

On Wilson Harris

[“*Wilson Harris and the Existentialist Doctrine*” is the text of a lecture delivered at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad in 1965, an occasion for which James was temporarily paroled from the house arrest to which he had been subjected by the Williams government. The introduction to Wilson Harris’s essay “*Tradition and the West Indian Novel*” was published in May 1965 by the London West Indian Students’ Union.]

Wilson Harris and the Existentialist Doctrine

I would be very much surprised if, except in a private home, there was a copy of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in the West Indies. Therefore you will understand why I will speak at greater length than usual on certain philosophical aspects of Harris’s work. I should warn you in advance that, as far as I am concerned, strict philosophy is as difficult and technical a business as marine engineering, or medicine. It is not a thing in which amateurs can fool around. Nevertheless, I make a certain response to Harris which is not unconnected with philosophy. May I say that everybody has a philosophical view of the world and of politics and of literature and everything else. He may not know it, he may militantly deny that he has, but he has one. Whether he knows it or not everybody has a certain philosophical view and those people I have found who very vigorously deny that they have any are precisely those who have one, but they have an uneasy feeling that it is not a very presentable one so they say, “I haven’t any, leave me out of that altogether.” (I don’t leave them out, I try to put them further in.)

So here is what I am going to do. I shall begin by giving you an idea of one of Harris’s novels *Palace of the Peacock*, the first one that he wrote. I shall then move straight into some aspects of the philosophy which I think has to be understood or appreciated in some degree or other in order really to understand what Harris is doing. Then I will go back to another novel of Harris. Finally I will take up with you some writing that Harris has been doing for the students in the West Indian hostel in London and which we have recently published. So that you can follow me easily, let me repeat: first of all, one of Harris’s novels, the first one, usually said to be the most difficult, *Palace of the Peacock*. Secondly, some philosophical ideas connected with Harris’s work in the way that I see it. I recommend to you to go into it; you can reject them, do whatever you like, but at least make yourself familiar and get some sort of view. Thirdly,

once more, a novel of Harris's. And finally a publication (of which I have here some proofs) that will be brought out very soon and may even now be already in circulation in Britain, something Harris has written recently—a lecture published in a small pamphlet which undoubtedly will be available here shortly.

The novel I am going to begin with is *Palace of the Peacock*. Harris wrote it about 1960 and you will have to pay very close attention to it in order to be able to get some idea of what he is doing. In *Palace of the Peacock* Harris begins on the first page by saying that somebody has seen a horseman, his elder brother. The horseman is dead. Now you have not gone very long before you find out that the man who is writing the novel is himself dead. Harris is taking you along a journey, made along a river of British Guiana where the rivers have a peculiar habit of going down suddenly—waterfalls or rapids. These men are engaged on this difficult journey, about six or eight of them, and they are all dead. The novel is a mystical reconstruction of the lives of each of them—Harris takes the reader carefully into the preliminary lives of each, how this one was living in Georgetown and how this one was a surveyor and that one was an engineer and that one a common boatman, etc., and takes each life up to the moment of death. Thus he gives you the preliminary life and then at the moment of death, at the moment when the man falls out of the raft or the canoe that they are travelling in, or the moment when somebody in the canoe stabs somebody else, this man who is dying has some conception of what he is trying to be and has a vision of where he is reaching and what he expects is going to happen to him. Harris does that with those six or eight characters. Their previous lives in ordinary existence, what is happening to them at the moment they are travelling in the canoe, their ideals and visions, which are quite individual to them, the moment of death, and at the moment of death, what they are looking for. There are one or two of them who are nearly dead, or really dead, I am not sure, but they see some kind of vision of the life they are going to live afterwards. All that within about 120 pages.

Now there is one thing you recognise at once. This is a very original, a very audacious novel, and, believe me, after some experience of the novel, I find that original and audacious novels are very rare. That is *Palace of the Peacock*. The Palace they are seeking is the Palace where they are going to achieve their life's ambition. But each has his own conception of happiness based on his past life, based on his racial associations, based on his vision of the world, based on the work that he is doing in getting the canoe down the river, and based on his relations with the people who are with him.

