

Surveying the Psyche: A Jungian Reading of Wilson Harris' *The Guyana Quartet*

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The Guyanese novelist, poet and essayist, Wilson Harris is widely regarded as a key contributor to postcolonial dialogue. However, Harris stands apart from his contemporaries in that he refuses, as Stuart Murray notes, to “engage with the orthodox postcolonial formulations of community, identity, citizenship, [and] sovereignty” (“Genesis” 55). Rather, his approach to postcolonial identity is more concerned with “the inevitability of the unknowable, the untranslatable, [and] the ungraspable” (“Genesis” 54-55). In his introduction to *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination: Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, Andrew Bundy expands upon this point of differentiation by saying: “While conscientiously we might make comparisons with these critical approaches and Harris’ own theories, such stances are likely to be less productive than reading Harris in the light of traditions of the imagination (literature, philosophy, anthropology, analytical psychology) that act as ‘parallel texts’ to his work” (“Genesis” 10). Carl Gustav Jung’s body of writing is a rich source of just such “parallel texts.” Indeed, Harris’ writing takes on a profoundly psychological dimension when one considers it in relation to Jung’s seminal work with the collective unconscious, archetypes and the restorative processes of alchemy and active imagination. In apt parallel to his career as a surveyor of the Guyana interior, Harris explores the inner landscape of the psyche in an attempt to understand the truths within “works of fiction that diverge in peculiar degrees, from canons of realism [...]” (“Genesis” 7). Harris’s fiction, particularly *The Guyana Quartet*, sets aside conventional realism (i.e. fiction that obeys the logic of the conscious mind) in favour of a world governed by unconscious elements. In *The Guyana Quartet*, Wilson Harris uses Jungian thought to create a dream text that functions both as a map for identifying conflicting fragments of the Guyana psyche, and a mechanism for restoring these fragments to a state of unity.

In Jung’s view, the unconscious is divided into two strata: the personal and the collective. The personal unconscious is the home of forgotten and repressed content specific to the individual. The collective unconscious, on the other hand, contains

our universal experience. Its content is inborn and exists in virtually identical form across cultures (“Archetypes” 2). Because the unconscious is, by its very definition, not conscious, its intentions are often enigmatic to the conscious mind. Jung proposes that dreams compensate for this discrepancy by providing a venue for the unconscious to present material with which the unconscious must come to terms (“Symbols” 34). Harris also recognizes the importance of the collective unconscious and dreaming as a theatre for reconciling opposing aspects of the psyche. The world Harris creates in *The Guyana Quartet*’s four novels is essentially a series of dreams that readers must attempt to reconcile, but on a cultural level, rather than the individual. The dream content of *The Guyana Quartet* comes from the collective experience of an entire country. Andrew Bundy concurs: “Harris’ entire body of fiction can be treated as a single continuous dream-book, whose text, just like a cycle of dreams over a number of years, is an inflection of thematic clusters and revisitations” (“Genesis” 13). He elaborates this idea further by noting that *The Guyana Quartet* plays out in “dislodged space” and aims to recover, through the language of dreams, “dimensionalities that our received ideas, our conventional reckonings flatten out or conventionalize.” The word “Guyana” itself supports this notion of an extended dream text, given that it derives from the Amerindian word meaning “land of waters” (“Guyana” 7). Water has a complex group of associations attached to it, but one of its chief connections is to the unconscious and the fluid body of non-formal, dynamic intuitive wisdom (Cirlot 364-5). In keeping with the fluid nature of dreams, Harris intentionally deprives the reader of a sense of ordered reality in the midst of shifting time, place and perspective. The fact that Harris begins each of the novels with a dream sequence indicates that the only reality he wishes to concern himself with is the dream reality, where creation and destruction, past and present, change and changelessness, group and individual occur simultaneously through the perceptions of the “dreaming eye” and the “dreaming self.” By removing the sense of a conscious reality, Harris prevents the reader from passing judgement on the unconscious through comparison to a logical (and in Harris’ view, limiting) state of mind. This is not to suggest that the novels’ characters do not have personal narratives and are purely symbolic. On the contrary, Fenwick’s career ambition, for instance, plays a role in the myth of *The Whole Armour*, but the novel does not rely upon this for its core meaning. Rather, Fenwick’s personal ambition merely serves to highlight unconscious currents in play— that of the ancient aboriginal identity being brought to bear on the modern collective psyche. Without the constraints of the conventional conscious narrative, fragments of the unconscious psyche are free to rise to the surface and interact in ways that would be impossible in a traditional novel.

