether folk imagination or non-verbal, which we may also tend to pigeonhole in the wrong way. Tradition secretes a mystery of wholeness that wears many *partial* investitures and masks we tend to consolidate into monoliths.

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