Now, I have frightened you sufficiently. I can fortify that discomfort by telling you that there are many people who say

that Harris is very difficult, including myself, some time ago. But the other day I met a young woman who told me: "You are always talking about Wilson Harris. I went to the library and got a book called *Palace of the Peacock*, but I read it through from start to finish without trouble. You had given me the impression he was difficult." Well, that shows I was wrong. I shouldn't have done it, but nevertheless, you are a university audience and any difficulties you can easily surmount, I am quite sure.

So that is *Palace of the Peacock*, that is Harris's novel. It has been compared by reviewers (and I am ashamed to say that I am going to have to use British reviewers about Harris in order to fortify the case I am making, but I will not do that during the talk, that will be done during question time and you will have to ask me for it)—it has been compared by British reviewers to *The Drunken Boat* by Rimbaud, which is one of the peaks of imaginative creation of a visionary world. That is what Harris does.

So now let us get down to it. Let me put on my glasses, so as to be able to see the looks of consternation on your faces. I believe Harris is to be seen as a writer of the postwar period who is in the full philosophical tradition and has carried to an extraordinary pitch the work of two German philosophers. There are others but we need only two—they are hard enough by themselves. One of them is Heidegger and the other is Jaspers, and I very much regret you have not got a Professor of Philosophy and Literature to pester as soon as you leave here, to tell you all about Heidegger, what he knows of Heidegger and Jaspers. I am glad to say I have found in this university somebody with whom I have had a conversation about Heidegger. He has not only a great knowledge of and interest in him but has had some personal connection with him. I tell you that because you ought to make it your business that he should speak to you and tell you what he knows. I am sure he will. People who are interested in Heidegger rejoice when they know that somebody wants to hear something about him.

Harris is not easy. That is why I want to speak of Heidegger, Jaspers (and Jean-Paul Sartre) and show you that it is in some consideration of those remarkable philosophers who have attracted so much philosophical attention after World War II, that Harris will be seen as being in the same stream.

Now Heidegger. I have read various translations of Heidegger, but the great book that matters is *Being and Time* and I say again that philosophy in a real sense is as difficult as marine engineering or medicine. That I know: but I read philosophical books, I have read them for many years, I am absolutely fascinated by Heidegger. And in my opinion *Being and Time* is one of the greatest philosophical works that I have ever read. Now all through Heidegger's great book (he published it in 1927) he is concerned about the everyday life, the life that is

lived by you and me and Heidegger himself. It is the life of "everydayness". He is a great man for making up words: "everydayness". He says that the lives which people live they live according to a certain "average", they do not know *exactly* this, or *exactly* that, but they have an everyday or average view.

He notes that most people read the same newspapers, they read the same books, they eat the same food, they listen to the same politicians, they live more or less a certain type of life. They may seem to communicate with one another but Heidegger says they don't. They use a special mode of communication, "idle talk". He says, about science, there are people who study anthropology and write anthropological books. He says they get a lot of facts and put them together but there is nothing to it. I accept that. I do not know anything about anthropology but he says the same about history. They put a lot of facts together—that is all, and Heidegger is not the only person saying so. Specialists in these various departments are today quite plain in their condemnation of the lack of some serious grasp of a subject, chiefly I would mention the sociologists. They are constantly asking, what is sociology? They do not know. Psychology. What is psychology? They do not know. All those books about Freud and Jung, etc. etc., Heidegger says that all the scientists do is to gather up a lot of facts, they go to the moon or they cross the Atlantic in one hour, but he says it is all just an accumulation of facts and of things that are happening. That is the general view of the world in which we live and everybody lives in that world.

Now, there is one word which I want you to remember about Heidegger and which you will have to grapple with. He says in that way I have sketched we live an "inauthentic" existence, but he says, there is another type of life which he calls "*dasein*". That is the only word you have to remember about Heidegger. *Dasein*; if you remember that, you remember everything. *Dasein*: that is the German word meaning "being there", and when the *dasein* begins to function, when a man is "being there" in the world of everydayness, of average behaviour, of idle talk, he begins to live an authentic existence. Before that his existence was inauthentic. With *dasein*, you begin to lead an authentic existence. Now, what are the distinctive forms of this authentic existence? I will mention a few words, a few terms, leave you with them and then go to Jaspers first and then go back to Wilson Harris.