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These psychic fragments reveal themselves through the collective unconscious' most succinct form of communication—the archetype. Their appearances within the context of a dream often raise questions of identity, especially when they present themselves in pairs. As a dream text, *The Guyana Quartet* is no exception. Conflicts transpire between a number of key archetypes whose tensions unfold between characters that embody dichotomies in Guyanan identity. For example, Oudin and Ram enact the roles of slave and master in *The Far Journey of Oudin*; Donne and Mariella, the conqueror and conquered in *Palace of the Peacock*; Magda and Cristo, authority figure and inexperienced youth in *The Whole Armour*; Fenwick and Poseidon, the “civilized” modern man and ancient noble “savage” in *The Secret Ladder*. The clash also occurs between archetypes of nature, such as the struggle between water, whose psychological implications have already been mentioned, and the bush, which buries every tributary in its “grave of wilderness” (“Guyana” 368). It can even occur within an individual who is torn between multiple archetypes, as is the case with Magda. She is portrayed as the jaguar (a creature of the jungle) who moves “with cat-like feet” and the whore (a bi-product of civilization) who possesses “something superstitiously holy” in her unholiness (“Guyana” 281, 274). In the end, she can no longer mediate between the two and becomes a “frightened child, frightened that all her hopes were all going up in smoke” (“Guyana” 326). The experience of losing her son and the lost illusion of community against nature renders her helpless. She can assert herself neither as a force of nature nor as a force of the modern world.

These archetypal conflicts do not just play themselves out over the course of one novel. Rather, their difficulties emerge over the entire quartet. Each novel presents reiterations of the archetypes contained in the novel before it. In *Le Symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque*, mythographer Paul Diel presents the idea that myths [and, by extension, the units that comprise myths— archetypes] have a tendency to evolve in multiple distinct but related situations, so that when one myth is finished, another myth begins containing the same meaning, but with changed details. He continues: “When we identify a group of myths with a shared theme, we begin to notice the inexactitudes in the conventionalised narrative of each episode [...] As if by sudden insight, we arrive at an account more comprehensive than our prior appreciation of any one myth episode” (“Genesis” 10). It is for precisely this reason that it is important to consider *The Guyana Quartet* as a whole, even though any one of the novels could be treated individually at length. The books share common archetypes that are kaleidoscopically explored through permutation, which can only be identified by looking at *The Guyana Quartet* in its entirety. Even *The Guyana Quartet*'s format is cyclical, with each of the four novels divided into

four sections of almost exactly the same length, and punctuated by different quotes from the same writers, suggesting a reiteration of ideas that are in continuous flux.

A key example of this archetypal permutation involves an archetype (though Harris never uses the word explicitly)—“the goddess of identity” (“Guyana” 274). Mariella, Beti, Magda and Sharon embody the Goddess of Identity, and point towards Guyana’s struggle for a reconciled postcolonial self. The myth of the abducted Mariella, who is the last remaining member of an ancient “consciousness of race” from which “all is changed into wisdom,” continues with the myth of the abducted Beti, whose “cry was as involuntary as a bird’s or animal’s ... so that there stood upon her now the stamp of timeless slavery, rather than selection and freedom, and of belonging to someone and something living and dead” (“Guyana” 61, 125). This, in turn, begins the myth of Magda, whose countenance is likened to the epitome of identity, “a dark flickering terrible mirror reflecting every dim consciousness” and the myth of Sharon, who struggles with Cristo to utter words “too deep as yet to be shaped by a material tongue” (“Guyana” 298, 330). The Goddess of Identity archetype manifests itself in varying degrees of intensity, spanning the spectrum of submission to domination, even within the same character. This variation of a single archetype highlights the true complexity of Guyana’s psychic conflict of having been victimized by colonialism, but wanting to assert itself as both an ancient culture and a new uncharted, hybrid culture.

