

# WILSON HARRIS

## Theatre of the Arts

*Before I start I'd like to say that "braids" is a term which seems to me to be crying out for cross-culturality—not multiculturalism but cross-culturality, which is quite different from multiculturalism. It cries out in an urgent way and it also cries out urgently for us to begin to approach art and fiction differently from how we have been conditioned to*



Technical brilliance is at the core of realism. Realism, I would say, has undoubtedly been the fruit of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European novel-form which has influenced the twentieth-century theatre of the arts. But such realism—however sophisticated or satiric or comic—led the rulers of civilization, unintentionally perhaps, into an “obliviousness” of the many diverse peoples under the umbrella of empire. This may seem surprising. The British empire was one, it was said, on which the sun never set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Perhaps it was a trend or habit that ran from the “sleep” of conquest of the Americas making one people regard itself as absolutely superior to others who pursued different faiths. The art of empire, in the novel-form of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, displayed all-white characters from all-white families and ignored all other peoples, diverse and peculiar, under the imperial umbrella. Ruler and ruled never gained the mutual insight of creative and re-creative responsibility. The ruled were bracketed, as though they did not exist, upon the passivity of stages marked by the military crossings of the ruler.

There were a few American novelists of the nineteenth century such as, for instance, Herman Melville, whose black and white and brown characters (all playing major roles in his fiction) offered pregnant silences and room for speculation as to what lay beneath those silences. In a sense the absolute domain of the ruling novel which Melville inherited, was implicitly broken through such an array of speaking silences. *Benito Cereno* closes as follows:

Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voicele-12. 2 17.6(-1n8113(r)-4.2(ok)-16.-24....2 T)k8113(r)-213(r)-213( -0.002i(r)-213(

And this brings me to the question: what does one mean by the life of the earth? I am not speaking of a *description* of hills or valleys or plains or rivers that are *fixed* or *insentient* features.

In *Tumatumari*, a novel of mine published in 1968, we come upon a portrayal of *moving*

sensitively woven into the characters that move upon it, whose history, may I say, reflects a profound relationship to the earth, so that we may speak of a humanity whose feet are made of mud or land or water or any other element to attune us to our being on an earth that moves as we move upon it. This is the mystery of fiction if not of science. You may remember epic figures with one eye in the middle of their forehead and with feet of oats.

TUMATUMARI is an Amerindian word, somewhat anglicized, I would say, which means “sleeping rocks.” In the novel I sought to bring the “sleep” of a traumatised people, traumatised by conquest, into league with sculptures that have sprung from the earth—  
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Let me return to *Tumatumari*.

Roi Solman dies in the Tumatumari waterfall. His wife Prudence sees him in a Dream descending into the waterfall and hunting the “wild boar of the rapids.” The hunt which is normally pursued on land changes subtly and complexly in her Dream of the waterfall.

It is vitally important, it seems to me, to engage with this in the trials of the imagination that the novel discloses, however testing, however difficult, and *not* to divide one's attention by fastening on *pure* philosophical concepts: Philosophy is very important but it needs to blend with the images in a work of art so genuinely, perhaps complexly, that we free ourselves from absolute restrictions in pursuing the partial nature of each image in its correspondences with other partial images.

Reason, as advanced by apparently sophisticated thinkers, leads to exercises that ignore the language of art in fiction. Such ignoring, such ignorance, reduces or measures flesh-and-blood as a *block* and this inevitably, if unwittingly, leads to agencies of conquest. There are reasons beyond reasons, depths beyond surfaces. Such depths, such humilities, beyond a fixed or sovereign restriction, are the mystery of art, the true mystery of fiction.

Let me return now to the question I asked earlier on "the waters of life."

What are "the waters of life" which are gained from a wholly new approach to fiction and art as these may encompass inexplicable truth in mu

The multifarious life of the earth, therefore, teaches us to pay the closest care and attention to variations and movements on the stage on which we live: and not to invest absolutely or fixedly on such a stage.