One of the terms is "truth". Heidegger says that although Plato and Aristotle knew better, they set us on a path which has made us completely lose sight of what truth is. He says truth is in nobody's mind. You have to find out truth by being there, by living an authentic existence in this inauthentic world. Truth is covered over and the finding out of truth means you uncover what is there, but it can be uncovered not by philosophy, not by

knowledge of any kind, but by the fact of *dasein*. You are living there and seeking what you need for your life, for an authentic life, and so you uncover the truth. Otherwise truth remains covered over. He says the modern world has followed the Greeks and thus have seen truth as something in the mind. Aristotle's logic has resulted in modern science which as he says, is a wonderful example of the discovery of a multitude of individual, separate *beings*: this and that and that, Newton and all these scientific discoveries. But Being, the nature of existence as a whole, *that* they have ignored and that they have to get back to, and that is what he is concerned with: the nature of Being. And the *dasein*, the "being there", is an uncovering of the truth of Being that exists. Not beings but Being itself. Further he says mountains are, horses are, books are, but only man *exists* and the source of man's existence is not only the *dasein*. The means he uses to find what he is finding out, to live an authentic existence, is language, and I have seen that nowhere stated as sharply as Harris states it. Language. Language is not a tool; politics is a tool, painting is a tool, scientific procedures are tools of mankind, but language is not. In Heidegger's view man lives a human life because of language. Without that he would be, I do not know what he would be, but he would not be a human being, and critics say that Heidegger's analysis of language is profoundly important for the study and practice of language.

Heidegger goes on to give his conception of history; some translators (these translators have a wonderful time with Heidegger) say that what he says about history should be translated as historicity. Others say it should be called historicality. I say, "Gentlemen, go right ahead, I know what he means," but I accept historicity. I like the long words, they are more important and imposing. Historicity and Temporality. Both of them I take together. Now I want to explain Heidegger's view of that because that is exactly what Harris is doing in *Palace of the Peacock* and what he is doing all through his fiction. Heidegger says, you say, now, today, you say what is happening today? Ordinary time tells you that on 25 March James came here to lecture to you, or speak to you on Wilson Harris, and yesterday James was doing something and tomorrow he will be doing something else. Heidegger says that is ordinary time, an ordinary event, in ordinary time. He says man does not live that way. He says he has a time of his own which Heidegger calls temporality. Each man has his own conception of time. He says what is the now? All these philosophers of the now, and now, and now, history writers speak of this and then this and then this. He says: that is not how it goes at all. He says at any moment the now is the result of all that has happened before and your conception of it. He says also you are considering something which he calls the futural. He says you are aware that you are going to be dead. He says that is the only

thing nobody can do for you, you have to die for yourself. He says, we live between birth and death—a man at a certain stage is looking at a certain totality and he is aware that he is there and he has lived up to that time, and he knows this and that and the other but he is aware that he will ultimately be dead and sometime or other what he is doing is going to arrive at a certain conclusion. He isn't sure what it is, but an actual moment is always a sort of approximation between the antiquarian, the historical point of view and the futural point of view. There is no actual time or actual part of history which is to be taken away from the fact that man is living there in the stream of actual existence. Now I have found that profound and illuminating. At question time you may ask me about personal experience. A great deal of what I have seen in Heidegger is due to my own personal experience.

Heidegger also uses the concept of "dread". He says, man lives with the concept of care, is very concerned with what is likely to happen, but he has the basic concept of dread. Man is not afraid of anything in particular or of any person in particular, not at all. He says the mere fact that you are living, you are going to be dead and you do not know exactly what is going to happen to you, he says that makes in your existence the necessity of some kind of dread as to what is going to happen to you in the future. You don't know. He insists that you are not afraid of this or that or the other, or of this person, or that earthquake, or that subversive law or anything. He says you are just afraid, you have this concept of dread. Now, the authentic existence, this way of being there, these problems that you deal with, the finding out of truth as something hidden, the concept of dread and care, he says all these things are there and you can live an inauthentic existence but there can take place a transcendence from these ordinary things, a transcendence arising above them. He says everything that really matters to you in an authentic existence is a transcendence, and with your kind permission (and I hope your lively curiosity) there I leave you with Heidegger.

I have given you some conception of what I got out of him and apart from technical questions of philosophy, I repeat that I find it one of the most fascinating and illuminating books that I have ever read. I can't talk very much about it unless I have it here, you see, but I am very much aware of *dasein*, that I am in the world: when I am reading Heidegger, and after I have read him, and being there, and the things present to hand, and all those technical matters. There is somebody on the campus who would be able to tell you about that, it is up to you whether you want it or not.