The Guyana Quartet also explores reiterations of the savior archetype. In *Palace of the Peacock*, Carroll, whose music reconciles Donne’s crew, and by extension, unifies Guyanan culture, does not have an acknowledged father. Despite the fact that Schomburgh internally admits that he is Carroll’s father, he feels that he has “relinquished paternity”, which renders Carroll “nameless out of shame and yet named by a new distant muse and mother to make others equally nameless ... and forge new mythical far-flung relationships” (“Guyana” 69). Oudin, too, comes from mysterious paternity: “The truth was, no one knew whom he represented or where he had sprung from” (“Guyana” 140). In *The Whole Armour*, Cristo cannot be sure who his true father is, since his mother is the village prostitute. Madga believes he is Abram’s son, but there is no way to be certain, and Abram refuses to acknowledge Cristo as a blood relation (“Guyana” 248). *The Secret Ladder*’s protagonist knows his father, but he is of a mixed heritage (African, English, French, Amerindian). This “evasive reality in the family myth” makes him receptive to the sense there was “something guilty and concrete he had to learn to face” (“Guyana” 383). This blurring of ancestry sets Carroll, Oudin, Fenwick and Cristo apart from their communities, but it also makes them sons of the land itself, sons of Guyana’s entire heritage. This allows them to mediate between their culture and Guyana’s past. As a result, they serve as catalysts for new visions of the future.

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The Guyana Quartet contains another important archetypal permutation that was of particular interest to Jung—that of the adversarial twins, Merlin and Parsifal. In his essay *Merlin and Parsifal: Adversarial Twins*, Harris summarizes his interpretation of Jung’s work on the subject with the following:

Let us remember that Merlin, the great magician of the Arthurian Round Table, was trapped in a tree or a cave. He symbolizes in tradition a network of association involving forests and caves which became his prison house. [...] Parsifal, his adversarial twin, who benefited at times enormously from his wisdom, remained apparently superior to nature in advancing technologies. Parsifal nevertheless was also a prisoner: the prisoner of inflexible sovereignty, sovereign institution (or bastion against the evolution of a wider and deeper community), [and] sovereign ego. [...] The language of Parsifalian ideology is now, one would think, part and parcel of the formerly colonized globe. Everyone writes and thinks in virtually the same fashion or mode. But fashion is still subject to unease and eruptive lament arising from the unconscious in the trapped or imprisoned magic of Merlin” (“Genesis” 59).

Jung calls this “eruptive lament” le cri de Merlin or “the cry of Merlin.” The Merlin-Parsifal twinship appears in various forms throughout *The Guyana Quartet*. In *Palace of the Peacock*, Donne and the unidentified I-narrator share opposite aspects of the same eye, Donne possessing the “dead seeing material eye” and the I-narrator possessing the “living closed spiritual eye” (“Guyana” 20). At the beginning, Donne and the I-narrator are presented together, and Donne acknowledges their twinship by saying, “I had almost forgotten I had a brother like you. It had passed from my mind—this dreaming twin responsibility” (“Guyana” 23). Donne reflects the materialistic, progress-driven aspect of Parsifal: “I’m the last landlord. I tell you I fight everything in nature, flood drought, chicken hawk, rat, beast and woman. I’m everything. Midwife, yes, doctor, yes, gaoler, judge, hangman, every blasted thing to the labouring people” (“Guyana” 22). Inversely, the I-narrator embodies the intuitive Merlinian half, as evidenced by his experience in the woods: “The forest rustled and rippled with a sigh and ubiquitous step. I stopped dead where I was, frightened for no reason whatever. The step near me stopped and stood still. I stared around me wildly, in surprise and terror, and my body grew faint and trembling as a woman’s or a child’s. I gave a loud cry which was no more than an echo in myself—a breaking and grotesque voice, man and boy, age and youth speaking together” (“Guyana” 29). In *The Far Journey of Oudin*, it is Beti who takes on the Merlin role and resists Ram’s Parsifalian pursuit of Oudin in the pegasse: “Every time she gave a cry and wail for freedom it was more for his sake than for hers” (Harris 214). It is le cri de Merlin for Oudin, who