We are told of parallel universes by scientific speculations, parallel universes of which we know nothing except perhaps that there is a Wound—akin to the Wound of being and non-being we carry in ourselves—that may take us into the spirit of timelessness. A supreme paradox. We move through a *Wound* into *timelessness*.

Quantum “particle” and “wave” —in their apparent illogicality—may help us to sense a living spark reaching darkly and brightly perhaps from a true Creator. It reaches through the demiurgic and conquistadorial field with which we have to wrestle for precarious freedoms in the midst of implacable fates.

It is but a spark, a spark capable of multiple illuminations that take us into diverse potentials, diverse dangers, diverse hopes in cross-cultural ages.

It is but a spark but it offers us an intensity of creative and re-creative imaginative and intuitive scope.

Without that “spark” what do we have but biased games or functions of uniform art and a clinging to science for masks to conceal our failures and our mortality?

*Gnosis* therefore (within the intuitions I have inserted in this talk—that there is no fortress locality to knowledge, that there is a complex window or infirmity within the strongest minds, the strongest imaginations) brings us to “the waters of life” as imbued by the spark of a true creation, a spark which assists us in contending with the demiurgic politics of

I do not say this absolutely but as a Jest, a serious Jest, however, which permits us a glimpse of chasms between knowledge and ignorance we dream to cross.

Let me quote briefly from *The Dark Jester*, my most recent novel, to sustain a grasp, as it were, of the measureless spark that makes us, in fiction, *living works of art* in the ground on which we move and which moves with us.

This is the City of Cities, El Dorado. I bring to it the ruins of the past, the memories of places I know as mine but which are taken by Europe and Spain. El Dorado is the Troy of the Americas.

I walk in shoes of mist, I wear rock and water. Rock melts, water becomes a solidity or a desert. My bone and my garments fuse in world theatre.

'El Dorado is gold. I am a man of gold in a place of gold. This is the distinctive legend of flesh and gold.' I cry the words boldly but my misgivings rise into space. There is a rumble. The Earth shakes. Shakes to Cassandra who comes across time to tell us in multiple ways of the fate of cultures. It is the heavy tread of my pursuers. Or is it my own bodiless step? A pulse beats fast as a drum.



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*Guardian today and on page three there's an article about how BP are working with the state capitalist oil company in China for oil extraction in Tibet, which has some major cultural and environmental consequences for the people of Tibet. So I would say that we need to have a more historically specific sense of the mediation between nature and humanity. And when I say more historic*

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art, hunting the earth sculpture that is sentient, so that the waters of life come forth. The waters of life carry the social realities of which you speak.

But I quite see your point, because it is a point on which we have been so conditioned that people will fail to perceive the reality of what I am saying. I know in universities you may read of what Jung says in his *massa confusa* and things like that, but these things never blend into the images of art. They remain like pure philosophy, and people read the novel as the novel has been written for two hundred years, three hundred years. They continue to read the novel like that. They don't look for the blending of philosophy into the images of the work, and therefore they are still conditioned by a situation in which they read the novel in one way, they may read philosophy, and they may be able to tell you, philosophy, well yes, I know the life of the earth, it's not dead because of this... but that's pure philosophy, that has no bearing on the *image*. There are no trials of the imagination that allow this reality to emerge.

I sense that something *is* happening. I saw reviews of *The Dark Jester* in which I could see that they are now coming in some sense or other to understand what I am saying. The Cartesian has eclipsed Atahualpan form. What is Atahualpan form? Atahualpan form has to do with a different notion of being. That is the point I'm making. You see, you are taking the aesthetics and divorcing it from what I'm saying. I'm speaking of this aesthetics in collaboration with the earth, with everything. That is what I'm trying to do. That's what I've been doing for forty years.

**Paula Burnett** *One of the things that struck me in The Dark Jester was the way in which you do use that sense of the connectedness of all the different forms, not just the human form. You don't talk about an anthropomorphic universe, you are not interested in a man-centred world. On the other hand what you are also saying, and you say it very eloquently at one point in*