Now, the other man I want to speak about is Jaspers. Both these old men are still alive and very lively. Jaspers also wrote his first book before World War II began. (All this to me is the

result of what happened to mankind in World War I. People became aware of the inauthentic nature of their existence, were aware of the permanent feeling of dread, of the uncertainty, of truth, and these philosophers wrote. It is my firm belief that a philosopher writes because he feels a special impact of the particular age in which he lives.)

Heidegger is, by the way, very careful and strong about that. He says, you study philosophy, you read Plato, you read Leibniz, you get a degree, you write a doctorate on philosophy, you understand Plato, you understand Aristotle, you understand the pre-Socratic Greeks etc., *only when you are yourself taking part in philosophy*. He says, otherwise, unless you are philosophising, fighting out an authentic way of philosophy, you are not only doing nothing but you cannot even understand the men you have been reading. He says you must philosophise i.e. take part philosophically in the problems of the day, otherwise you cannot even understand the great philosophers of the past. I believe he has in mind a certain famous professor, but what amuses me is a devastating paragraph he has about Ernest Cassirer (Cassirer is a very learned man who died the other day) and his American supporter Suzanne Langer. They say man is a maker of symbols (you know, some say man is a tool-making animal, others say God made him, other people say Darwin discovered the origin of species; they, at least Cassirer, discovered that man makes symbols). Heidegger says it is a lot of nonsense and for a long time I have thought the same. You can find out for yourself.

Now we must go over to Jaspers. Heidegger published in 1927; go to your Library and insist on their having *Being and Time*.

I can deal with Jaspers in two or three minutes. Jaspers, as far back as 1931, wrote one of his early philosophical books where he said that mankind found out what he was when he was living in a limit situation, in an extreme boundary situation. He says previously you live an ordinary life—it was not too different from the everyday existence that Heidegger talks about. He says that when you are in an extreme case, then you find out what man is, what he can do, what he is likely to do. The extreme boundary limit situation is the philosophy of Jaspers. Now Jaspers has been accused of being Christian, and that does not worry me at all. He can be what he likes. But he has made clear that man today is living in an extreme situation and it is when he is living in that extreme limit boundary situation that you find out what man really is and what he is likely to become.

Most of Harris's work, a great deal of it, is divided between these very topics. Man lives the everyday life in Georgetown, everydayness, and then lives in an extreme situation in the hinterland of British Guiana, in which he has to deal with rivers, floods, wild animals, with difficulties of food, and the realities

of human life are stark and clear. So that for Harris, in British Guiana you have the everydayness and average life in Georgetown and small towns and villages (we ought to know that here in Trinidad); and also you have this life of the extreme boundary limit situation in which the harsh realities of existence tell men what they really are, which is what Jaspers has been saying all the time. An important note. Heidegger says the transcendental is the way in which the man who is living the life of *dasein*, works his way to something out of everyday existence. Jaspers is here different. Jaspers says the transcendental is mystical and he wavers around about Christianity and even God, I think—I am not so sure. But that, as a thinker of the boundary situation, is his particular sphere. I have read his philosophy with interest, parts of it with a certain scepticism, but I recognised that he is watching something, aware of certain aspects of life, still untouched.

Now these were philosophers whom nobody would have bothered with particularly except German philosophers, German students and specialists. But France went through the period of being occupied by the Germans and tortured by the Gestapo, and produced undoubtedly the greatest writer of the present day, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre wrote philosophy of his own, a huge book called *Being and Nothingness*. In it he introduced a great deal of Heidegger, he introduced some of Jaspers (he also introduced both Descartes and Hegel), and it is a philosophical work that is fit to take its place with the traditional masterpieces of philosophy. Now he was close to Heidegger in that he says you have to make a choice, the choice depends on you, on your being there—Sartre somewhat vulgarises this question of choice. He rather insists that you have to make a political choice between the inauthentic existence and the authentic. But there is a lot of Jaspers in Sartre. Sartre went through the occupation in France, the French citizen had to decide what he would do when tortured by the Gestapo, whether he would betray or not. Nobody would ever know what you had decided. And he has a peculiar sentence where he says, "We were never so happy as under the German occupation," because you see they had to choose and they knew what was right and what was wrong. In those days the limit was very plain, you were in an extreme situation and that is what Jaspers had taught for years and was still teaching. Sartre has made Heidegger and Jaspers popular. Everybody talks about them now, not only in philosophical circles, but in most intellectual circles. Heidegger and Jaspers who wrote between the wars are now very widely known because Jean-Paul Sartre has introduced these questions into philosophy.