is battling between the identities imposed upon him by society (servant, outlaw and imbecile) and the identities he intuitively feels belong to him (inheritor and free agent). Beti is not conscious of this complex conflict, but she senses the psychic changes in play even though she cannot articulate them. In *The Whole Armour*, the Parsifalian mentality of the village forces Cristo and Sharon to flee into the jungle, where they sleep under the moon, whose light “fell and painted stripes and bars under the trees” (“Guyana” 305). In escaping Parsifal, they cross over into an awareness of Merlin’s domain and must come to terms with the adversarial twins of their culture. In *The Secret Ladder*, Fenwick, who regards nature as a force to be measured and harnessed, must confront Poseidon, who lives in the bush as a remnant of Guyana’s Parsifalian slave culture. Poseidon’s ability to wreak havoc on Fenwick’s surveying efforts subverts Parsifalian dominance and requires that Fenwick redefine his concept of “freedom.”

While these unresolved archetypes appear repeatedly throughout *The Guyana Quartet*, Harris also imbeds in the text a mechanism for unifying these opposing images: alchemy. This ancient body of literature dates back to early Egyptian civilization, and is a tradition that has flourished within many world cultures over the past three thousand years, including China, Europe and the Middle East. Despite the fact that many great thinkers have engaged in serious alchemical study (including Sir Isaac Newton), mainstream culture regards it at best as a primitive precursor to chemistry, and at worst a deceptive practice. Yet, alchemy speaks from a rich lexicon of symbols that detail a process going beyond the manipulation of metal. It attempts to “deal with the complexities of change, the transformation of one substance into another” (“Alchemy” 2). Jung studied alchemy extensively throughout his career, finding that alchemical symbolism flowed “parallel to the way a human being, with a correct use of will and imagination, and the assent of fate, can enter a process whose goal is the creation of an internal structure he called the self” (“Alchemy” 2). For Jung, alchemy signified the psyche’s struggle for unity—a fusion of the conscious with the unconscious, the male with the female, the upper with the lower. Alchemical thought appears throughout *The Guyana Quartet*, and it is Harris’ solution for reuniting fragments of the Guyanan identity.

Palace of the Peacock is arguably the most alchemical novel of the quartet, since the voyage of Donne’s crew essentially amounts to a re-enactment of the alchemical process. The novel opens with images of Donne riding a dark horse under a sun that “blinded and ruled my living sight” (“Guyana” 19). The fact that the sun image is accompanied by a funereal animal indicates that this is the *sol niger*, representing the dead, unworked unconscious in its initial state (also referred to as the *prima materia*) (Cirlot 320). This marks the beginning of the psychic transmutation. The crew consists of ten men, which, in alchemical symbolism, signifies a “return to unity,” and they embark upon a seven day journey—one day

