

Hena Maes-Jelinek, *The Labyrinth of Universality: Wilson Harris's Visionary Art of Fiction*

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Hena Maes-Jelinek. *The Labyrinth of Universality: Wilson Harris's Visionary Art of Fiction*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006. 564 pp. ISBN: Hb: 978-90-420-2032-0/90-420-2032-6. €115/ US\$161

- 1 Wilson Harris is one of the “founding fathers” of Caribbean literature, a novelist generally revered by other West Indian writers and yet one which readers sometimes hesitate to explore because of his alleged obscurity. In his novels, Harris experiments with the limits of language as a means of expressing “reality.” Preoccupied by the extreme polarisation of the Guyanese society in which he grew up, with the aftermath of slavery, exploitation, and the virtual eclipse of the Amerindian heritage, he constantly aspires to a form of fiction which avoids ready-made significations in order to shed light on the interstices between clear-cut forms and ideas. The fictional form which Harris prefers is one in which generic conventions become blurred. No critic has studied Wilson Harris’s works as closely and as systematically as Hena Maes-Jelinek, who was also one of the founders of what is now called postcolonial studies. *The Labyrinth of Universality* is the result of her life work on the major Caribbean writer. The volume includes a revised version of most of Hena Maes-Jelinek’s criticism on Wilson Harris since the early 1970s. This book is a formidable enterprise taking into account the considerable critical corpus already published on Harris.¹
- 2 Though Harris is very much inspired by T.S. Eliot, particularly in his concern for tradition, his “modernism” differs from most common acceptations of the term. Harris has repeatedly criticised postmodernism for what he calls its “nihilism”. The writer is

equally adamant in his rejection of realism, which he blames for what he considers as its inability to account for the complex nature of reality. Harris's rejection of realism does not mean that his works are remote from reality or historical events. On the contrary, much of his fiction is concerned with finding ways of overcoming the traumas of conquest, colonisation, racism, and the exploitation of the weak. Harris rejects the finality of catastrophes which, as he shows in his fiction, contain a potential for regeneration. The author's hope for salvation lies more in spiritual renewal than in essentially political solutions.

- 3 Although this is not evident at first sight, many of Harris's novels originate in the writer's own lived experience. The "Guiana Quartet" cycle in particular, which constitutes the first sequence, is based on Harris's experience as a surveyor in the heart of the Guyanese forest. Similarly, the recurring figure of the beggar is inspired by a real meeting when the author was eight. Yet, instead of treating these experiences in a realistic manner, the author deconstructs surface images and resorts to metaphoric or mythic associations in order to break down what he considers as the tyranny of self-evident representations. Harris's landscapes are landscapes of the mind and many of his plots delve into the depths of meaning and creation. Each novel is an attempt to approach the mystery of life from a slightly different angle, using a particular cluster of images as the basis of his linguistic journey into the unknown.
- 4 Hena Maes-Jelinek admits that she herself comes from a "Cartesian" tradition of logic and that she has had to make considerable efforts to approach the non-logical method followed by Harris. Consequently, each of her essays dedicated to a particular piece of fiction retraces Harris's text step by step, stressing the particular formulations or ruling metaphoric networks prevalent in each particular novel. Her criticism closely follows the terminology used by the author. This probably stems from her deep respect for the author's inimitable creations which Maes-Jelinek feels she can only examine from a profoundly sympathetic perspective. She puts this method to excellent use when she evokes the author's concern with overcoming the "reconciliation of contraries, not definitely, but in evanescent moments of vision within a constantly evolving pattern of separation and union" (p. xv).
- 5 Though Harris has repeatedly refuted the merits of theory, his creation is deeply inspired by Martin Buber and Carl Jung. His approach to reality has been compared with that of the Romantics with whom he shares the belief that "a spiritual reality is to be found within and beyond a phenomenal world" (p. xvi). Harris's fiction is profoundly metafictional or self-reflexive in so far as his works deal with what he calls the "fabric" of the imagination. In some of his works, he resorts to musical images to evoke this silent yet audible design which he perceives at the heart of the universe. Hena Maes-Jelinek insists on Harris's totally original use of the term "cross-cultural" which she differentiates from notions such as the multicultural or the hybrid. For her, cross-culturality is "a mutuality not only between different peoples and cultures but also between self-assertive people(s) and those [Harris] calls the 'uninitiated' within the social establishment" (p. 550).
- 6 This volume is essential reading for any student of Caribbean literature. For the more general public, it is the most thorough introduction to the works of one of the masters of contemporary literature.

NOTES

1. Hena Maes-Jelinek's bibliography is probably the most exhaustive to date.
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AUTHORS

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Jean-Pierre DURIX is emeritus professor at the Université de Bourgogne in Dijon, France. For twenty-two years and until he retired, he was editor of *Commonwealth*. He has published widely, mainly on various aspects of postcolonial literature in English and has translated several postcolonial writers' works into French (Wilson Harris, Witi Ihimaera, Derek Walcott, Albert Wendt). His main publications in book form are: *The Writer Written* (Greenwood Press, 1987), *An Introduction to the New Literatures in English* (Longman, 1993 ; together with Carole Durix), *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse* (Macmillan/ST; Martin's Press, 1998) and *Derek Walcott: Collected Poems* (Atlande, 2005).