Now let us go rapidly back to Wilson Harris. What is noticeable about Sartre is this—he writes his philosophical books, *Being and Nothingness*, etc., you have to wrestle with

Heidegger, you have to wade through Kant's theories; but although Sartre writes that kind of book, he also writes novels and plays, and his existentialist philosophy he seeks to portray in novels and plays. I have never known a philosophy so closely reported in fiction or drama.

But Harris has done more than that. Within the covers of one small book of ninety or one hundred pages Harris gives you a big slab of actual everyday existence, the inauthentic life we all lead, and then, within that same novel, he takes you to an extreme situation right away in the interior of British Guiana with men pulling a canoe or raft up some waterfall or descending it with all sorts of dangers around them. And then he does what Sartre does not do, within the covers of the same volume he proceeds to give you pages of philosophical exploration. There is no other novelist that I know of doing the same thing today. There is a woman in England called Ivy Compton Burnett. There is another woman called Iris Murdoch, you should see the reviews they get. I find it hard to take them seriously. There is a bunch of them in Paris, Claude Simon, a woman called Natalie Sarraute. They write "anti-novels": I agree completely, the novel as I have known it—what they write is anti that. There are some novelists in America, I read one or two of them, the only one that matters to me is James Baldwin. To all of them I prefer—I put it that way—Lamming and Naipaul. Now to them is added Harris. Harris is a remarkable novelist whether he writes about everydayness; or of the life that the men and women living in the boundary situation out in the wilds of British Guiana. The contrast is between their lives in the everyday situation and their lives in a boundary situation; and then he proceeds to write philosophical views of the world in general. I think it is most remarkable that this West Indian, uneducated in German, uneducated in European universities, should have found out these things practically for himself and should be writing the kind of book that he does.

I have read Harris's latest novel—it hasn't been published yet—it is called *The Eye of the Scarecrow*. But I will not deal with this. I will deal with a novel called *The Secret Ladder*. Now I hope you will remember what I have been saying about Heidegger and Jaspers. Fenwick is a young man who has been living an inauthentic existence in Georgetown. He is a land surveyor and has gone into the interior to survey a piece of land on which live some African Negroes, descendants of the former escaped slaves. The head of this group of Negroes is a man called Poseidon, a name with Greek and very widespread connotations which you will find out for yourself. Poseidon is a hundred years old and it is clear that he and his people distrust Fenwick and his party. They feel they have come there to do a scientific job which will improve the situation. Poseidon and company do not accept this at all. They consider that Fenwick

and the people who have come there to carry out all these experiments, putting gauges and measuring temperature and measuring depth of rainfall and so on, they are a menace, they have come to do something harmful to these African descendants of slaves who have been living there for over a hundred years. Now that is an extreme situation for Poseidon and his followers. It also becomes a very extreme situation for Fenwick. Fenwick has a talk with Poseidon and he notices that the way that Poseidon's lips move is contrary to the things that Poseidon is supposed to be saying. In other words the physical appearance of Poseidon is one thing but the things that he is saying come from a different age and a different generation. Fenwick writes to his mother and he tells her: "I didn't understand him but I have a peculiar feeling that unless I understand what he is saying, this generation to which I belong is doomed."³ Harris you can see is a very bold writer. So Fenwick sends this letter to his mother and he again meets Poseidon this time in the company of a young Negro called Bryant. Poseidon talks again and Fenwick is very much aware that Poseidon thinks that the best thing that could happen is that Fenwick and all his crew and all their instruments should get out of there. Fenwick gets very angry. He tells Poseidon or he tells Bryant rather: "You seem sympathetic to him. You think that we are going to cut short his freedom. What is this freedom, what kind of freedom does Poseidon have, he and his ex-slaves? Can't you see that in bringing science here and surveying the place and seeing what is to be done we are bringing some real freedom?" To his astonishment Bryant says: "I do not think so." Bryant says: "I think Poseidon is freer than you or me." Fenwick says: "What kind of nonsense is that? You are forgetting yourself." Bryant says: "Well, that is what I think. I think he is freer than you or me"; and then Bryant says something which I recommend for your careful consideration. This young West Indian of the present day, having got into touch with Poseidon who is fighting for freedom, he tells Fenwick: "When Poseidon dies he is going to go back to Africa." Now Bryant did not learn that in school or in university, what he learnt in school was that such an idea was the illusion under which African slaves committed suicide. But, you see, under the pressure of the extreme situation and siding with Poseidon he recovers the historical ideas of the slaves. He tells Fenwick that Poseidon was his grandfather: "At least I feel that way towards him." Fenwick is deeply disturbed, first of all at Poseidon and at what Poseidon is doing to Bryant. They bring news to Fenwick that some of Poseidon's men have broken down the gauges that he has put up to measure rainfall and waterfall and so on. And two of Fenwick's assistants, they are foremen in charge, tell him: "Now look at what these savages did. We should deal with them." But Fenwick begins to experience the *dasein*. He says, "I do not think that what they