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for each step of the alchemical process (Cirlot 234). The crew, under the influence of Donne and the *sol niger*, braves the rapids (the *massa confusa* or creative chaos where “all elements are in conflict and repel one another”) as they engage in the “impossible wrestle and struggle in the silent passage in the lava of water” and “gripe and pray interminably and soundlessly” (“Alchemy” 51 and “Guyana” 63). They then lose several crew members to the river, which signifies *ablutio*, or “death by water” (McCarthy 7). The white waterfall marks the beginning of the *albedo* state or “whitening” where “despair, madness and fears of abandonment [are] overcome” (“Alchemy” 35). They ascend the waterfall and enter the *aurum non vulgi* or *cauda pavonis*— the final stage before attaining the *lapis*, the penultimate substance. The *cauda pavonis* is represented by the peacock, which symbolizes wisdom through many eyes, as well as immortality due to the ancient belief that peacock flesh was incorruptible (Hall 278). Indeed, the transfigured crew experiences an awareness of their restored immortality as the lapis. In this case, it manifests as many beings sharing one vision. The I-narrator realizes: “The change and variation I thought I detected [...] were outward and unreal and illusory: they were induced by the limits and apprehensions in the listening minds of men, and by their wish and need in the world to provide a material nexus to bind the spirit of the universe” (“Guyana” 114). Carroll’s “whistling” in the *Palace of the Peacock* comes from the Carib bone flute that is also alchemical in nature. In his introduction to *The Guyana Quartet*, Harris mentions that the Carib bone flute was carved out of the bones of an enemy. Thus, music springs from the bone of past conflict, and it invokes a kind of “transubstantiation in reverse.” Instead of spirit becoming matter, matter elevates itself into spirit. It is a symbolic depiction of the alchemical process in ideal conditions: two opposing elements merging to become a new, higher element.

In *The Far Journey of Oudin*, the fisherman asks the fugitive Oudin and Beti, “You believe fire and water ever mix?” (“Guyana” 210). This is the central question of alchemy. Can opposing elements really combine to form a truly new substance, the *lapis*? The text attempts to answer this question by putting Oudin, who appears as a water element whose “unexpected face ... was guarded and protected in the glass of the river and ... stood beyond a touch where no material impact could break [him]”, in contrast to Mohammed and his brothers, who are plagued by fiery deaths (lightning, funeral pyre, building fire) (“Guyana” 135). *The Whole Armour* also contains alchemical elements, the most obvious being Harris’ choice of a particular quote to preface the novel: a small section from *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, an 8th Century Chinese alchemical treatise by Lu Tzu that emphasizes the circular movement of light (“Imagination” 74). In his “Commentary on The Secret of the Golden Flower”, Jung notes that this

“circulation of light” shares strong links to the mandala, which means “circle” in Sanskrit and represents the focus of the many into one (“Imagination” 78). Mandalas tend to be quaternary in structure. This coincides directly with Oudin’s four identities (slave, usurper, servant and heir) merging into a one identity capable of exerting power over Ram from the grave, strong enough to cast around him the “dreadful twine of shattering encirclement, stretching from far away out of a faint servant in the sun” (“Guyana” 238). Additionally, over the course of four novels we discover that each narrative not only transpires in the same physical space, but also converges into a single liminal space, where archetypes overlap, and a central meaning emerges.

Though he doesn’t do so through the text itself, Harris makes deft use of another key Jungian concept: active imagination. Nathan Schwartz-Salant writes: “Jung called the process which provides the link between conscious and unconscious ‘the transcendent function’. He held that it was developed through the process he called ‘active imagination’, whereby one consciously enters a dialogue with unconscious images” (“Alchemy” 15). Through these activities, the one can access and analyze unconscious content, such as dreams, with the conscious mind actively engaged. This is exactly the activity Harris requires of his readers. By exposing *The Guyana Quartet*’s dream content, Harris invites the reader to engage in active imagination, to bridge the chasm between conscious and unconscious insight. He asks us to explore the symbols of the unconscious as aware interpreters. We enter the dream, but do so consciously, and with a desire to make sense of it, while still moving with the intuitive flow of the narrative. In doing so, we are able to complete the final step of Harris’ alchemical transformation: that of acknowledging unconscious content and letting its ideas, struggles and desires begin to reconcile themselves in our conscious psyche.

By actively reading *The Guyana Quartet* as a dream text, we can identify the unconscious opposing archetypes that serve as landmarks on the landscape of Guyanan identity, and witness a reunion of these opposites through the psychological transformations of alchemy and active imagination. The reader echoes the I-narrator’s sentiment: “I am glad we are together again after so many years. I may be able to free myself from this—this—” I searched for a word—“This obsession. After all it’s childish” (“Guyana” 23). In this way, it is the reader who becomes the *vas hermeticum*, the alchemical vessel in which human identity transforms itself and a new substance of thought begins.

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