did was in opposition to us." Fenwick adds: "Yes, they may have broken the gauges, but I think they were seeking to establish some sort of freedom which they think we threaten." The foremen are eager to punish Poseidon's men. Fenwick says, "No, leave them alone. I think I will be able to work it out with them." Fenwick, in other words, is experiencing the *dasein*. He is "living there", and the previous existence whereby he came from the government with the instruments and a group to measure the land and to do things which he thought of benefit to them, he has lost that completely, it was inauthentic. He is quite sympathetic now to the fact that they are breaking down his gauges and saying that they do not want him. He says he thinks he understands what they are doing.

Now there is only one more point I wish to make about the novel, the rest of it you will have to work out for yourself. He has two foremen and one of the foremen tells him, "Please, sir, you are becoming too sympathetic to the men." I do not quite understand this psychological motivation myself. The foreman continues to admonish Fenwick. He says, "Your attitude to Poseidon and your attitude to the men dispels all the discipline that the crew should have. The men are beginning to feel that you are soft and they will come and ask you for things and break discipline." Fenwick says: "Well, if they feel that way, that is okay with me. I am beginning to feel that way myself, and I think it is a better feeling than the previous one." And there I will stop in regard to *The Secret Ladder*.

I hope I have made you understand that this is a writer dealing with profoundly important subjects in a bold and original manner that you will not easily find among other novels of the day. The relationship is between Fenwick's everyday existence and Fenwick as he finds an authentic existence, the way in which by getting into the position of "being there" with Poseidon and the rest, he begins to find out what their life really is, his change from feeling that he was coming there to help them, to understand that their opposition to him is in reality authentic and not to be fought down or ignored, all this makes this a highly philosophical novel. Harris breaks easily from all this into philosophical meditation closely allied to the events all within the covers of one novel.

I went the other day to the West Indian Students' Hostel to hear Harris speak on the West Indian novel. Well, in the end we decided that we should print it. I was told I could write an introduction, Learie Constantine has paid for it, and I have the proofs here. Harris is speaking about the West Indian novel and I want to read one extract because we cannot have a talk about Wilson Harris without your hearing something that he says himself. Harris says, "The special point I want to make in regard to the West Indies is that the pursuit of a strange and subtle goal, melting pot, call it what you like, is the mainstream

(though unacknowledged) tradition in the Americas. And the significance of this is akin to the European preoccupation with alchemy, with the growth of experimental science, the poetry of science as well as of explosive nature which is informed by a solution of images, agnostic humility and essential beauty rather than vested interest in a fixed assumption and classification of things."

That I think is the key to Harris. When the pamphlet appears get your own copy and study it. This is what I make of it.

European civilisation for many centuries had a fixed assumption and classification of material achievement and corresponding philosophical conceptions. Harris says that America is not like that. He insists America is not like that, the West Indies are not like that. They have a different attitude to the world, because their whole historical and material experience has been different. But Heidegger, in my opinion, and Jaspers and Sartre, are aware that the European preoccupation or acceptance of the material basis of life, a fixed assumption—that has broken down. That is the significance of Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre. It began to break down with Nietzsche who said that God was dead and, as Dostoyevsky added, if God is dead then everything is permitted: people, especially people with authority, do anything. The whole European conception of a fixed material assumption of things and a fixed political and philosophical assumption of things—that has broken down. Harris is saying that in the Americas, in Central America and in the West Indies, that has never been. There has never been that fixed assumption of things, that belief in something that is many centuries old and solid. That is why he is saying what I interpret as the *dasein*, the "being there". I find it profoundly important and viable especially for people who live in these territories.

1965

Introduction to "Tradition and the West Indian Novel"

After listening to Wilson Harris's lecture, and reading the script which I at once asked for, I recommended that it be published. I also asked him if he would object to my writing a commentary to be published along with his script. He agreed—I may add, cordially. And I should begin at once by saying why I wished to add a few words of comment to his altogether exceptional piece. (Where I have disagreed with his specific judgments I have told him in person, but that is not my business here.) What I want to do is to show why I think this lecture is one of the most remarkable I have ever heard, both in its application to writing in general and, secondly, not only for the West Indies but coming from the West Indies.

What startled me was that I had been studying existentialism,

that modern development in philosophy, and reading the German philosopher Heidegger. I had been reading:

In what sense however is this most dangerous thing one of man's possessions? Language is his own property. It is at his disposal for the purpose of communicating his experiences, resolutions and moods. Language serves to give information. As a fit instrument for this, it is a "possession". But the essence of language does not consist entirely in being a means of giving information. This definition does not touch its essential essence, but merely indicates an effect of its essence. Language is not a mere tool, one of the many which man possesses; on the contrary, it is only language that affords the very possibility of standing in the openness of the existent. Only where there is language, is there world, i.e. the perpetually altering circuit of decision and production, of action and responsibility, but also of commotion and arbitrariness, of decay and confusion. Only where world predominates, is there history. Language is a possession in a more fundamental sense. It is good for the fact that (i.e. it affords a guarantee that) man can *exist* historically. Language is not a tool at his disposal, rather it is that event which disposes of the supreme possibility of human existence. We must first of all be certain of this essence of language, in order to comprehend truly the sphere of action of poetry and with it poetry itself. How does language become actual? In order to find the answer to this question, let us consider a third saying of Hölderlin's.

We come across this saying in a long and involved sketch for the unfinished poem which begins "*Versohnender, der du nimmergeglaubt . . .*" (IV, 162ff, and 339ff.):

"Much has man learnt.

Many of the heavenly ones has he named,

Since we have been a conversation

And have been able to hear from one another." (IV, 343.)

Let us first pick out from these lines the part which has a direct bearing on what we have said so far: "Since we have been a conversation . . ." We—mankind—are a conversation. The being of man is founded in language.

I have been reading this off and on for some years but it is only since I have felt it urgent, as a marxist, to get myself right on existentialism that I began to pay serious attention. In a critical essay on Heidegger by an American I read that it is a pity that modern students of literature outside of Germany have not paid attention to his analysis of language. For a long time I have been thinking and writing about the origin and influence of language in relation to ourselves in the West Indies, also what happens to us who use a language that originated among another and very different people. Imagine when I sit in the West Indies Student Centre and hear Harris say:

And this vision of consciousness is the peculiar reality of language

because the concept of language is one which continuously transforms inner and outer formal categories of experience, earlier and representative modes of speech itself, the still life resident in painting and sculpture as such, even music which one ceases to "hear"—the peculiar reality of language provides a medium to *see* in consciousness the "free" motion and to *hear* with consciousness the "silent" flood of sound by a continuous inward revisionary and momentous logic of potent explosive images evoked in the mind. Such a capacity for language is a real and necessary one in a world where the inarticulate person is continuously frozen or legislated for in mass and a genuine experience of his distress, the instinct of distress, sinks into a void. The nightmare proportions of this are already becoming apparent throughout the world.

Whom Harris has been reading I don't know. I sent him at once a copy of my Heidegger and he rapidly replied that he agreed with Heidegger entirely. I have talked with George Lamming on this question of language in the West Indies and he has very definite views on it. These he will, I hope, make clear (and popular) one day. Derek Walcott I know is grappling practically with this problem. The point that shook me was that Harris, grappling with a West Indian problem, had arrived at conclusions which dealt with the problem of language as a whole in the world at large.

The second point that has startled me is Harris's clear recognition that we are the product of a very complicated historical past and all of it is in us *striving or at any rate ready for expression*. We are an adventurous people, ready for anything. We are what we are because we have been what we have been. Take for example Harris on the myth of El Dorado:

Let us apply our scale, for example, to the open myth of El Dorado. The religious and economic thirst for exploration was true of the Spanish conquistador, of the Portuguese, French, Dutch and English, of Raleigh, of Fawcett, as it is true of the black modern pork-knocker and the pork-knocker of all races. An instinctive idealism associated with this adventure was overpowered within individual and collective by enormous greed, cruelty and exploitation. In fact it would have been very difficult a century ago to present these exploits as other than a very material and degrading hunger for wealth spiced by a king of self-righteous spirituality. It is difficult enough today within clouds of prejudice and nihilism; nevertheless the substance of this adventure, involving men of all races, past and present conditions, has begun to acquire a residual pattern of illuminating correspondences. El Dorado, City of Gold, City of God, grotesque, unique coincidence, another window within upon the Universe, another drunken boat, another ocean, another river; in terms of the novel the distribution of a frail moment of illuminating adjustments within a long succession and grotesque series of adventures, past and present, capable *now* of discovering

themselves and continuing to discover themselves so that in one sense one relives and reverses the "given" condition of the past, freeing oneself from catastrophic idolatry and blindness to one's own historical and philosophical conceptions and misconceptions which may bind one within a statuesque present or a false future.

If you know the outside world and look at and feel the West Indian people (not what you can get out of them but what you can give to them), you can see and feel their past, latent in their contemporary personality—others besides myself call it a search for national identity. That identity conceals or rather constricts an enormous potentiality. We have a history, we don't know it, and we will never know it until we respect ourselves, and relate our present, our past and our future. On this interrelation, Harris is very strong and very clear. Not the least of the virtues of his lecture is that for him the relation between these abstract, you may even say abstruse, matters and day-to-day social, even political life is very clear.

There is only one more point that I wish to take up. Harris obviously thinks that creative originality in literature is a sign, a portent, evidence of creative originality in politics, and in social life. The history of Russian literature during the nineteenth century and Russian social and political life in the twentieth is one irrefutable proof of this. Harris is very critical of the lack of originality—what he sees as remaining bound by the traditional standards of judgement—which he thinks is a characteristic of West Indian literature. I see this question differently but I refuse to argue it here for reasons which I shall make clear in a moment. But when Harris says, "In fact it is one of the ironic things with West Indians of my generation that they may conceive of themselves in the most radical political light but their approach to art and literature is one which consolidates the most conventional and documentary techniques in the novel", when Harris says that, I feel I have to speak. This is a political matter and I have to disagree. Some West Indians may "conceive of themselves" as political radicals. In strict fact during the last twenty years I have never met one, not one. To talk about revolution and nationalisation and the need to create a revolutionary party (on the discredited stalinist model) is merely a senseless aping of the models of East and West. In that there is nothing revolutionary. The instinctive feelings and readiness of the West Indian populations for adventurous creation in all fields is proved among other proofs by the literature these territories produce. Literature as Harris very well sees is not an accident. If it is genuine literature, it expresses more than it knows. For example, powerful on the Jamaican scene is the urge of the Rastafari to find a new life in Africa. Rather fantastic! Not realistic! OK. But Vic Reid writes the finest Jamaican novel so far, about the revolutionary struggle of the Mau Mau in Kenya.

That accident needs some explanation.

Barbados is the West Indian territory where there is the clearest and sharpest social differentiation. George Lamming's novels are permeated by the sense of the role of different classes in West Indian society. His work is an expression of Barbados.

Of the larger territories, Trinidad is the one with the most diversified past, where different foreign influences have been most pervasive, where the sense of insular identity (very strong in Barbados and Jamaica) has been almost non-existent. The result? Trinidadians have written more notable history; we have produced the most remarkable politicians in the West Indies, and in literature the finest study ever produced in the West Indies (or anywhere that I know) of a minority and the herculean obstacles in the way of its achieving a room in the national building—Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*.

British Guiana is the only West Indian territory of space and with easily identified relics of the past. Hence Harris, not only in his theoretical ideas but in his fiction. His novels add a continental dimension to West Indian insular literature.

'Enough for the time being. The literature is expressing some very vital reality. I hope I have helped to make Harris easier for West Indians to grasp. That is one trouble. Our novelists, as our cricketers, are recognised abroad for what they are, something new, creative and precious in the organisations and traditions of the West. But what they need is what Heidegger recognised in Hölderlin—a homecoming. Harris should not be confined to London. He should be speaking from end to end of the West Indies.

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